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The Cutting Season

Written by Attica Locke

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ATTICA LOCKE

The Cutting Season



Author's Note: This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is unintentional. Quirks and discrepancies in regional geography and/or history are the author's choice.

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For Odell & Odelia

We navigate by stories, but sometimes we only escape
by abandoning them.

—Rebecca Solnit

A Haunting Discovery

1

Ascension Parish, 2009

It was during the Thompson-Delacroix wedding, Caren's first week on the job, that a cottonmouth, measuring the length of a Cadillac, fell some twenty feet from a live oak on the front lawn, landing like a coil of rope in the lap of the bride's future mother-in-law. It only briefly stopped the ceremony, this being Louisiana after all. Within minutes, an off-duty sheriff's deputy on the groom's side found a 12-gauge in the groundskeeper's shed and shot the thing dead, and after, one of the cater-waiters was kind enough to hose down the grass. The bride and groom moved on to their vows, staying on schedule for a planned kiss at sunset, the mighty Mississippi blowing a breeze through the line of stately, hundred-year-old trees. The uninvited guest certainly made for lively dinner conversation at the reception in the main hall. By the time the servers made their fourth round with bottles of imported champagne, several men, including prim little Father Haliwell, were lining up to have their pictures taken with the viper, before somebody from parish services finally came to haul the carcass away.

Still, she took it as a sign.

A reminder, really, that Belle Vie, its beauty, was not to be trusted.

That beneath its loamy topsoil, the manicured grounds and

gardens, two centuries of breathtaking wealth and spectacle, lay a land both black and bitter, soft to the touch, but pressing in its power. She should have known that one day it would spit out what it no longer had use for, the secrets it would no longer keep.

The plantation proper sat on eighteen acres, bordered to the north by the river, and to the east by the raw, unincorporated landscape of Ascension Parish. To walk it—from the library in the northwest corner to the gift shop and then over to the main house, past the stone kitchen and the rose garden, the cottages Manette and Le Roy, the old schoolhouse and the quarters—took nearly an hour. Caren had learned to start her days early, while it was quiet, heading out before sunlight—having arranged for Letty to arrive by six a.m. at least three days a week, while Caren's daughter was still sleeping. Six mornings out of seven, she made a full sweep of the property, combing every square inch, noting any scuffed floors or dry flower beds or drapes that needed to be steamed—even one time changing the motor in one of the gallery's ceiling fans herself.

She didn't mind the work.

Belle Vie was her job, and she was nothing if not professional.

Though she could in no way have prepared herself for the grisly sight before her now.

To the south and west, across a nearly five-foot-high fence, where Caren was standing, the back five hundred acres of the Clancy family's 157-year-old property had been leased for cane farming since before she was born. Over the fence line, puffs of gray smoke shot up out of the fields. The machines were out in the cane this morning, already on the clock. The mechanical cutters were big and wide as tractor trucks, fat, gassy beasts whose engines often disturbed the natural habitat, chasing rats and snakes and rabbits from their nests in the cane fields—and come harvest time each year, the animals invariably sought out

a safe and peaceful living on the grounds of Belle Vie. Luis had run them out of the garden, cleared their fecal waste from his tool shed, and, on more than one occasion, trapped and bagged a specimen to take home for God knows what purpose. And now some critter had dug up the dirt and grass along the plantation's fence line and come up with this.

The body was face down.

In a makeshift grave so shallow that its walls hugged the corpse as snugly as a shell, as if the dead woman at Caren's feet were on the verge of hatching, of emerging from her confinement to start this life over again. She was coated with mud, top to bottom, her arms and legs tucked beneath her body, the spine in a curved position. The word *fetal* came to mind. Caren thought, for a brief, dizzying second, that she might faint. "Don't touch her," she said. "Don't touch a thing."

She'd been up since dawn, that cold Thursday morning.

It was a day that had already gotten off to a wrong start, before she'd even stepped foot out of the house . . . though for an entirely different reason. She'd woken up that morning to a message on her cell phone, one that had set off a minor staff crisis. Donovan Isaacs had had the nerve to call in sick for the third time in two weeks, this time leaving a nearly incoherent voicemail message on her phone at four o'clock in the morning, and keeping Caren in her pajamas for over an hour as she sent e-mails and placed phone calls, searching for a replacement. She didn't know if it was because she was a woman or black—a *sister*, as he would say—but she'd never had an employee make so little effort to impress her. He was chronically late and impossible to get on the phone, responding sporadically to text messages or nagging calls to his grandmother, with whom he lived while taking classes at the River Valley Community College and working here

part-time. His salary, like those of the other Belle Vie Players, was paid by a yearly stipend from the state's Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, which made firing him a bureaucratic headache, but one she was no less committed to pursuing. But that was later, of course. Right now she needed a stand-in for the part of FIELD SLAVE #1. She was about a heartbeat away from making a call to the theater department at Donaldsonville High School, willing to settle for a warm body, at least, when finally, at a quarter to seven, Ennis Mabry returned one of her messages, saying he had a nephew who could take over Ennis's role as Monsieur Duquesne's trusty DRIVER, and Ennis could step in to play Donovan's part, which, he assured her, he knew by heart.

"Don't worry, Miss C," he said. "The kids'll have they show."

Letty was on the kitchen phone when Caren came downstairs a few minutes later. She was standing over the stove, talking to her eldest daughter, a girl Caren had met only once, on a day when Letty's '92 Ford Aerostar wouldn't start and Gabriela had to drive all the way from Vacherie to come pick her up. She was a good kid, Letty reported at least once a week. She was on the honor roll, had held a job since she was fifteen, and didn't mess around with boys. And three days a week, Gabby made a hot breakfast for her younger brother and sister, packed their lunches, and drove them to school, all so her mother could come to work before dawn and do the very same for Caren's child. At the stove, Letty was hunched over a pot of Malt-O-Meal, talking about Gabby's little brother and speaking Spanish in a coarse whisper, only a few words of which Caren could make out at a distance: *thermometer* and *aspirin* and some bit about *hot tea.*

Caren had two school tours scheduled before lunch and a cocktail reception in the main house that evening, the menu for

which had yet to be finalized. She couldn't do this day without Letty or her rusty van or the Herrera kids up and well enough for school. They were all tied together that way. Caren's life, her job, depended on Letty being able to do hers. She gave Letty's shoulder a warm squeeze before walking out, mouthing the words *thank you* and mentally making a list of all the creative ways she might make it up to her, knowing, in her heart, that any such token is worthless when your kid is sick. It was not something she was proud of, skipping out like that. But very little in Caren's life, at that point, was. Pride, as a method of categorizing one's personal life and history, was something she'd long given up on. There was her daughter, and there was this job.

The air outside was cold for October, and wet, still drunk from a late-night rain that had soaked Belle Vie, and again she thought it was wise to warn the evening's host against outdoor seating. Still, she would need Luis to pull at least one of the heat lamps from the supply closet in the main house. A number of Belle Vie's paying guests liked to take an after-dinner brandy on the gallery, to say nothing of the smokers who routinely gathered there. The plantation had finally gone smoke-free the year before—in the main house, at least, and the guest cottages. Caren's living quarters, a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of the former *garçonnière* and overseer's residence—which also housed the plantation's historical records—still carried a heavy scent of burnt pipe tobacco, a faintly sweet aroma she had come to think of as home.

She had, for better or for worse, made a life here.

She had finally accepted that Belle Vie was where she belonged.

Her work boots, a weathered pair of brown ropers, were waiting where they always were, just outside the library's front

door. She slipped them over her wool socks, zipping a down jacket and pulling a frayed tulane school of law cap from the pocket. She slid the hat over her uncombed curls, feeling their thick weight against the back of her neck. On her right hip, she carried a black walkie-talkie. On her left, a ring of brass keys rode on her belt loop, bumping and jangling against the flesh of her thigh as she started for the main gate. She'd cover more ground in less time if she borrowed the golf cart from security. The plan was to drive along the perimeter first, then double back, park by the guest cottages, and walk the quarters on foot. She was always careful not to leave tire tracks in the slave village. She was responsible for even this detail.

It's not that Belle Vie wasn't well staffed.

There was a cleaning crew that came several times a week, more if there were guests in the cottages or events scheduled back-to-back on weekends. And Luis, who had been on the payroll since 1966—when the Clancy family fully restored the plantation that had been in their family for generations—could probably run the place himself if he had to. Still, she was surprised by the little things that got overlooked. She once found a used condom on the dirt floor of one of the slave cottages. Drunken wedding guests, she had learned, were by far the horniest, most unscrupulous people on the planet: neither a sense of the macabre nor common decency would stop them once they got their minds set on something, or someone. And Caren didn't think any third-grader's first school field trip ought to include a messy, impromptu lesson about the mating habits of loose bridesmaids.

From high overhead, sunlight studded the green grass with bits of coral and gold, as she rode along beneath a canopy of aged magnolias that shaded the main, brick-laid road through the plantation; their branches were deep black and slick with lingering rainwater. Mornings like this, she didn't try to fight

the romance of the place. It was no use anyway. The land was simply breathtaking, lush and pure. She drove past the gift shop, then north toward Belle Vie's award-winning rose garden, which sat embedded within a circular drive just a few feet from the main house. The nearly two-hundred-year-old manse was held up by white columns, and adorned with black shutters and a wrought-iron balcony that overlooked the river to the north and the garden to the south. Luis and his one-man maintenance crew had done a grand job with *le jardin*, coaxing rows of plum-colored tea roses and hydrangeas into an unlikely fall showing. Mrs. Leland James Clancy, had she lived, would have been most proud.

All along the drive, Caren made mental notes.

The hedges in front of the guest cottages could stand a trim. And whatever the latest fertilizer formula or concoction Luis had sprinkled on the hill behind the quarters, it wasn't working. There was still a narrow patch of earth out that way—grown over the foundation of some building long forgotten and not appearing on any plantation map—that remained as stubbornly dull and dry as it had even when Caren was a kid, no matter what Luis tried. Food scraps and horse shit, or cold, salted water.

Down by the quarters, grass simply refused to grow.

Caren was, at that moment, a mere thirty yards or so from a crime scene, but, of course, she didn't know it yet. She saw only the break in the land, where the earth had been disturbed. But from afar, it looked like a rabbit or a mole or some such creature had been digging up the ground along the fence line that separated the plantation from the cane fields—another problem, she thought, since the Groveland Corporation took over the lease on the "back five." Ed Renfrew, when his family farmed the land, always made a point to monitor his side of the fence. If a critter tore up the

dirt or left any such blot on the landscape, he'd always tend to it right away. But Hunt Abrams, the project manager for the Groveland farm, had never uttered more than ten words to Caren, had never gone out of his way to acknowledge her existence. She lifted the walkie-talkie from the waistband of her jeans, using it to alert Luis to the problem, telling him to get somebody out there to clean up the mess. "Sure thing, ma'am," he said.

Later, two cops would ask, more than once, how it was she didn't see her.

She could have offered up any number of theories: the dirt and mud on the woman's back, the distance of twenty or thirty yards between the fence and Caren's perch behind the driver's seat, even her own layman's assessment that the brain can't possibly process what it has no precedent for. But none of the words came. *I don't know*, she said.

She watched one of the cops write this down.

But it was the quarters, wasn't it?

The reason she had missed that girl, the dirt and the blood.

The slave village had always been a dark distraction, its craggy, crooked shadows blackening many a morning at Belle Vie. It was the part of the job she liked the least. For Caren, the dread usually started before she even set foot on the dirt road, and today hadn't been any different. It was still dark out when she'd started to the south. Not black, but cold and dim, a heavy, leaden gray. And from the time she set out this morning, she'd fretted over the task of inspecting the quarters, putting it off until the last possible second, until, finally, she parked the golf cart near the guest cottages, walking the rest of the way on foot. She folded her arms tight, putting the bulk of her down jacket between her body and the wind. The air in the quarters was always a few degrees cooler.

Even in the dead of summer, more than few people had reported feeling a chill on this very path. A sign of spirits in their midst, Caren had been told her first day on the job. Among the staff—the ones who didn't know the first thing about her background, the plain facts of where she was born and raised—it was a perverse kind of hazing, a way to test her resolve, perhaps, to lay bets on how long she would last. That she refused to walk the quarters the first few weeks she worked here was a fact greatly whispered about. Anytime she came within even a few feet of the slave village, her chest would tighten to a point no wider than a pinprick, and she felt she couldn't breathe. She would get as far as the dirt road and stop.

They all gave her a week, tops.

But they didn't know the whole story.

Truth is, avoiding the slave village was an old, old habit of hers, and one that long predated the job. Caren had grown up in Ascension Parish, in the shadows of Belle Vie; she had grown up with the ghost stories, childhood rants, and the rest of it. They were almost as old as the plantation itself. She had no proof, of course, that the quarters were haunted, but it is absolutely true that one morning during her first year back, she stood at the mouth of the village, staring down the length of dirt road. And in the morning fog, the graying clapboard cottages lined up on each side, she said a short, fervent prayer, and the spell was effectively and immediately broken. The space opened itself up to her only after she privately acknowledged its power. It was the only way forward.

She repeated the prayer this morning, mumbling the words softly.

The wind lifted and changed direction, pushing at her back, nudging her on.

She passed the bronze marker first, the heels of her boots sinking into the soft, damp earth. Raised some three feet off the

ground and set just inside the gate to the first cabin, it dated the village to 1852, the year Monsieur and Madame Duquesne bought the land from the Mississippi all the way to the back swamp, christening it *La Belle Vie*. The six cabins were all that remained of what was once a thriving village of plantation workers. She wiped the words with her jacket sleeve, clearing the dew. Inside the first cabin, she paused long enough for her eyes to adjust to the darkness of the one-room shack. The air was thick, even the halest breeze unable or unwilling to cross the threshold. Caren gave the cabin a quick survey: straw pallet on the dirt floor; antique field tools hanging from rusty nails on the walls; a pine table with a tin cup and a kettle resting atop; a broom of twigs and brush; and a crudely made bench with a threadbare quilt lying on one end. It was neat and clean and ready for showing. Caren backed out, ducking her head beneath a low beam.

The others were all the same: four leaning walls beneath sagging, shingled roofs, each with an open doorway but no actual door, and out front a tiny, square patch of dirt and weeds where vegetables and wildflowers once grew—a historical fact which Raymond Clancy had pointedly refused to re-create, even in a nod to verisimilitude, for fear of being accused of painting too pretty a picture of slave life, of being called an apologist or worse. Raymond hated the slave cabins, hated every damn thing they stood for, he'd said, and had more than once made a fervent pitch to tear them down completely, fairly begging, knowing that this was one curatorial decision he'd have to run by his father, Leland, a man beloved in the parish for preserving an important piece of history, for Louisianans and black folks, in particular. Raymond had tried to rope Caren in once, asking her to author a memo on company letterhead stating all the ways it would boost the plantation's bottom line if the unsightly cabins were done away with. They could build a second reception hall,

he'd said, or expand parking. It was the only instance, in all the time Caren had worked for Raymond, maybe even in all the years she'd known him, that she ever told him *no*.

Raymond, she remembered, the one they used to call chicken.

Caren and his baby brother, Bobby, used to spend long, rain-soaked afternoons daring him to walk alone through the slave village, daring Ray to spend even ten minutes inside the last cabin on the left, the one Caren was standing in front of now.

Jason's Cabin, they called it, because that was her mother's name for it.

She could still hear her hot, honeyed soprano.

She could still hear her mother whispering that name.

He was some kin to her, so the story went, some distant branch on the Gray family tree, thin and reedy as it was, pruned by time and circumstance; Caren was an only child, as was her mother before her, great-aunts and -uncles long gone. Jason, her great-great-great-grandfather on her mother's side, she'd been told, had been a slave, born across the river on a neighboring plantation, brought to Belle Vie when he was just a boy. Her mother had always said he was a man to be proud of, slave or no slave. The stories her mother told, bits and pieces of history passed on from one generation to the next, painted a man who had lived with his head up and his back straight, a man who had lived a life of peace and fidelity . . . until he went mysteriously missing sometime after the Civil War. No one really knew what happened to him, but plantation lore was ripe with speculation. Some said he had tired of cutting cane and walked out of the fields after the war, leaving a wife and child. Some said he had problems with drink and women and that's why he ran. And still others, like Caren's mother, thought he had likely met trouble here on the plantation; that he'd died at Belle Vie, and his soul never left the grounds. Bobby's tales

were the most gruesome, often involving knife fights and fisticuffs and blood in the cane fields, anything his twelve-year-old mind could conjure to color his ghost stories, his proof of a real plantation haunting, a man without a final resting place. He would whisper in Caren's ear, tap-tap her shoulders to the beat of spectral feet wandering the slave village, messing with her until she either screamed or fell into a fit of laughter, chest burning as she ran and ran, always looking back, hoping Bobby Clancy would catch her. Tall and lean, it never took him more than a few strides. He would throw himself down, rolling on the grass at her feet, strands of his black hair pasted against his damp, pink forehead. "Honest," he would say, panting to catch his breath, staring up through a tangle of trees. Jason's Cabin was haunted.

Caren rested her hand on the cabin's low-lying gate.

It was washed over with rain, and the door was standing wide open.

She paused over that, thinking it odd, that one detail.

But it wasn't until she crossed the dirt yard and stepped inside the cabin that she felt something was really wrong. Someone had been in here, she thought, inside this very cabin. It was the stillness that spooked her. Not the kind of emptiness that comes with actual vacancy, but rather a kind of strained quiet that was trying too hard, the tightness that comes when someone somewhere is trying very hard to be still, to restrain every twitch and wayward breath.

She felt, for a moment, that she wasn't alone.

She couldn't see two feet in front of her, the daylight stingy and withholding and stopping stubbornly at the door. She was standing in utter darkness, the air thick and dusty. She felt her chest close, her head go light. She'd had moments like this before, in this very cabin, when she'd felt overcome with dread, a

heavy weight pressing in on her sternum. But today the feeling was worse. And Caren did something she'd never done, not in all the years she'd worked at Belle Vie. She didn't wait for her eyes to adjust, didn't wait until she could actually see . . . the tools on the wall and the rusting sugar kettle made over for laundering, a bar of lye soap and a hand wringer inside; the straw bed and pine table and the shallow pit in the floor that was dug out for cooking. She simply turned and walked out, cutting her inspection short. This cabin, the one set closest to the fields, was exactly the same as the others. At least that's what she told the cops.

Her last stop was the staff kitchen, located in a squat, stone-and-brick building a few yards from the main house. In the old days, a chance kitchen fire could mow down a Southern mansion in a matter of minutes, and the distance between the two buildings was meant to provide a measure of protection, and keep the big house cool in the worst summer months. The kitchen was an eight-hundred-square-foot box, one room that was bigger than any of the places Caren had lived in with her mom when she was a kid: guesthouses and garage apartments and one unbearably damp and hot summer spent in a two-room trailer parked on the back of somebody's land. They were cheap rentals that provided shelter, but little else, places Helen Gray cared little for. The plantation's eighteen acres were the whole of Caren's only real idea of home, the only constant in her life. Belle Vie *is* home, her mother would say. *It's in our blood, 'Cakes.* Caren had spent part of her childhood in this very kitchen, thumbing through her schoolwork or watching television. She'd learned to write her cursive letters in a single afternoon, sitting at one of the small tables by the stove, waiting for her mother to get off work.

The kitchen's door was propped open. Inside, Lorraine, the current cook, had her feet up on a card table covered with vegetable scraps and newspapers and discarded oyster shells.

"Morning, baby," she said, seeing Caren at the back door. Lorraine called everyone *baby*, and Caren had long learned not to take it personally.

In the hot, steamy kitchen, she unzipped her down jacket.

"You have a menu for me, Lorraine?"

"Now, what you think, baby?"

Lorraine had a bottle of hot sauce sticking out of the pocket of her stained apron and was sucking down raw oysters for breakfast and watching *Fox & Friends* on a small black-and-white television set. Caren could have stood there all day before she moved an inch. "Lorraine," she sighed, because they went through this every time.

"Yes, baby?" she said, in a way that suggested she had already carried this conversation farther than she intended to. Lorraine was openly suspicious of Caren and her sudden return to Belle Vie four years ago. It was possible that she even held an irrational belief that Caren had come for her job, to claim her rightful place in line. That Raymond Clancy had made her general manager, Lorraine's boss essentially, certainly didn't help things. Lorraine delighted in small acts of insubordination, putting through purchase orders without Caren's permission, serving pickled chow-chow out of crusty jars from her home kitchen, and often changing menus at the last minute. She considered herself an artist, and not one to be tied down by fixed pricing. To Lorraine, Caren was a nuisance, with her little clipboard and her endless list of questions. Worse, she saw Caren as a woman who was rootless and unsure of where she belonged—and therefore not someone who, by Lorraine's standards, ought to be consulted about the

intricacies of local cuisine. Lorraine was tall and black and unabashedly fat, carrying most of her excess weight around her middle, wearing it as a walking billboard for her talents, and she likewise regarded Caren's relatively lean frame as further evidence that she shouldn't be trusted in a kitchen. She was nothing like her mother, Lorraine was fond of saying.

"Lorraine, we have eighty-five guests due here at five o'clock."

"Plenty of time."

"The host is expecting a five-course meal," Caren said, repeating a fact of which she knew Lorraine was well aware. "I'd like to be able to tell them just what all that might entail."

Lorraine pondered the request before deciding, impulsively, to grant it.

"What'd we say, Pearl?"

She glanced over her shoulder at her line cook, a child-sized black woman in her sixties who had to stand on an orange crate to man the stove, which she was hovering over now. She didn't bother to look up from the pot that was fogging her glasses.

"'Gator," Pearl said.

Lorraine turned, reporting this news to Caren. "'Gator."

"And?"

Lorraine sighed then, making a grand show of being ordered onto her feet. She crossed the kitchen to a large, stainless-steel fridge. There, she planted one hand on the curve of her right hip and stood in front of the open refrigerator door, searching the stored contents with her eyes. After a few moments of silence, she ticked off the night's menu: "Grits, rolled with smoked Gouda, spinach, and bacon; chard out of the garden, with garlic and lemon; and potatoes creamed with butter and drippings." She bent down a little, checking a lower shelf. "And I guess I could do a mushroom soup to start." Then, nodding to her assistant, she added, "Pearl did a cobbler last night."

"Peach," Pearl said.

Lorraine turned to Caren. "Peach."

Caren nodded. "Sounds great."

Of course it did, she thought. She and Lorraine both knew those were Caren's mother's recipes. Lorraine held her gaze for a moment, narrowing eyes the color of burnt butter, and daring Caren to say something about it. "Oh, yes, ma'am, baby."

Caren's office was on the second floor of the main house, above the formal parlor. It was long and narrow and always warm, as the room's single window faced south. She could see a swatch of the parking lot from here, and the cane fields beyond.

She was never allowed in the main house as a kid.

She and Bobby had the run of the grounds and would sometimes sneak over the levee to hide from Raymond. But she never once stepped foot inside Bobby's bedroom or sat to dinner with the family. And her mother never made it past the foyer. She would cook, but Helen would not *serve*, leaving trays of hot food on a pedestal table by the back door or sending Lorraine in her stead. The Grays, for generations, had stayed clear of the main house, either by fate or by choice. And now, six days out of the week, Caren sat comfortably at her desk, looking out over fields where her ancestors had cut sugarcane by hand, both before and after the Civil War. Days she felt tempted to sit and ruminate about mistakes she'd made, choices that had led like a series of stale bread crumbs back to the gates of Belle, there was always this one thought. She had gone farther and risen higher than anyone in her family might have dreamed. It was not nearly the life she thought she'd have, not at thirty-seven. But it was something.

The machines were in the fields today.

October to January, they were out from sunup to sundown,

mowing row after row, plucking ripe stalks from the ground and stacking the bounty in advance of its long ride to the sugar mill in Thibodaux. Every year, during the cutting season, she watched them from her desk for hours on end, their whole repetitive existence providing the background hum of Caren's life on the plantation during the fall.

That Thursday was the first dry morning in a week.

Though the air was still damp and thick as wet cotton, fogging up her office window with tiny beads of dew, there was no rain today, and that meant there were laborers in the fields. She watched them work in teams of two. They dropped whole stalks of cane into shallow furrows dug into fields that had been left empty and fallow; they were planting for next year's crop, work that ordinarily would have been completed by early September, well before the harvest, if this season hadn't been so unusually wet. They'd had nearly fifteen inches of rain in August alone, the stuff of records. And every wet day was a day a farm couldn't plant, putting Groveland and everybody else behind for the season—and creating a small band of underemployed field-workers hanging around outside the Ace Hardware or the T&H Superette in Donaldsonville, looking for extra work. Ed Renfrew always hired locally, mostly blacks and poor whites, as had the Clancys when they still ran the farm, but for the past three years, the Groveland Corporation had been pulling in laborers from out of state, as far west as Beaumont, Texas, and even some coming all the way from Georgia and Alabama; they were Mexicans mostly, and some Guatemalans, plucked out of rice fields and fruit groves for a few months of working Louisiana sugarcane, before moving on to somewhere else. If the weather had held, the cops would later say, Inés Avalo would have already been gone. She would have likely still been alive.

The plantation was about fifty miles south of the capital.

Out here, they got only a few radio stations, mostly out of Baton Rouge, an endless stream of adult contemporary and country, Lionel Richie and Randy Travis. The music played softly as Caren got to work on the morning's first task: a memo to her supervisor, Raymond Clancy, outlining the particulars of the Donovan Isaacs problem.

It had started over the summer.

Mr. Isaacs, an "actor" with the Belle Vie Players who'd had a lead part in *The Olden Days of Belle Vie* for over a year, had taken a basic, first-year U.S. history course at his community college and come out a new man, he said. He'd had a personal awakening of sorts and suddenly taken grave issue with the staged play, refusing to utter, on principle, the scripted words that were being "put into his mouth."

The play was, admittedly, bad, a fact that Caren didn't drive home in her memo.

It was written by a state senator's wife, following Belle Vie's formal recognition as a historical treasure (worthy of state funding), and not a period or comma had changed in the twenty-five years hence. It was as soapy as *Gone With the Wind*, full of belles and balls and star-crossed lovers, noble Confederates and happy darkies and more dirty Yankees than you could count. And the tourists *loved* it. Senior groups and war buffs and New Englanders in shorts and flip-flops. And middle school teachers, of course, many of whom ordered items in bulk from the gift shop as takeaways for their students.

Caren had a certain appreciation for Donovan's newfound rage and even let him vent in her office for a solid twenty minutes, as he enumerated the many ways "this cracker-ass bullshit" fell well short of the *real* history of plantation life across Louisiana. Donovan wanted the whole play axed, which Caren was in no position to authorize. She did admit to encouraging

him, though. It was actually her idea that he create some kind of alternative document, "like a history report," that would tell a more accurate version of antebellum life, using Belle Vie's own library, if he wanted, and that he present it to the Clancy family and the state's Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, which paid his small salary. She was thinking of a one-sheet, something they could photocopy and include as a handout along with the play's programs. But Donovan had taken it a step further. He showed up in her office one hot July morning, clutching a stack of wrinkled yellow legal papers, smudged with pencil marks and ink. He had rewritten the play, top to bottom. Even the title was new: *Truth and Consequences: The Straight Story of the South*. The handwriting was illegible and difficult to follow, and at first she thought he was joking. "I'm as serious as a heart attack," he said, leaving the pages on Caren's desk.

She never even got past the third page, on which, as far as she could tell, a slave revolt took out half the French Creoles in Ascension Parish. There were three beheadings in a single paragraph. The whole thing read like bad comic-book fan fiction: slaves firing weapons without any gunpowder in sight, Yankee soldiers making telephone calls in the middle of the Civil War, and there was at least one musical interlude. It was an absolute mess, a boyish fantasy, an overcorrection that favored Donovan's own misguided ideas about power and score-settling over any real semblance of the truth. And besides, it wasn't exactly the kind of feel-good fare that pulls tourists in off the highway. Raymond Clancy said as much when she'd pitched the idea over the phone. His instructions could not have been more explicit: the play, and Belle Vie itself, his family homestead, would stay the way they had always been. When she reported this news to Donovan, he nodded stoically, as if he'd been expecting this. Then he threatened a walkout of the

whole cast in protest—inducting Shauna Hayes and Cornelius McCrary on the spot, before finally convincing Dell Blanchett, Nikki Hubbard, and Ennis Mabry to join the fight if push came to shove—leaving Caren with the task of figuring a way to run Belle Vie without any slaves. He'd left her office that day with a parting admonition that the truth would come out, one way or another.

In some ways, Caren understood Donovan.

She understood his pining for a history he could take some pride in. She was the daughter of a plantation cook, after all, the great-great-great-granddaughter of slaves, facts that had caused her no small amount of shame when she was Donovan's age.

She just didn't like him much.

She didn't want to be his *sister*.

He was a twenty-two-year-old kid, undereducated and over-entitled, of a generation long out of the shadow of the hard work that had made a life like his possible. He had nice clothes and a decent car, paid for by his grandmother, no less, the same grandmother who scrounged up bail money from emptied-out coffee cans whenever her boy got in trouble, which he did on an almost quarterly basis. It was little stuff mostly—petty theft or disorderly conduct, drunken fights outside of nightclubs and house parties. They were the impulsive acts of a knucklehead, not a hardened criminal, which in Caren's mind somehow made them worse. She'd been in court with kids who didn't have even half the resources Donovan did, kids who would spend their lives in jail, most of them, kids who had no chance. She thought Donovan should have known better, shown some self-restraint, made his grandmother's heart ache less. Betty Collier was in her eighties now, had raised him since he was in grade school. She would some days keep Caren on the phone at all hours, wanting her to know how hard she worked to keep her grandson out

of trouble, often ending these calls by asking if there was more Caren could hire Donovan to do on the place to keep him busy. And Caren would have to explain that the only open work was for maintenance jobs, and that Donovan had made it plain he wasn't putting his hands in any dirt.

"What the fuck I'm in college for?" he'd said.

These unexplained absences were his latest stunt. Caren was listing them in chronological order, starting back from August, when the news finally reached her. There was a faint crackle at her hip, then Luis's lilting voice on her walkie-talkie.

"Ma'am . . ." he said.

She lifted the clunky device from the waist of her jeans. "Luis, could you or Miguel make sure to pull one of the heat lamps from the storage closet for this evening?"

"Uh . . . Mrs. Gray?"

She sighed.

She must have told him at least a dozen times she wasn't married, repeating just as frequently that she, thirty years his junior, was the one who ought to be calling him *sir*.

"Yes," she said, still typing. "What is it, Luis?"

"There's something out here, ma'am, something you need to see."