

folklore and evermore:
the novelization

By Nathan Peralta

This is a set of stories inspired by
Taylor Swift's sister albums
Folklore and Evermore.
Some of these characters and
even a few lines are taken from
her songs.

This is simply my interpretation
of her work.

I thank you for reading
and I hope you enjoy!

–NP

*“Passed down like folk songs
our love lasts so long”*

Part One:
we can call it even

tupelo, 1993

Gavin

“Don’t be dense,” Dorothea cried, covering her mouth as if trying to conceal her laughter. It was a sweet, tinkling sound, and one Gavin found himself thinking about quite often.

“I’m serious,” he chuckled in response. “Just imagine the look on her face. It’ll be priceless.”

She smacked his shoulder, grinning, and Gavin mirrored her glimmering smile with one of his own. Above them, the bleachers were beginning to groan under the weight of gathering people. The fading evening light meant the game was bound to start anytime now, and the other cheerleaders would come looking for Dot if she didn’t join them soon.

“We can’t just skip prom, Gavin. She’ll lock me up forever,” she protested.

“She’s worse than the cops,” he teased, crouching down to pick her blue and gold pom poms off the ground. “Here.”

“She’s my *mom*.”

“It’s just junior prom, Dot. There’s always next year,” he insisted, reaching out to tuck a pale strand behind her ear. “Plus, you’re the one always complaining about her pageant schemes,” he reminded. This close to her, he could smell the familiar scent of her lavender soap. The sweet aroma engulfed his senses, blurring the world around them and leaving only Dorothea at its focal point, standing like the only smudge of color in a vast ocean of gray.

“We’ll see,” she said, the glint in her eye sending what little remained of her poker face crumbling to the ground. He knew she loved the idea of it all even if she pretended not to show it. She might try to mask it, but Gavin knew Dorothea was a rebel at heart. “It’s still months away, unlike practice. Inez will murder me if I’m late again.”

“Five more minutes?” he ventured.

“Are you kidding? That girl will scatter my entrails all over the field.” She was only half-joking, Gavin knew, but the thought still made him shiver. Inez had always terrified him.

Reluctantly, he said goodbye. She smiled tenderly, planting a small kiss on his cheek before running off to join the mass of blue and gold assembling in the middle of the field. The softness of the gesture lingered on, even after he stopped re-playing the moment over and over in his head.

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He never would’ve admitted it, but Gavin had never understood football. It was an enigma of formations and patterns, throws and catches, chasing and tackling. Still, he cheered when the crowd cheered and made disgruntled sounds when they booed. The reality of everything, though, was that he couldn’t have cared less whether Tupelo High won or lost. The only victory

Gavin sought was the exhilaration on Dorothea's face as she danced with the rest of the cheerleaders.

He suspected the girl beside him shared the sentiment. Not for Dorothea, of course, although he wouldn't blame her if that was the case—it was difficult to not admire her ardent flame. No, the girl's focus was on James, the muddled quarterback spearheading the offense. Like Gavin, she seemed to be utterly disoriented, clinging to her cardigan as she peered around to mimic the emotions of the swarm around them before diverting her gaze back to the player. She was pretty, with butterfly clips holding her curly hair back. *Betty*, Gavin remembered, plucking the name from distant conversations he'd had with Dorothea about her friends.

This wasn't the first time they'd sat beside each other, though nothing more than small nods were ever exchanged. Even so, he knew there was a quiet understanding between them: it was a relief to not be the only fluttering soul adrift in such a mercurial tide.

The raucousness of the game went on in an almost rhythmic lull as the sun set over the town and stars began to pierce the darkening sky. Just when Gavin thought it would never end, triumph was finally declared for Tupelo. The uproar that followed sent a jolt through his bones and sharpened the world around him. The colors shone brighter, the noise deafening in the best way possible. The soft late-summer breeze that ruffled his hair tasted sweet and fresh. Suddenly, the night had come to life.

The crowd began to shuffle forward, pushing to the front of the stands. He was pulled along like a fish in a stream, not even trying to fight the current. The brightly lit field was flooded in moments, wild hoots and laughter painting the atmosphere in radiant victory. That same golden aura seemed to surround Dorothea when Gavin finally found her near one of the exits after a lifetime of wandering. She stood as beautiful as ever, cross-armed and leaning against the chain-link fence pretending to look impatient.

“Took you long enough,” she called out as he approached. “I was seriously thinking about leaving you planted.” Her cheerleading uniform was

gone, replaced by simple blue jeans and a white t-shirt she'd clearly stolen from him. Her blond hair was no longer in its ponytail, cascading over her shoulders in waves of ivory and gold.

"I'm your ride," Gavin smirked. In moments, his hands found hers, their fingers curling into each other mechanically.

"Good thing I stole your keys," she whispered, reaching into her bag and pulling out a silver keychain. She dangled it in front of him. He frowned, searching his pockets for the reassuring feeling of the keys, only to come back empty-handed. Of course she had. He then laughed softly, only ceasing when Dorothea closed the distance between them, pulling him down to meet her lips with his in an explosion of warmth. The fervor in Gavin's chest expanded the way it only ever did with her, and minutes seemed to pass before he remembered where they were. Slowly, he pulled away.

"Come on." He sighed, nodding in the direction of his pickup. The old truck was near the end of the parking lot and Gavin was already dreading the stops they'd have to make along the way. *You were great out there, Dot!* someone would inevitably say, and they'd stop for a quick conversation before moving on to the next person, then the next, and the next. It was a process they'd gone through before and certainly would go through again. He did not express his apprehension, though. Gavin loved the smile those compliments etched on Dorothea's face, the happiness they set in those blue eyes. It was always worth it, in the end.

To his surprise, however, the whole ordeal flowed fairly quickly and they had almost reached his red Chevy when one last group waved them over. Gavin scanned their faces and recognized Inez among them, black hair, much like his own, spilling like ink down her back. Beyond her, he could glimpse James leaning on the hood of his car. He was talking to Betty and a few others about something Gavin couldn't make out, but it brought forth a giggle from his little audience.

"Did you guys hear?" Inez inquired as they walked up. Like Dorothea, she'd slipped out of her cheer uniform, only to slip into another short black

dress and high heels that made her tower over the group. Her dark, piercing stare found Gavin's and he shuddered. He didn't exactly know any of them, so he had come to know the group through Dorothea's tales. Inez Lujan was often the center of impossible yet hilarious situations in Dot's stories, but never much of a saint in them. He recalled one where the two girls had broken down on the side of the road and Inez stood in the middle of the street, forcing the first man she saw to get off and assess the problem. The poor guy knew nothing about cars but Inez was convinced he was lying and had held him hostage. That day, Gavin made a mental note to never find himself near Inez in any sort of stressful situation.

"Hear what?" Dorothea asked now.

"The other team was dared to run naked down Main Street if they lost the game," Inez tittered. Behind her, James snorted, turning his attention toward them.

"Where did you even hear that from?" he asked.

"I was there when they made the deal!" she exclaimed.

James looked at Gavin with an apology on his face. "Don't mind her. You can't believe a word she says most times."

Inez dagged him with her eyes, and Gavin was suddenly reminded of the faint animosity Dorothea had told him existed between the two. James simply shrugged the look off as if saying *what can you do?* Inez was Inez and nothing would change that. He seemed so careless, with tousled brown hair and baggy clothes. Gavin wondered if it was his lack of concern the force that pulled the strings of Inez's composure so effortlessly.

Dorothea stirred beside Gavin, sensing the thin trickle of tension in the air. "We better get going," she declared.

"You're not coming to Betty's? She's throwing one of her parties," Inez said. "Unless you think I'm lying about that too," she added, shooting yet another accusatory glance toward James.

Gavin shrunk within himself. Social environments had always made him queasy, especially when it came to people he hardly knew. But these were

Dorothea's friends, people who evidently meant a lot to her, people she cared about. He knew that when she looked at him, the unasked question bright in her eyes, he would not be able to say no. So, when she did just that, he found himself nodding, a fake smile snaking its way onto his face.

"We'll be there," he muttered, a small nod in Betty's direction. The girl gave him an encouraging smile that didn't do much to calm the rush of blood in his ears. Dorothea's grip on his hand tightened and he exhaled slowly. *Just focus on her*, Gavin told himself. He could get through tonight with her by his side. He could get through anything if his hands were in hers.

James clapped his back, smiling. "See you soon then."

"See you soon," Gavin replied.

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Midnight was steadily approaching and the party still crackled with electric excitement. The dim blue-colored lights hanging above the crowd gave the backyard an eerie glow—it was otherworldly, almost magical. It cast everything into dark hues of blues and shadows. Music blared loudly from somewhere inside the house and sweat-covered bodies moved up and down the place like ants whose hill had just been crushed. It was only a matter of time, Gavin thought, before a complaining neighbor summoned the police and extinguished everyone's fun.

Not that he cared much; truth be told, that was exactly what he was guiltily hoping for.

He sat quietly by the edge of the pool, jeans rolled up and feet submerged in pleasantly cool water. Dorothea had gone off to collect more drinks, and he was left alone to contemplate the scene before him: Inez and James, snarky as ever, trying to aim pong balls into a line of red plastic cups at opposite sides of a table. His throws were precise, but hers were just as good. Their snide remarks, like their aim, were equally impressive, hitting their target without fail. Gavin found himself amused by the whole ordeal.

He breathed in the cool night air and sighed, a sound that was lost in the wilderness of the party. The buzz of the alcohol was a high that had not yet arrived, a fact he was beginning to find disappointing. However, he did detect the original panic that had consumed him before coming here slowly dissipate, and whether this was the beer's doing or not he wasn't sure. It didn't make him long for Dorothea's presence any less.

"Come on, it can't be *that* bad," called a voice behind him. Gavin turned to see Betty looking at him mockingly through squinted brown eyes. He regarded her as she stood over him: there were still butterfly clips in her hair, but her cardigan had been left behind for a white dress that contrasted the darkness of her skin. "I've been told I throw a mean party."

"It's just not my thing," he shrugged apologetically.

"And what *is* your thing?" Betty asked, hugging her arms as she found a place next to him, her feet tentatively touching the water.

"Quiet." It was strange, Gavin thought: here he was, confiding in someone whom he'd previously only acknowledged with curt nods. "I like the silence of life, you know?"

"Hmm." She considered his answer for a moment. "I think I know what you mean," she said, and Gavin raised an eyebrow. The irony of her declaration was not lost on him: here was a girl scandalously notorious for her frequent parties claiming to understand the beauty of silence. But who was he to judge? After all, what did he know about any of these people?

Before he could say anything, though, Dorothea was back with cups in her hands. The sight of familiarity struck Gavin with warmth and he beamed as she took her place by his side. By then, James and Inez's game had come to an amicable end, to everyone's surprise, and they all gathered to drink and sing and laugh, a cloud of noise hanging around Gavin's head. For someone who enjoyed silence, he couldn't help noticing how easy it was to also enjoy the lack of it. Perhaps there was a truth to Betty's irony after all.

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Weeks came and went, the way weeks always did for Gavin, with little to remember them by. Days streamed by until they all blurred into a singular current. He helped his parents at their grocery store. He swept and mopped and cleaned as time bled out, and before he knew it November had come yet again, bringing with it the early signs of winter. He did not mind. His was a simple life, with nothing but a series of routines to live by; it had always been and would always be so.

His parents were still out working at the store when Gavin finally rose from his evening nap. He noted this in the silence of his home, something that would be nearly impossible if either of his parents were already here. The chattering of his mother over the counter and the laughter of his dad as he cooked would dominate the late hours of the day. And it *was* late, for his parents, at least—the clock on his wall marked a quarter after eight—but it wasn't unusual for them to open earlier and close later when money was short, the way it seemed to always be lately.

He pushed away his covers with some reluctance, letting the cool night air paint goosebumps along his bare skin. He shuddered, suppressing a yawn as he pulled a t-shirt over his head, walked to the bathroom, and splashed his face into wakefulness.

His room was a disarray of books strewn all over the floor, papers and pens splayed between blue bed sheets. A cup of coffee, its heat long since gone, sat unfinished by his bedside table next to yet another pile of books. Deliberately ignoring the mess, Gavin strode toward his bedroom window, where a picture frame of him and Dorothea rested atop its sill. Beside it stood a yellowing plant he'd forgotten to water the day prior. Sighing, he reached for the pitcher he kept nearby and sprinkled the soft soil gently. He moved to set it back down when he suddenly registered a dull *thump* coming from outside. He peered groggily through the glass, halting when he found a dark figure crouching in front of his yard.

He snapped to full awareness, already making a grab for the phone on his bedside table when he heard Bug's friendly bark. Upon second glance he made out Dorothea's golden hair, shining silver under the light of the moon. His heart ceased its rapid beating when he realized she was simply petting his dog.

Confused, he latched his window open, feeling the scant warmth of his room depart as he lifted it.

"Dot?" he called out into the night. "What are you doing here?" he asked suspiciously, glancing behind her at the empty street. The dim light showed no other vehicle other than his truck. "Did you *walk* here?"

"Of course I did," Dorothea boasted, craning her neck to look up at him. "As to *why*, well..." she paused for a moment as she stood, watching Bug run in circles around her, wagging her tail in happiness. "I've come to prevent a tragedy," she said, dropping her voice an octave.

He laughed, rolling his eyes. "And what might that be?"

"The tragedy every teenager faces on Friday nights, Gavin. Boredom!"

"You're preventing boredom?"

"That's what I just said."

"And how exactly does one go about doing that?" Gavin pondered.

"Well, you see, I've had an idea. The best I've had in a while, actually," she avowed. Her arms came to rest on her hips, the way they always did when she meant serious business. "And I think a date is long overdue."

She was right, he knew. The last time they'd gone out was two weeks ago, but that could hardly be considered a date. After all, they'd spent the whole night at Betty's Halloween party, where they'd barely had time alone.

Defeated, Gavin sighed. "Just a sec."

He closed the window and grabbed his keys from the hook beside his door. His arm reached into his closet, feeling at random until he pulled out a mint knit sweater. It would do. He raced downstairs hastily, locking the door behind him after letting Bug inside.

Dorothea was instantly upon him the second he stepped off the porch. Her arms wrapped around his neck as he lifted her, spinning her around before gently setting her back down.

“I missed you,” she said.

“We just saw each other a few hours ago.”

“So? Am I not allowed to miss you?”

“No,” he said, tickling her side. She screeched for him to stop, her winning smile forcing him to stop and stare, mesmerized, at its beautiful owner.

“So what’s this ‘date’ you speak of?” he inquired.

“No telling,” she said. “I give the directions, you drive. One thing, though, we’re not coming back anytime soon.”

“I’m not really a fan of that concept,” he said. “You know I hate staying out late.” It was a lie, of course, and she knew it.

“Well, Mr. Aoki, that is just too bad,” she sneered. Gavin hardly had time to object before she quickly ran to his truck, climbing into the passenger seat and beckoning for him to follow.

Gavin had to admit it all sounded tempting. It’s not like it was the first time they’d stayed out into the late hours of the night—or rather the early hours of the day. He recalled midnights spent down in the park, making a lark of all the misery brought by long, dreary Mondays. He thought of late Wednesdays they’d spent in cafes or Friday nights in the field behind his yard. But he’d been the author of those ideas then. He’d persuaded and begged and finally accomplished getting the girl to go along with him. Now, he couldn’t help but notice the reversing of their roles.

“Where to, my Lady?” he asked as he positioned himself in the driver’s side, thrusting his key into the ignition.

“Mr. Aoki, are you aware of the marvelous kingdom that is West Point, Mississippi?”

“Ah, beautiful lands, I hear,” Gavin said, going along. “But what interest might a place of the sort have for us at such an ungodly hour?”

“I hear a fair has rolled in, stationed but for one week.”

“A fair?” he wiggled his eyebrows, making her laugh and break character. Gavin smiled to himself, Dorothea’s plan finally unfolding before him.

“Can we? Please?” She stuck her bottom lip out in false beseechment.

“Who am I to deny the wishes of a queen?” he said and leaned in to kiss her. Her lips came undone in his, and he gasped the way he always did as if every time they kissed was always the first time. As if every time he’d been caught unaware by a wave that lapped at his feet, again and again, rising higher and higher each time until it was too late and he was being dragged toward the bottom of the ocean.

And if Dorothea was an ocean, he did not mind drowning in it.

Pretending to make a serious face, she withdrew and raised an eyebrow. “Who are you to *kiss* a queen?”

He laughed, shaking his head as he exited the driveway, a one hand-feel on the steering wheel, the other on her heart.

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Gravel crunched beneath their feet as they hurried toward the Ferris wheel. Gavin hated to admit that the fair wasn’t as magical as it’d been in his early childhood years, but there was no denying it. The mechanical monstrosities glinted under the multicolored lights like discarded pieces of metallic trash in a dusty junkyard. Even the paint on them seemed dull and flaky. The sickly sweet aroma of funnel cake was difficult to ignore and even then did little to mask the smell of trash underneath. Dorothea, however, did not seem to mind.

He’d come to notice that she never found anything ugly or lacking. Life was always as rich and colorful as she could make it, and make it she could. After all, she *had* dragged him here all the way from Tupelo, had she not?

The lines were surprisingly thin tonight, and they didn’t have to wait long before climbing onto an empty green cabin. The couple felt it dangle

precariously from side to side as it took on their weight, but neither of them said anything. It wasn't all too reassuring.

Once the door was secured and their seatbelts strapped on, they slowly began to rise. The mechanical whine of the thing didn't do much to calm Gavin's building nerves.

It was a plodding ascent. Dorothea leaned against his side, her head finding comfort in Gavin's shoulder. The clown music below became a distant gurgle as they reached the apex, the gush of wind drowning the whole world out. Despite this, he was still able to hear Dorothea's low mumble, the muttering of a faint *I love you*.

He perked up, his eyes meeting hers, surprised. It was not something either of them had ever said aloud before—an invisible line he hadn't yet dared cross. Still, the words poured like wine from his mouth, sweet and inebriating. "I love you too," Gavin said back, startling even himself.

Fire danced inside his heart, a blazing storm of passion, burning him from within. He remembered the first time he'd ever laid eyes on her, one early December day beneath the bleachers of their school's football field. She'd been crying then, newly dumped by some boy whose name escaped his mind now after nearly two years. It was the final class of the day, he recalled. He'd skipped it, nowhere near having the headspace for trigonometry after such a long day. He remembered asking if she was hurt or if she needed help. She'd simply sobbed and glared, but eventually conceded by retelling the events. He'd offered to walk her home, and she nodded. Neither had any idea how much that action would blossom—a friendship bound to burgeon into something even greater.

That younger Gavin would never have guessed how much room his heart would make for the soul under the bleachers.

"I love you," he repeated now with confidence.

"I love you," Dorothea said, and pulled him down into a kiss.

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Winter passed by like the blinking of an eye. Before Gavin was aware of it, blossoming flowers began to perfume the fresh spring air entering through his propped-open window. Outside, the sapphire sky was full of possibility—the promise of a new life shining bright. He was intent on making the most of it.

He was laying face-down at the edge of his bed, the blue cord of his telephone coiled around a finger.

“On a scale of one to ten, how angry is she?” he asked the girl on the other side of the line.

“A million,” she replied, stifling a laugh. It didn’t do much to cover the sadness in her voice. Sadness, and maybe something more. He couldn’t quite make out what it was.

“It’s just prom,” he repeated for what seemed to be the hundredth time.

“Yeah, it’s not that serious,” Dorothea agreed, and yet he couldn’t help but feel she was holding something back. Perhaps she was angry? Angry at him, for being the reason she was in her current situation.

He knew that making her skip the dance had not taken much convincing—he knew Dorothea had made up her mind the first time he’d ever brought up the idea. Yet he couldn’t help the guilt that plagued him when he thought of Dot in her room, grounded with nothing but silence to keep her company. He could not blame her if maybe she felt some resentment. After all, he’d pushed aside all the times she’d prophesied this outcome, thinking it was no more than mere exaggerations. Now he could see how wrong he’d been.

No matter. His mind began whirling, the shadow of an idea beginning to form in his head.

It was a beautiful day.

He was intent on making the most of it.

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The way to Dorothea's house was a map tattooed on his mind. He was sure he could make the trip blind. God knew he nearly had many times, walking under nothing but the moon to illuminate his way before his father had gifted him the old truck. He wondered when their night escapades had turned into more than just sneaking out with a friend, when they'd begun sharing kisses in the dark and promises under the stars.

The stars always shined so bright in her eyes.

Now there were no stars visible save for the beating sun that reflected off the hood of his vehicle. He drove with his windows rolled down, enjoying the breeze that cooled the sweat beading on his forehead.

Gavin made but one stop. He bought half a dozen white roses from a floral shop near Dorothea's house. They'd always been her favorite.

He left his truck one block away from her house—he was bound to draw attention if he outright parked at her front door.

The plan was a simple one. He'd sneak softly into her backyard, crawl to her window, and tap until she opened. She would laugh, he knew. Laugh and jump out the window into his arms. It wasn't the first time they'd gotten away with this, and the more he thought about it the more confidence he felt.

It wasn't the first time.

It would not be the last.

Gavin would always be there to rescue Dorothea, like some fairytale knight come to break out a princess locked away in her tower.

Taking the flowers, he began walking to the alley behind the white row of houses lining her street. He was sorry to replace their manicured green lawns for the rot of trash bins, but one had to make sacrifices for love, Gavin thought with a small grin. Silently, he opened the wooden door that led to her backyard and shut it gently behind him. The blinds to all the back windows were shut, but he bolted for his destination nonetheless. One could never be too careful.

Crouching beneath her windowsill he let out a soft sigh of relief. He'd made it. He couldn't wait to see the flash of surprise on her face when he revealed himself.

Quietly, Gavin began to tap.

He waited after the first two raps, straining to hear any sound from within. None came. Maybe she wasn't home, but that couldn't be it. She was grounded, after all. Maybe she simply hadn't heard him. He vehemently hoped for the latter as he tapped two more times. Then two more, and finally outright knocking.

The double windows flew open with a force that almost knocked Gavin backward. He stumbled a few steps but regained his balance on time.

"Gavin?" Dorothea's blond head poked through the window, peering down at where he kneeled in the grass. He was reminded suddenly of the night she'd shown up at his house, determined to go through with her plan.

Their roles, he noted, were once again reversed.

"Babe," he greeted, holding up the white flowers in his hand.

Dorothea pointedly ignored the roses. "What are you doing here?" she hissed.

He'd thought she would be happier to see him. Maybe she was simply scared of getting caught, he reasoned. "Don't worry, I made sure no one saw me come here," he assured her, flashing a quick grin. She did not return it.

"I thought I would surprise you," Gavin continued, dusting off his knees after getting to his feet. "I've come to rescue you."

Gavin waited. He waited for her giggle. He waited for her laugh. Her smile. He waited. He waited and waited, but they never came.

Dorothea looked at him incredulously, then with a sigh buried her head in her hands. He didn't think this would upset her so much. He'd done it plenty of times before...

He stole a glance behind her and froze. Her room—it was bare. The posters she'd had on the wall were all taken down. Her bookshelves empty. The framed picture of the two of them, twin to his own, gone. Propped on her bed was a brown suitcase with clothes thrown in hastily, half its contents still messily strewn out over the covers.

At least her covers were still there, he thought through the fog of his mind.

“Dot?” he asked, puzzlement sharp in his tone. Then, when she didn’t answer, “Dot!”

She mumbled something unintelligible under her breath.

“What?” he asked.

“I said I’m leaving.”

“What do you mean? What’s going on?”

She only looked at him, sympathy in those blue eyes. It was a look he’d scarcely seen before, and one he did not like. She tried smiling, but Gavin knew her well enough to know when it was a fake. “You were never grounded,” he guessed. He felt foolish, saying it out loud. Sure, her mom must have been upset about them skipping the prom, but really? Grounded?

She shook her head. “I said it so you’d stay away. I didn’t think— It never crossed my mind that you would come anyway.”

“You...you lied.” He sounded sheepish, and he hated it. What a fool he must have looked like to her. At some point, the flowers he was holding had escaped his grasp. The roses now lay on the ground, their soft petals darkened by the muddy ground, no longer white. What once was beautiful, now gone.

A lot of things were.

“I was going to tell you earlier,” she said. “I promise I was going to tell you, but I just couldn’t bring myself to—”

“I still don’t understand,” he interrupted. “What do you mean, you’re leaving?”

“To California,” she said in a breath.

“To Cal— what the— why didn’t you—” he balled his fists, placing them on his forehead. He tried calming himself, breathing in, breathing out. It was not working. “What the fuck? Seriously Dorothea, what the fuck?”

He watched as tears began to well behind her eyes. Gavin was suddenly reminded of the day he’d met her under the bleachers, how much she’d cried then. How little she’d cried since then.

“My parents are staying. It’s just me. I’ll be back for the holidays—” she began.

“So you were just gonna leave? Just like that? Do your friends even know?”

“It’s a small town. Word will get around.”

“How long have you kept this from me?” he spoke over her, beginning to pace in circles.

“Four months,” Dorothea whispered after a pause.

“Four months?!”

“I’m really, *really* sorry, Gavin.” she outstretched her hand, but he moved out of her reach. A single tear rolled out of her eye, making its way down her cheek and disappearing beneath her chin.

“Why?”

“You know Tupelo isn’t for me.”

“What? All your friends are here, Dorothea. *I’m* here. What about me?”

“And what about *me*, Gavin?”

“Since when has Tupelo ever been a problem?” he cried. It didn’t make any sense. If she’d ever been unhappy here, she had never shown it.

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve always wanted to leave. I want to be bigger than any of this. You not knowing it or me not saying it doesn’t make it any less true.”

“What about us? Are we not bigger than this?”

She looked at him sadly, her silence the only response he needed to hear.

“You’re just a kid,” he said finally. “You’re only sixteen. You can’t even be on your own.”

“Of course not. I’m leaving with my aunt. I’ll be staying with her.”

He felt stupid for even saying that. Of course, everything had been organized. After all, her family had had four months to make all the necessary arrangements. She’d had four months to tell him *something*. Anything.

“When?”

“Tomorrow,” she responded.

“Wow,” he said, biting the inside of his cheek. “Just wow.” He gave her a cold smile.

Looking into her tear-stained face brought him pain. Whether it was because of the slight betrayal, the lying, or simply the fact that he was already beginning to miss her, no matter how much he wanted to hate her, he didn’t know.

He gave her one last look, shook his head, and walked away.

“Gavin!” she called after him, but he didn’t look back.

Not once.

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Alone in his truck, with the windows rolled up, Gavin allowed himself to cry. He cried and cried and cried until there was nothing left in him.

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The following day brought with it a rainy morning, and dark clouds coated the sky overhead as Gavin gripped the steering wheel, preparing for something he told himself he would not do.

But how could he not? The way he saw it, every story needed a proper ending, and yesterday’s events did not feel like the closure his story with Dorothea needed. He wasn’t stupid. He knew it was over. He simply wanted that proper ending. One final goodbye.

It was still early when he made his way to Dorothea’s house. Would this be the last time? It certainly felt like it. After three years this was how things ended: the way they began.

He had no idea what time she had planned to depart, so Gavin hoped against hope that he wasn’t too late. Unlike yesterday, there was no need to hide his arrival, so he drove up straight to her driveway and walked up the front

steps of her house confidently. He heard a commotion inside as he brought his fist down on the door, and sighed with relief when he heard Dorothea's voice.

"Coming!" her muffled voice called. There was a sound of turning bolts before the door sprung open, revealing a puffy-eyed Dorothea. She looked shocked to see him. Gavin didn't blame her.

"I came to say goodbye," he said after an awkward silence.

Dorothea stepped onto the porch, gently closing the door behind her. She looked up at him, those blue eyes gazing into his. For once, he didn't get lost in them.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"About what," he asked.

"Not telling you."

"So you're not sorry about leaving?"

"Gavin, it's not that simple."

He scoffed. Even now, after everything, she didn't feel bad.

"You're right. It isn't simple, Dorothea. What am I supposed to do? Am I just supposed to hang around here until you come back?"

She shook her head. "I won't ask you to wait if you don't ask me to stay. We could call it even, I guess."

"*Even?* Even though you're leaving?" he sneered. "There's nothing even about that. *I love you*, Dorothea. Can't you see that? This shit you're pulling off fucking *hurts*."

"It hurts me too, Gavin. I'm breaking my own heart here."

"Then don't," he said, reaching for her hand. Once, they would have fit perfectly in his, their fingers seeking each other like clockwork. Now, fumbling awkwardly with them, that felt like a lifetime ago. "Don't leave, Dot. Stay."

She began to cry. She cried and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his shoulder. Moments passed before she spoke again.

"I can't," she finally said.

"Why not?" He was crying now, too, and he hated it. He didn't want her to see him like this.

“I need to know what I can be outside of this life. Outside of this town.”

“Outside of us.”

“I still love you,” Dorothea said, letting go.

“That doesn’t really matter anymore, does it?”

Gavin didn’t wait for a response. He walked back down the porch steps, over her lawn, and into his truck, slamming the door shut after him. The last thing he saw was her back as she turned away, leaving him wondering if he’d ever see that face again.

So much for proper endings, he thought and sped away.

*Part Two:
'tis the damn season*

tupelo, 2000

Dorothea

Coming soon...