

Rusted Halo

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Smashwords Edition

MEMORIES FADE PERFUNCTORILY.

They only become a specter of what our lives used to be, as we traverse toward a definite end, never keeping a steady course, always flowing, always moving.

But there are some memories that choose to linger if only to torment and haunt us, poking and prodding at our souls, the way a child does amidst an endless game of nuisance and fascination.

I was a young boy once, undoubtedly foolish and coy, and as I move a little closer to my own *definite end* the memories of my life and how I lived it are beginning to fade to dust, as the color in my complexion begins to grey and my voice sounds a little weathered.

Exhaustion now attacks my limbs and frosty drafts from a cracked window often hinder my movement; but my soul is alive. It thirsts and bleeds and pulsates, struggling with my poor bodily plight, desperately igniting my mind with my memories in tow.

Like I said, I was a foolish young boy when I felt my soul thump for the first time.

And Wolf Mountain nearest to my home in Dahlonega, Georgia was breathtaking, unadulterated. The breeze that brushed off its summit had always tasted warm and sweet, and the trees at its pedestal always provided the best shade from the copious, aggressive sun.

And on one particular day in June, unlike any other, I lay comfortably at the plinth of an oak tree. You see, I was specifically told to stay put under that tree until she came running to me. Everything had been carefully planned out...and I was fantastically in love.

Every inch of my body stood on its end; and I swore I could smell her perfume in the air, hear her voice echo through my ears.

You see, this meeting was all in secret because it wasn't right. We both knew that if anyone found out about us I'd never see her again. So, I did as I was told and I remained perfectly still, waiting for her...

But the sound of a loud snap stole my peace and I shot up with fright...and I took off running in the direction of the sound like the foolish boy I was.

I knew that something wasn't right, but I kept on running...and then the sound split through the sky again and I ran harder...and the tips of the wild grass nipped at my bare legs scratching me, irritating me as if they wanted me to stop and turn around...

But I kept on, as I left my breath behind, as sweat cooled my brow, as I sank my sharp canines into the pulp of my bottom lip.

I stalled at a clearing beneath a few evergreen trees.

Silence stained my mouth as I stared before me.

It was Isobel Grey.

Now, she had always been a sweet girl and she had always been the one who did what her mama and daddy told her to do. She had always been a good girl; but now her snow-white dress was marbled with an angry scarlet, staining her pretty skin with the golden flecks that glimmered in the sunlight.

There was something strange about her face that never sat quite right with me, and like a foolish boy I stood perfectly still.

It was then that I realized she was holding something in her hand, and a flash of remorse crossed her face.

"Sully," she panted, loosening her grip. She raised herself up. The thing in her hand was shiny and black and it didn't take much time for me to grasp what it was.

"Sully, I need you to help me," she breathed. "Sully, come here...come help me..."

Now, what I neglected to tell you before this point was that Isobel Grey surpassed me in age by nearly ten years. So while she'd come to full bloom at the gentle age of twenty-five, I was still catching up. But Isobel Grey had looked after me in my infancy and I had always wanted to help her, please her.

But something made me backtrack slowly. And she inched closer to me.

"Sully," she breathed. She had always been so pure, like an angel. Her voice had always reminded him of the smoothest, sweetest ice cream, or the type of homemade caramel candy that needs no manipulation or chemical to change it; it just melted in your mouth.

"Did you hear me, Sully? I need you...come help me...I need you..."

I backed away some more. I no longer trusted the look in that girl's eyes. They permeated my dwindling fortitude. After all, I was foolish and young, wasn't I?

The alarming sound of my own thrusting heartbeat distracted me, and I almost lost my footing on a raised root in the ground. I swallowed thickly, reformed my stance, but that Isobel Grey had the shiny black thing pointed directly at me.

"Come, Sully...come to me...help me...I...I don't want you to end up like them...be a good boy, Sully...don't you love me?"

I wanted to scream "No". I wanted to take off running. I knew that I should have continued to wait by that tree. But even in her devilish haze, Isobel Grey still kept my senses in her grasp.

"I'll tell them, Sully," she began, smiling. "I'll tell everyone what you saw last night...I'll tell them what you know...you don't want that, do you? You're a smart boy...you're a good boy...come to me..."

. . .

My pop used to always tell me how smart I was and how proud of me he was.

"You pay attention to the small things, Sully," he would tell me. "Like all those detectives you see on TV...you'll be a good cop one day...you'll make me proud, I know it..."

In school, I was always better in my reading and my writing classes than anything else. There was one question that went unanswered by me.

I guess I always embraced the fact that what I knew and how much I knew would take me far – it would never hurt me.

Now, my favorite book was *The Great Gatsby*. And while other people would say the most fascinating person in the book was Gatsby himself, I fell in love with Nick's perspective...*well*...with the exception of an Ivy League degree and about fifteen years in age. But like him, I lived with my pop in a small community called Creighton at the base of Wolf Mountain. He rented an old guesthouse by the lake.

You see my pop worked for a man named Tate Grey whose family built the mansion at the turn-of-the-century when the wine industry in Georgia was coming to form.

My pop never really wanted much out of life, except for his work and me. He was a landscape architect, but he never liked to be called something so formal. Tate Grey had seen his work done on a friend's summer home in Atlanta and had wanted the same done for his. Moving into that small bungalow was pop's idea alone – but that didn't stop Grey from jumping on the idea.

Pop spent hours working on mastering Grey's landscape. He knew every flower, plant or shrub better than any botanist and he was always ready to challenge one if the opportunity ever presented itself. Now, I'd go over and help my pop with the gardening and such when school was over and I'd see Mrs. Georgie Grey sitting on the second floor terrace, humming a tune and sipping sweet tea. Mrs. Grey was always pleasant, but a little narcissistic. She never paid much attention to anything outside of herself, as if the bubble around her was a mirror that she could look into and always be reminded of herself.

Now, Tate Grey had two daughters; their blood was thick but their personalities mimicked oil and water. There was Isobel Grey who liked to dance in dresses with big skirts and sing at the top of her lungs. She was fresh and effervescent, like the first chill of autumn in the air, as bright as the flowers that my pop planted all over

the house. Tate Grey doted upon her, and Georgie Grey stamped her with envious eyes. She was a modern-day princess.

She would watch me when pop worked long hours and we would play card games. I would always win and she would always tell me how smart and cunning I was.

“I need to learn your secrets, Sully,” she would say. “I think you can read my mind...”

There was a peculiar maturity about her and a certain understanding of things that she never really talked about or expressed to the point that it made people sick of her. She was well liked in most circles, and people never felt guilty about spoiling her.

Her father made plans for her to go to Princeton, so she went to Princeton. She wanted to study dance at Juilliard when she was done, but he didn't let her. He made plans for her to go to Yale and become a lawyer like him. She applied to Yale when she finished at Princeton and she was accepted.

Just like that.

There was one summer that she returned home and she was wandering the narrow passageway between the guesthouse and the big house. I spotted her knelt in a bed of tulips as dusk settled on the ground and in the sky, and she was crying. Before I could ask her what was wrong, she ran away. That was the first time that I had seen anything less than a smile on her face.

And then there was Selah Grey. Now, the thing to understand about Selah was that she didn't look very much like the rest of her family. And there was a rumor circling about Dahlonega that she had been adopted at a young age. She was quiet and pensive, and a full head of black waves cradled her face like a lion's mane. There was a peculiar type of frailty about her - the kind that made her appear decreasingly unsure of her place on the earth.

I suppose it didn't help matters much when people were always remarking on how strange and dark she looked and how bright and beautiful Isobel was.

It's my only guess that she painted a lot and stayed indoors for that reason alone. There was an implicit obscurity that mantled her that nobody really understood. It wasn't ominous or frightening, but placid and calm, like the feeling you get when you're sitting on a screened porch and a summer thunderstorm is soothing your plaguing thoughts.

Now, Selah and Isobel Grey never really got along much; they were only two years apart and when clothes and shoes didn't fit Isobel anymore, they were stuffed in Selah's closet. There was a rumor that as children, they were once inseparable and they enjoyed playing in the lake beside the house. Some have said that one morning, Isobel wanted to play in the lake and had dragged Selah along even though she didn't really want to.

She didn't want to wear her older sister's old bathing suit. It tugged in some places but sagged dramatically in the butt. Anyway, they jumped in while their parents were still asleep. The sun was like a newborn child. Selah was never a very good swimmer, and Isobel knew that. The older sister turned her back for a second and Selah began to struggle. The younger sister cried out for help, kicking and splashing about, but Isobel, who had left the water, only stood on the bank and watched her tussle.

"You've got to learn how to stand on your own two feet, Selah," she supposedly told her. "Your plain looks will not get you far, baby sister...you have to be a fighter...I won't always be there for you..."

The people say that young Selah could have drowned if Isobel hadn't decided to pull her out at the last second. Selah has only said a few words to her ever since.

Isobel loved being in the spotlight while Selah preferred to lurk in the shadows. Isobel had always been openly loved and appreciated and her beauty has always been praised. There was never a question whether or not Isobel Grey would find the man of her dreams...

When Isobel left for law school, Selah moved to Paris to study art and fashion. Neither Tate nor Georgie tried to stop her.

Things in the Grey mansion were quiet for a while. With both daughters gone, Tate and Georgie had no choice but to focus on themselves. And even I found myself bored. I had gotten so used to Isobel's nurturing and prancing and Selah's withdrawn disposition and passion for painting that nothing appealed to me but that tree and that shade. I was young and I was foolish and I was growing up. But girls my age never enthralled me the way that they should have. I always knew that I was different; I always knew that there was a reason why I was so attracted to Isobel's maturity and her freshness.

At the start of that particular summer, I couldn't wait till she got home. I wanted to hear her call my name, I wanted to feel her arms around me, her breath on my face, I wanted to see her smile. She would be done with law school that summer, and she would return to Georgia for good.

And one day in June, a long black Mercedes pulled into the long winding driveway of the Grey house. It was the type of car that was only used in spy movies and almost always belonged to the director or the producer. A long, tall man stepped out of the driver's seat, moving to the passenger side to open the door. And there was that Isobel Grey, looking as beautiful as ever. And she was holding hands with that long, tall man.

There was something about his face that I immediately didn't trust or didn't understand...but I couldn't place my thoughts or feelings about it.

The next day, Tate Grey told my pop that he needed to make sure that the grounds looked their best. Isobel was getting married that next week to a big-time lawyer from Boston named Carter.

There's a peculiar childlike demeanor that arose when Isobel was around Carter. Tate and Georgie noticed it too, and they were elated by it, though easily displeased by the shortness of the engagement.

But there was something about Carter's haughty presence that made me angry, though, even now I can't quite put my finger on it. It reminded me of dissatisfaction or a passive compliance to the general cause and effect of things. There was an

unvoiced understanding that rich people like Carter married into a rich family like Tate Grey's, as if with the intention of being ultra cautious not to upset the order of things.

He seemed to fit right into the immaculate picture of what Isobel wanted her life to be - two lawyers living the familiar affluent existence, never steering too far to the right or too far left.

Over the course of the following week, my pop projected his best work onto that garden. Cooks and bakers and florists were in and out of the house at all times of day, and Isobel's friends had flown in promptly to ensure that everything ran as smoothly as possible.

I only lurked in the background, watching the chaos unfold, imagining what my summer would have been like if Carter hadn't come here or if Isobel hadn't gone so far away to study law or if she hadn't as pretty as she was. I begin to imagine myself ten years older in a young and foolish way; I was a rich man, living in a mansion by the sea, women throwing themselves at my feet just for the chance to be close to me. But then Isobel Grey appears in my flaky daydreaming as if mimicking a break in the crowd, and all I want is her, and all she wants is a spot in then shade under that big oak tree with me.

I selfishly imagine an easier life if more money was involved, if I was older, if Isobel looked at me in only remote comparison to the way she looked at Carter.

No, there was no way I compared to other boys and their foolish teenaged fantasies of movie stars and attractive young teachers. And I acknowledge that it would be an understatement to say that at seventeen I desired the impure touch of a woman, but with Isobel, my feelings far surpassed the limits of physicality.

My only saving grace, however, was that there was no way she could have known. For, I had always been a helpful child and I had always been a quiet child, thus expressing myself in a way that could expose my inner calm was foreign to me. I thrived for sight and touch and smell; I observed people and things closely, gaining perspective, understanding, the way a scientist observes a peculiar natural

phenomenon.

I suppose it would be rather uncouth of me to blurt out that I have not spoken a single word since the age of five, but I cannot think of a better way to tell you such. I am completely unaware of what my voice sounds like, and you may find it strange that I've created one that resembles a child in my head, but I can't readily understand why.

It's neither genetic nor God-given, but a doctor had called it "selective". Now, don't be mistaken, I'm neither a monk nor protesting for a greater cause. You see, my pop was working late one night when I was younger and my mama...my mama liked to leave the window open on hot nights to let some fresh mountain air in. You see, my mama was a city girl and moved to the mountains for my pop into that stuffy old lake house. She didn't like the mountains but she loved my pop and she did the best she could. Not long before that night, I heard my mama and pop arguing about something that now is a little muddy in my mind. But I'm sure it had something to do with my pop not working enough and them not making enough money. So, not too long after that, my pop worked longer hours and came home later and later. I knew then that my pop really loved my mama.

That night, my mama put me to bed and retired to her favorite chair in the living room. Now, I was never one of those kids who could fall asleep fast, and the crickets liked to nestle beneath my window and wail till dawn broke.

But there was a particular lucidity that night: the ebony sky almost appeared sheer with streams of royal blue weaved throughout like a loom. The gale echoed sharply against the surface of Wolf Mountain, giving it a hollow sound. And the moon's glow gave everything a pure chiffon overlay of cerulean.

I now envy the inner calm of a child; there's a haven that you feel, as if you're constantly trouncing along a candy-coated path of gumdrops and chocolate bunnies, diving into a pool of ingenuity and an imagination that far surpasses the genius of Walt Disney himself.

You see, as I remember it, there was a man who lived in a neighboring

community who was a little obsessed with my mama. His wife had died a year before that in a car accident, and my folks used to say that he needed to go see a doctor about his depression. Now, I can confidently say that I inherited my intuition from my mama - she always told my pop that that man never quite sat right with her, but my pop ignored it.

"You're a pretty girl, Josephine," he'd tell her. "The man's hurting. I can't beat up every man that makes a pass at you, can I?"

You see, what my pop didn't know was that that man used to follow my mama. And one day we were at the market buying groceries for my pop's birthday dinner and he cornered her. She was so scared that she took her purse and slammed it into his face. The metal piece attached to the zipper sliced him right across the cheek.

I'm almost sure that my mama didn't tell my pop.

So, that one night, I had just drifted off to sleep when I heard my mama scream out. I flew out of my bed and down the hall. I saw that crazy man, looming in the moon's glow, holding my mama by her neck. Her face looked strained and a gurgling sound came from her mouth. She was completely nude.

She looked at me. "Sully! Get out of here, Sully! Run, baby!"

I could have sworn she was just about to say something else but that man shoved something into her side, silencing her. He dumped her limp body on the floor and looked at me.

"Boy, if you tell anybody what I've done, I'll come back and finish you."

The next day, the cops sat me in a cold, smelly closet with only two chairs and a small table and asked me what happened.

I didn't voice a peep. I didn't even cry.

I've been called "Sully the Mute" ever since.

. . .

Two nights before the wedding, I was waiting lakeside, waiting for my pop to put the finishing touches on the landscape. We were going to dinner. The Grey house

was full of friends and family from either side. They were throwing an impromptu engagement party of sorts. We wanted no parts of it though Tate had poignantly offered him an invitation.

I heard rustling behind me but didn't think much of it. Then it got louder and closer.

Then Isobel jumped out at me. I only released a quick breath, attempting to smile.

"I thought I would get you to scream, Sully," she whispered, setting herself down beside me. "I thought I would get to hear what your voice sounded like before I got married..."

Her perfume was sweet, but her mere proximity was beyond intoxicating. I rolled my eyes closed for a fleeting second.

She sighed deeply and leaned back, perching her elbows in the plush grass. The black chiffon dress she wore was new, and I imagined Tate Grey buying it in anticipation of her arrival.

"Everybody that I know is in that house," she whispered. "Do you know how suffocating that is, Sully?"

I honestly couldn't imagine feeling that way. Living so close to Heaven always gave me the feeling of a long expanse of possibilities and the idea that the world was the cold, dark place that everyone made it out to be.

"Do you like him, Sully?"

I wanted to keep my feelings to myself. I didn't want to disappoint her with my disapproving countenance. So, I simply nodded my head.

"Good," she whispered, smiling a little bit bigger. "I trust your opinion...I know you wouldn't lie to me. I know everything is happening so fast...but I'm in love, Sully...I'm really, really in love with him..."

I honestly didn't want her to keep going. The less I knew about that man the better. I wanted no reminders of what was to come the day after tomorrow.

"My sister called me this morning," she admitted. "It's been two years since I've

seen her. I told her that I was getting married this weekend. She told me that she wasn't surprised. She told me that I would always be the one who'd get swallowed in the hole of submission and normalcy. I don't know why I tried to convince myself that she'd be happy for me. You'd think that two years in Paris would change her perspective. Just because I've always known what I wanted out of life, doesn't mean she should make me feel bad for it. She said she wanted no parts of my weekend. Can you believe that she said that?"

I honestly could, but I made no signal of recollection. I couldn't agree or disagree with what she had to say. But there was no denying that things just weren't right between her and her sister Selah.

Isobel sighed and stared outward. "You're always so good to me, Sully...even when you don't speak, you never seem to let me down...not one second...maybe my sister is right...maybe I am on the verge of getting swallowed whole. I do whatever I'm told...I'm the good child...that's why Selah has always hated me...they loved me more than her..."

I wasn't sure who she was referring to when she said "they". I was too distracted by my nearness to her, and her distance from Carter. Suddenly I felt more in control of her and more alive than I ever had.

"If only you were older, Sully," she smirked, gingerly wrapping her arm around my shoulder. "We could run away together...and I wouldn't have to think about living a normal life..."

Part of me wanted to take her by the hand and lead her soaring through the woods and to the other side of the mountain. But when she turned and faced me, I could smell the tepid alcohol on her breath, poisoning my image of her immaculate disposition.

I watched hypnotically as her tongue danced around her lips for me, slithering like a snake, charming my better sense.

"I bet you're still a virgin," she whispered close to me. Her fingers pricked along my shoulder blade, and everything below my waste felt alive and thirsty.

“Carter gets angry with me,” she admitted, lowering her head a little. “I won’t sleep with him. Maybe I’m a little bit afraid of him. Maybe I’m a little bit afraid of *any* man.”

I then imagined Tate Grey with his money, power and innate coercion, scaring off any man that came close to Isobel. I fancied her a prisoner and I her savior, a strong, silent hero in my flashy armor.

“I don’t even like my wedding dress,” she whispered. She then crumbled into tears and pressed her head against my shoulder. I enclosed the length of my grasp around her small frame and I took in her smell. Imagine inhaling a glorious Christmas dinner with all its trimmings and your famished, empty stomach is growling at you. You’re just close enough to pick up a turkey leg, but someone smacks your hand away and tells you that you’re not worthy enough for this meal.

I tried to stop breathing. I wanted no parts of this moment. I wanted no parts of Isobel Grey. It was wrong and every nerve in my body could sense it, feel it, touch it.

But she pressed her soft lips into my neck and I couldn’t move. And they traveled up to my jaw line, along my cheek, across the bridge of my nose, down to my lips. They were hungry, deep kisses, and every part of my common sense wanted to push her away, but I’d soon become drunk and witless, and my brain matter evaporated to dust.

Surely I was convinced that I’d stepped inside of a dream, and the young, foolish facet of myself ignored the possibility that this was wrong or that our newly forged connection would soon come to an end.

It wasn’t fair that I could live and breathe and taste Heaven, then get it snatched away so quickly. Suddenly I was a child again, and a gooey chocolate chip cookie was being dangled in my face, and all I could see, all I wanted was *it*...

But she shoved me off quickly thereafter, smiled in my face out of guilt and I just sat there panting, wanting it to happen again, nearly feeling the urge to *make* it happen again. But the intensity of her coal-black eyes gazing into mine startled me into a lifeless stupor, giving her enough time to get to her feet and run away promptly.

Tate Grey had a rehearsal dinner for her daughter the night before the wedding on the lawn just before twilight swept along the grounds. My pop forced me to go with him. I kept my distance and lurked in the shadows, watching Isobel Grey from afar, cringing and seething each time that Carter Grey grabbed at his fiancée's back.

But the truth was I'd never seen that girl look happier. Any fear or disillusion she felt about marrying that man had completely dissipated from her demeanor, and she looked at light and fresh as she always did. The kiss then had only become a blip in time, a mistake, unadulterated happenstance. I then only stood back, a lovesick fool, understanding that our small connection was only a fleeting flicker, embedded in the bigger picture of what she wanted out of life and from Carter.

She never glanced in my direction once. But each dragging second, as my feelings transcended the innocence of a boyhood crush, I prayed that she did...

I acknowledged this moment as my first stint of heartbreak, of unrequited love... even if no one understood it but me...

You see, the expression on my face rarely changed, even when I was with my pop, even when I was with her.

And while Tate Grey raised his glass to Carter and Isobel, I felt nauseous. I turned and ran when my father wasn't looking, and I returned to my tree.

I was nestled against its base watching a pink sky fade to purple, and I closed my eyes lazily, feeling the stale heat wrap around me. I tasted Isobel in the breeze.

It's a lonely road when no one understands the thoughts going on in your head. It's standing in front of the right door to your chosen path but you forgot the key...

I had just drifted off to sleep, when I heard my name being called.

I smiled instantly, thinking of only one woman's presence that mattered more to me than my own mother's.

But when I opened my eyes, a peculiar shadowed figure loomed over my head.

"Sullivan Lee," the woman said. "You look so grown up..."

I sat up quickly and noticed that Selah Grey had changed a little too. She took notice of my awkward staring and laughed.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered, running her hand along the top of my head. “Even as quiet as you are, I hear every word that you say...”

And she walked away. The comment was strange and alarming, but it made sense coming from her mouth. I did not understand my feelings about her presence then, but I think I understand them a little better now.

At any rate, I followed her, keeping a careful distance, waiting for the moment that she’d turn around and tell me to leave her be. She wasn’t supposed to be there, but I had to know why she had decided to come...

Her nebulous existence made a little bit more sense to me then. Paris had done a number on her, but I couldn’t put my finger on what made her more intriguing then, in contrast to the way she looked a couple of years ago.

I was one of the very few who had acknowledged (even in my silence) how pretty Selah Grey was, but the glimmering shadow of Isobel’s gaze left an inferior mark on the younger sister. But there was something resplendent and pure and organic about her now, as if she acknowledged her obstacles of the past and had decided to shove through them, leaving slicing curse words in her wake.

Selah turned and reached for my hand. “Come, Sully...we should talk...”

So, I complied.

She stopped us just within earshot of the party, among a assemblage of cypress trees. Isobel’s laughter echoed in my ears.

“Love hurts, doesn’t it, Sully?”

I was genuinely confused; I’m sure that my expression matched my thoughts easily.

Selah gazed toward her sister and smiled. “She’s pretty, isn’t she, Sully?”

I pursed my lips to keep from agreeing with her. But I’m sure my eyes gave way to my tree feelings.

“It’s okay,” she replied in whisper. “You don’t have to respond...I already know how you feel...”

Did she?

“She shouldn’t have kissed you like that,” Selah told him. “She shouldn’t have kissed you like that when she’s in love with someone else...”

I sucked in my breath.

“It’s not fair, is it, Sully? To watch the one person you ever loved kiss someone else, marry someone else. It makes you do things you’d regret, doesn’t it, Sully? It makes you want to prove that you’re better, that you’ve always been better...”

Selah Grey gripped my hand a little tighter then. I kept my mouth shut tight.

But then she gasped and it startled me. I tried to follow the direction of her gaze but she quickly dropped my hand and proceeded to back away. I wanted to follow her, but I was convinced that she’d been taken over by some perilous demon.

In retrospect...maybe she had...

She took off running and I stood stationary, wholly bewildered and equally intrigued.

But Carter broke through the shallow branches of the trees seconds later, muttering her name through clenched teeth. I jumped back into the shadows of the lofty trees so that he didn’t see me. I don’t think he would have cared either way.

“*Selah!* Selah, I saw you...come back! Come back!”

I turned and trailed him undetected. My steps were careful, methodic, my breath light. I was unsure of each step of took, and Selah was completely out of sight ahead of me. All that I could hear was the sound of Carter’s labored panting, drowning in the resonance of the crickets’ howl.

But I found them under my tree.

Selah was pacing back and forth, avoiding Carter’s grasp. I could see the glistening of tears on her cheek even from my position behind another tree.

“Why did you come back?” he kept asking her. “You shouldn’t have come back...”

“Why?” she replied once, sniffing. “Am I fucking up your perfect existence? Do you think I’m trying to upset your perfect wife...?”

He grabbed her arm and steadied her. “Stop running away from me,” he told her, pulling her close. Their noses were barely grazing each others. I could see her chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Haven’t you done enough of that?” he pressed.

He was gripping her arm in an ungodly way, but she seemed to like the tension that it brought her.

“Why do you care?” she asked him, snatching her arm out of his grasp. “I left so that you and Isobel could have the space that you wanted...the space that you needed...”

“What I *needed* was *you*,” he told her forcibly. “What I *wanted* was *you*...”

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” she mumbled, starting in the other direction. It looked as though she wanted to take off running in the opposing direction but the length of his grasp stopped her before she could get very far. Carter then yanked her back toward him.

“Won’t your *bride* be concerned about your whereabouts soon? You shouldn’t keep her waiting...”

He paused, releasing her grasp, before he continued. “This isn’t over...”

And he turned and walked away from her.

. . .

My pop passed out on the couch after the party had died down, and I felt sorry for him. He couldn’t even make it to his bed, and maybe part of him didn’t want to. Josephine Lee had been a big part of his life for a long time; perhaps he was tired of sharing a bed with only a specter of how happy he used to be.

I slid out of bed and snuck out of the house. The unbending summer heat blanketed the ground relentlessly, creating premature dew on the grass and trees. The moon was full, spellbinding and pure and I idled beside my house for a moment, gazing up at it.

But the rustling sounds near it couldn't have been ignored. My eyes floated over the long expanse of ground and saw two shadows moving together in perfect harmony. Whispers echoed against the silence like icy apparitions, piercing through the murky summer shadows with delight.

I moved closer to them unconsciously, disregarding what fate lay ahead of me. I relied on my silence and stealth, hoping that the shadows didn't stop moving, hoping that the fates didn't bring calamity upon me. I ducked behind a menacing oak tree, standing on my toes, hiding my presence in the sound of the rustling branches above my head.

And the silver stream of the moon ignited them, sliding down their bodies, revealing their true forms in the nude. And Selah Grey's pleasurable cry shot through the trees, reverberated off the mountains, and melded almost perfectly with Carter's low, bellowed groans. Their bodies moved in mellifluously, in raw, impeccable grace, scraping away the last stint of doubt that something between them was misplaced or trivial.

I watched on in a mixture of horror and unbridled curiosity, and a subtle pinch of rage seethed through me, crawling along my skin like an itchy rash. They were making love in the most open of ways, completely disregarding consequence, succumbing to their tortuous bodies and carnal desire. All the while, Isobel slept in her bedroom, flounced in lace and satin, waiting for the first splash of sunlight to come.

She loved Carter. Carter was to be hers for an eternity.

A part of me wanted to keep this moment secret as much as they did. If Isobel caught wind of Selah's arrival (in the worst of ways, surely), what then? I wouldn't stand for seeing her *that* unhappy, no matter how I felt about her.

And then they finished suddenly. Selah straddled him, panting lazily, bracing her forehead against his while he gripped her with all of his might. And Carter breathed her name against her face, his eyes rolled closed in rapture.

“Come back to me,” he murmured, pressing his fingers deeper into her sides.
“Come back to me, Selah...”

She slowly shook her head. “Isobel always gets what she wants. I smell her all over you. I can’t love you, knowing that *she* loves you too. I can’t share you. All of my days are cursed because of what she did.”

Then Selah came toward my direction as though she were drawn to it. For a moment I swore that she was looking right at me.

. . .

A crack of lavender sunrise, perched itself upon my face, bringing to dawn my sleepless night.

I could have motioned to someone about what I saw – but who would have believed me?

There were things that clearly far surpassed my notion of understanding – even when they were so blatantly formed before my face.

But there was one thing that I knew with upmost certainty: I couldn’t go to that wedding.

But I fooled myself into believing that I was – I even got dressed in my finest, and marched out the door. Pop had already gone ahead without me. It didn’t surprise me that Tate wouldn’t give him the day off.

And I walked effortlessly along an unbridled path to my oak tree. It was a peculiarly gorgeous day; the one that genuinely made you feel as though God was really looking out for you.

And I strolled in a peculiarly leisured way, as though I unwontedly anticipated the moment that someone would reveal themselves, from the hidden splendor of the shrubs and hedges I walked along.

Perhaps I shouldn't have spend so much time getting caught in my own wanderlust...

But someone's arms clamored around me in due time, locking me into unwilling submission.

It was the first time I'd ever thought of squealing in years.

"Shhh," the voice whispered, covering my mouth just so. "Do you want all of Dahlonga to hear you, Sully?"

It was Selah – and she frightened me.

She stood before me, blocking my path to my tree.

"I have an important message for you," she whispered. "It's from Isobel..."

Everything inside my body stood on end, alert, ready.

Selah leaned into me starkly – her breath was tainted but I couldn't detect the origin.

"She wants you to meet her by the old oak tree," she murmured. "The one you're so fond of..."

My face changed and she noticed it quickly.

"Don't worry, Sully," she assured me, placing her hand on my shoulder. "This is what you've been waiting for..."

. . .

There was a moment in my stark disbelief where I could have stopped everything. I could have gone to that wedding; I could have voiced outwardly: "to hell with you...I'm going to do the right thing".

But, like I said, I was young and I was foolish, and my heart was standing on its end.

I was witlessly in love, romantic, feeling her love innately tug at my loins.

I would have done *anything*.

Instead, I sat imperturbably at the base of said tree, watching the clouds move across the sky.

I thought about how I would react when I saw her, how I would comfort her. I was immediately inclined to believe the obvious – she'd found out about Selah and Carter's late night tryst and wanted nothing more to do with the wedding.

I wallowed there in the unmistakable pleasure that her presence would soon bring me.

Isobel and I, unbridled, pure.

There was a thing that happened to me as I sat there – a newfound understanding of love.

I viewed it in the most dramatic sense – a wayward clashing of souls, imminently drawn together by some unobserved, undetected force.

Isobel.

I drew up an immediate plan: make haste with her over the mountain, ditch her white dress in a flurry of wildly orgasmic emotion, and say goodbye to our lives as we knew them.

It would be easy – we were both young, we both were capable of unconditional love.

And then I heard it for the first time – a clap that resounded loudly through the clouds, alarming a bevy of robins in the branches above my head to flee.

And then another.

I sprang to my feet instinctively. I coursed along a breadth of yellow grass, toward a clearing in the trees and I found her there.

She loomed above a body, indolent and stiffened, her position visibly rattled. I stood a steady distance away from her, scrutinizing her every inhale, exhale.

My eyes tarried downward long enough to notice the shiny, black thing in her clutches, emitting a slender spiral of smoke.

“Sully,” she murmured.

I panted, desperate to draw blindness from the sight of vermillion staining her wedding gown.

I felt my lips quake as she drew closer to me; and in an attempt to stave away the disconcerting wakefulness in her eye, I shook my head vehemently.

“It’s me, Sullivan...”

The ease that came with exuding my name rattled the very core of me, to the point where I almost forgot my initial reason for standing in that spot.

“It’s Isobel...”

Her own name sliced through me with the coldness of an icepick, but I remained stationery.

I *loved* her...and she loved me.

“I want you to do something for me, Sully...”

I swallowed thickly. She moved closer to me – I could smell her. I longed for her even then.

“I did this for us, Sully,” she continued. “Can’t you see? This is only for *us*...”

Us...it sounded nice, didn’t it? I focused on her pink lips and lost all sense of myself.

“You have to help me...you have to help me with this...”

Her hands were shaking. If she didn’t trust her movements, why should I?

I begin to backtrack slowly – and my movements ceased her confidence.

“Sully,” she said. “It’s *me*...”

Tears cluttered the bottom of her eyes...but she didn’t stop smiling.

“I love you, Sully,” she whispered. “Don’t you love me...?”

I should have ran – that was my moment. It was as obvious as the sun blinding us to no remorse.

The illusion of starting a new life became a lot easier when I focused on those big brown eyes of hers.

Everything made more sense when I was lapsing in her pools of irrevocable foolery.

I nodded witlessly at her imprudent question, and I stalled my body as she moved toward me.

Isobel...

She stood just before me, and smile, gingerly placing the cool, shiny gun in my hand.

“I want you to take this, Sully...I want you to take this and run...”

I clutched my hands around the gun, embedding the tips of my fingers in it. It neither shook nor trembled in my grasp. And Isobel smiled bigger.

“Good, Sully...good...”

And she backed away from me. And Selah Grey appeared beyond the trees.

“You’re a good boy, Sully,” she said. “You’ve always been a good boy...”

Carter quivered and took his last breath beneath our feet.

I wasn’t sure if it was my imagination, but I swore I heard him utter, “Selah,” before his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

And they stood there proudly, Selah and Isobel, a rather odd pair.

“He didn’t understand us,” Selah replied reflectively.

“It would have taken too long,” Isobel added.

“It’s sad it had to end this way,” Selah continued. “It would have been a lovely wedding...”

Then Isobel looked at me. “Run, Sully...and don’t turn back...”

So, I did.

. . .

They caught me on the other side of the mountain, sleeping in a cove at dawn. Tate Grey berated me, but my Pop tried to stop him.

“Watch how you talk to my boy,” Pop said.

I was sitting in the old guesthouse with blood-stained fingers and my pop and Mr. Grey staring me down intently.

“The little invalid did it, didn’t he, Lee? I can tell by the look in his eye,” Grey said. “Sneaky little bastard...”

A sheriff from the next county over had handcuffs dangling from his pocket, eyeballing me.

“Where are the girls, Sully?” the sheriff. “Where are they?”

Selah and Isobel had gone missing overnight – but not me. I guess deep down I wanted to be found.

“We know you didn’t kill ‘em, boy,” he pressed. “Who did it, Sully? Tell us who did it?”

I loved her – I really, really loved her.

I took a deep breath and I simply voiced, “Me...”

Hmph, I sounded a lot different than I thought...