

THE GREAT TREES FALL Excerpt

SHE THOUGHT SHE HEARD HER MAMA'S VOICE just down the hallway. But the house was quiet and she embraced the solace, standing idly between rows of family portraits on either side of her, eyes blankly fixated on the empty space in front of her. Her mama's voice, she realized, had a very distinct drawl to it, like the swamps of the Georgia low country: thick and balmy, like day-old grits or slow-churned butter. Arching her feet upward, she readied herself to run toward it, as though all peace lied in the comforting vibration in her ears, dulling the piercing shriek of her own thumping heartbeat.

Perhaps she thought that standing there would help her piece everything together better. Although she had the ability to stand strongly, her knees buckling only intermittently, she felt as though she represented the outline of herself, the rest of her existing elsewhere, perhaps existing in the same unseen plane as her mother's disembodied voice.

And she closed her eyes. Helen's voice had died away, but a whistling sound remained. The breeze, she figured, reminding her that she was alone.

She didn't mind it much.

She liked the solitude, really. She'd caused far too much pain to be deserving of anything else. Existing, even, seemed useless.

But, hell, maybe she was selfish. She deserved to live and breathe and smother herself in the emptiness. She longed for the giant hole in her belly to linger and widen over time. She desired a daily reminder of how far she'd fucked things up. She'd pushed the one person whose name she had difficulty even uttering to the point that he shoved off the gentlest of her touches. He needn't be bothered with her bullshit anymore. And she fulfilled that need to rid himself of her.

It seemed easier somehow.

Just a little while ago, she'd attempted to write something down. But her hand started to tremble and ache. She couldn't bring herself to the realization of anything. Understanding the consequences of her actions was something she wasn't prepared to

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just shell out on paper for someone to find later and judge her for. She'd done enough judging of herself, goddamnit.

Writing exercise proven futile, she threw the pen across the room, slumped down pitifully and cried again, praying internally to be even minutely worthy of her own sadness.

Opening her eyes, she took one step. Then another one, silently agreeing, that if it proved too much to press onward, she'd stop and close her eyes again, willing her mother's voice into her head. Then, another step. She was able-bodied, still. Her limbs worked just fine in spite of...did she even have to mention it? Feel it? Think about it?

The emptiness in her belly pinched a nerve and made her wince. She stopped moving, raking the peak of her fingernails into the bed of her palms, igniting pain throughout her body. Rolling her lips in, she took another step, inching onward down the corridor. She could hear the tolling of a bell tower again, marking her steps ominously. She counted them: four. They amounted to four. Then, she idled in an arched doorway, gazing upward at a wrought iron crucifix, hanging in the center of it. Her knees buckled. She pressed onward anyway, toward the door beyond the archway, trailing the tips of her fingers over the knob.

It was at this particular moment that she questioned her meaning for being there. Eyelids fluttering, she attempted to remember how she'd gotten there and why.

Baffled and jaded, she opened the door. A gust of salty air floated past her cheeks. And she closed her eyes again.

And the sound of car tires, trampling over historic cobblestone.

And the flapping of a seagull's wings.

And laughter.

Ocean water. And waves, crashing ashore.

When she opened her eyes again, she ogled a tallish male in brown aviators, stroll casually up a small incline, heading toward her, cigarette in one hand, and a

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small sack in the other. He seemed comfortable in his effortless stroll, his languid manner, and she stared far long than she should've...until his appearance started to make more sense to her.

Sinking her teeth into the pulp of her bottom lip, she took a deep breath; murmuring, "Dear God," and feeling her knees buckle once more.

He stopped just before her, putting the cigarette to his lips, dragging once before tossing it aside. He then grinned almost cautiously.

"I hope you like striped bass."

She glared at him, rolling her lips inward.

He nodded once. "We're still not talking, I see."

She shifted the weight of her body from one foot to the next, lowering her eyes as he lifted up his shades to reveal his pale green eyes.

"Well...I'm going to give this food over to Mathilde. Then you and I are going for a walk. Go find some shoes."

The confidence of his soft-spoken voice felt as comfortable as the breeze above her head.

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