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TREE OF HEARTS

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1

I was thirteen when I found the big oak on the eastern edge of my grandparents' property. If I'd wandered out there any other time of year, it would've been just another tree in a whole forest of them. I may never have noticed its uniqueness.

But in December, the trees were all skeletons without flesh. Stark and bare. Still proud, still strong, but with all their glory and dignity stripped away by the cold hand and freezing breath of winter. Kind of like sad octogenarians—those elderly folks still in full possession of their mental faculties, but thrust into retirement homes and assisted living facilities before they need to be. Once behind those doors, all dignity is forever lost. They find themselves treated like half-witted children, incapable of making their own decisions or even granted the privacy that may have been so crucial to them throughout a lifetime.

A rather odd comparison, I guess, but that's what the trees made me think about that day, probably because I had a part-time job reading to "guests" at the Skunk Creek Elder Care Facility. Back then that kind of place was more commonly known as an "old folks' home." Most of the younger crowd in Skunk Creek referred to our one home for the elderly as the Old Ones Garbage Bin because so many people dumped their parents and grandparents there and never returned. Not for a visit, and sometimes not even for a

funeral.

But I digress.

On this day, I wandered to the extreme edge of my grandfather's land because I felt like a throw-away myself. Once again, my parents couldn't be bothered to come get me, so I was stuck out in the country for yet another night with Grandpops and Grammy. Not that I minded, not really. I was comfortable there, and why wouldn't I be? I spent a whole lot more time at their place than in the mini mansion that was my official address. But still, sometimes it stung a little when neither of my parents was willing to drive the five miles outside town to pick me up in the evenings. Somehow, that choice more than any other pinpointed in my young mind how low I fell on their list of priorities.

So I bundled myself up and set out for a walk. Why I headed for the wooded area, I don't know. I'd never wandered in there before. To be honest, the cluster of big trees that formed its own thick, dark world of vines and branches scared me a bit. But for some reason, I was drawn there that day.

I pushed my way through the barrier of giant trunks and creeping appendages to find myself in a shadowy realm that felt completely alien to the life three steps behind me. My breath stuttered in and out, forming tiny clouds of vapor around my face while I gaped at the small army of multi-limbed tree skeletons, their arms thrown into the air as if in surrender. Not a single leaf remained on even one tree. The shiver that shook my body as I gazed around that unclothed cove of mighty oaks didn't come from the frigid December air.

And then it happened. A beam of bright sunlight

cut through the cloud cover and shone like a laser blast through the branches of one tree. Just one, and that single tree glowed as if lit from within.

That's how I happened to notice the Tree of Hearts.

Because the branches were bare...because the sunlight hit the tree at just the right moment...because I was looking for hope...perhaps even because somewhere up there existed a God who cared that I didn't seem to be finding it.

Hope stared at me from the central branches of one naked winter oak tree.

Two branches, to be precise. They split apart at the top of the large trunk, where trees always sprout limbs that meander off in different directions. These two arms had indeed started off on opposite paths. But at roughly the same time, as if unable to bear being parted, both young branches made a wide curve and turned back toward the center, where they fell into each other's embrace at a downward point. The result was a beautiful piece of natural, heart-shaped art, situated in the perfect place—at the heart of the mighty oak. The escaped sunbeam raced through the middle of the miraculous shape and buried itself deep within my heart.

You'll find him here. Your true love. When the time is right.

An audible voice? No. And no angelic figure appeared with a message. But I heard those words in the deepest, most guarded part of my being. This I know without doubt.

For a long time I stood there, awed by the graceful heart dancing in the glare of sunlight, dead center of that barebones oak. And then the cloud cover

obliterated the sun and the brilliance faded from the tree's secret center.

But not from mine.

Casting one last look at those unbelievable branches, I marked the tree's location in my mind for future reference. I'd be back to visit her again.

How could I not? I'd discovered a wonder. A unique gift, placed in exactly that spot in my grandparents' woods for me alone—an unwanted, largely unnoticed girl for whom no one ever went out of their way to do anything special.

Yet Someone somewhere had given me my very own Tree of Hearts.

Over the years, the old oak became an anchor. I went there when sadness or melancholy ate at my soul like an acid. I visited when joy made brief appearances in my otherwise unremarkable life. Sometimes, when I had no real reason to visit the oak, I went anyway. The Tree of Hearts had rooted deep in my lonely psyche, and I thought of it as a friend. My best friend, though I would never have said so out loud. How many people would understand such a thing?

I grew up, and the Tree of Hearts grew taller, stronger, bigger around. In the springtime, dressed in the fancy green she wore all the way through summer, her beauty stole my breath away. In the fall, the oak changed clothing, preferring more earthy tones...brown, yellow, deep purple. Gorgeous. I devoured many a novel at the sturdy foot of the well-dressed but increasingly massive maiden, shed many a tear beneath her leafy shelter.

Even when I went away to college, every break in my curriculum found me back home, mostly so I could soothe my soul at the altar of the hidden heart. For a young woman who felt unloved, unwanted, and unlikely to see those things change anytime soon, the Tree of Hearts became somewhat therapeutic.

But as is often the case, change came when I least expected it.

I'd graduated with degrees in sociology and psychology. Why those two things? I suppose the logical answer would be that, even through my academic endeavors, I never stopped seeking a "why" for an existence that hadn't affected the lives of anyone in my family for longer than a minute or two at a time.

Armed with the education that would hopefully allow me to make a decent living, I rented a ramshackle old cabin on Grandpops's property. He'd threatened to tear it down since I was a kid, and yet the old place still stood. When I called and begged to rent it, Grandpops balked.

"It's a shack, Peyton." He huffed and puffed and made comments about me not knowing how to be young. Ultimately, however, he agreed to let me have the place. "But I don't intend to sink any money into that hovel," he warned. "It needs some fixin' up, so unless you want the rain and snow in your lap, I'd advise you get busy out there."

Ecstatic, I promised to make the place livable, and the moment I arrived in town, I trudged out to see what I'd gotten myself into.

Grandpops handed me a key and a push broom. "You'll need that and a whole lot more to clear a path through that rotten old hut."

"Thank you, Grandpops." I shuffled from one foot

to the other, and then gave him a stiff, uncomfortable hug. "I'll stop by again on my way out."

"You stayin' at your folks place 'til you get this fixed up?"

"Uhm...no. I'll rent a room until my place is ready to live in."

He snorted. A bent, twisted thumb gestured over his shoulder. "That room in yonder's still empty, and you used to sleep just fine there. But if you think you gotta have a *hotel* and spend money ya ought not be spendin'..."

"Thank you!" An insistent grin forced me to release the lip pinched between my teeth. "I'd love to stay here."

"Well, Grammy ain't doin' as much as she used to." He jerked the legs of his overalls upward and eased himself onto the rocking chair that had graced his porch for longer than I'd been alive. "You might have to cook for yerself, but there's food here for the cookin'."

"Thanks, Grandpops. Maybe I can cook for the two of you now and then."

"Hmph." He fished a pinch of snuff out of a familiar round can and shoved it behind his lip.

"I'll stop on my way out." I took off across the lawn, and when he called my name, I froze in place, certain he'd changed his mind about letting me have the cabin. "What is it, Grandpops?"

"I forgot to tell you I hired some young whippersnapper to do some fixin' up 'round here. The place is startin' to look abandoned, and I cain't hardly make it through the back gate without fallin' on my face. So he's out there somewhere. Just didn't want you to get scared or nothin', if ya happen to spot him."

“Oh.” I hesitated. “What’s his name?”

“I don’t know.” Grandpops waved me away and leaned his head against the rocker’s hard back. “Jack, George, Jake. What does it matter?”

I bit my lip. Grandpops didn’t like being laughed at. “OK. I won’t get excited if I see some dude wandering around.”

Grandpops raised his head enough to hike one bushy white eyebrow. His thin lips stretched into a grimace that was supposed to be a grin. “Oh, I don’t imagine you’ll see any dudes.”

I shook my head and plodded off toward my new nest, dragging the push broom behind me.

The tree first.

Even from a distance, it was clear winter had already raked her icy nails across the woods. A few stubborn brown leaves clung to branches here and there. Were they embarrassed? Like modest brides, dreading the moment they’d be required to step out of skimpy, inadequate underwear that provided at least an illusion of covering?

I shook my head. Where did those weird thoughts come from, anyway? No wonder I didn’t have close girlfriends—or boyfriends either. My brain obviously operated on a track a long ways from the norm.

As I approached the Tree of Hearts, I dropped the broom to the ground, with some vague notion that I might actually hug my old friend.

“Coming to sweep the altar?”

I shrieked. My heart jumped into my throat and danced a wild tango.

He was up in *my* tree, perched at the base of *my* secret heart. Long legs that ended in a pair of cowboy boots dangled on each side of the trunk. What did he think he was, a wild oak rider?

"Sorry." His grin belied the half-hearted apology. "Didn't mean to scare you. Just thought I should let you know someone was up here before you actually looked up and saw my ugly mug."

What ugly mug? No way had this guy ever seen a less-than-hunky day in his life—which had probably started about the same time mine did.

"Wh-who are you?" I stammered.

"Jason Playce, at your service, ma'am." He shimmied down the trunk like a monkey, brushed his hands together, and held out the right one for me to shake. "The old guy didn't warn you I'd be wanderin' around out here?"

Grandpops's fixer-upper guy. And he was right. This man could easily win a blue ribbon for "Cowboy of the Year," but a dude he was not.

"Oh, you're Jack-George-Jake. Grandpops said you'd be out here somewhere." I shook his hand and gave myself a mental kick for enjoying the firm-but-gentle pressure he applied. "But that doesn't explain why you're getting too familiar with my tree."

"*Your* tree?" One thick brow hiked halfway up a perfect forehead. "I wasn't aware these big ol' specimens could be owned by anyone. But for the sake of argument, I'm fairly certain Mr. Mardell owns the deed to the land they're on—and he's given me permission to do whatever needs doin' back here."

"Well, you're not 'doing' anything to my tree."

Jack-George-Jake might look like a movie star in the making, but if he planned any harm to the Tree of

Hearts, I'd inflict some real damage on his far-too-handsome face.

Jason shook his head. "What makes you think I'd *do* anything to this tree, Miss—" Frowning, he crossed his arms over his chest. "'Grandpops,' you said? You gotta be Peyton. Mr. Mardell's 'little grandgirl.'" A deep burst of laughter rumbled from his lips. "The way he talks about you, I thought you'd be in knickers."

Knickers? Since when did anyone my age—besides me—come up with a word like that?

"Well, as you can see, I'm not." I crossed my arms and glared at the interloper. "I just finished college and moved back home to Skunk Creek."

"That so?" He narrowed a pair of sky blue peepers and cocked his head. "What kind o' shingle you plannin' to hang in a place like this, Peyton Mardell? Skunk Creek isn't exactly a metropolis."

"If that's what I wanted, I'd've stayed in Sacramento." I stepped to the side and past his tall frame, headed for my tree. "I'm the new director of operations at the Old Ones Garb—" Giving myself a hard mental kick, I went on as if I wasn't embarrassed almost beyond lucidity. "At the Skunk Creek Elder Care Facility."

I wasn't about to tell this guy I'd chosen to come home so I could live near a tree that gave me more hope than anything else in my pathetic life ever had.

"Director, huh?" He caught up and trudged along beside me, slanting a deep blue glance my way. "Good for you. Really. I hope it works out. Those old folks could use someone who gives a fig about 'em."

"Yes, they could." I stopped several feet shy of the huge trunk. My special piece of nature had grown large over the years. "So what were you doing up

there? And what did you mean by...?" I hesitated. He probably hadn't meant anything. Just being a smart-mouthed cowboy. "Why did you ask if I was coming to sweep the altar?"

"Well, you *were* pulling a broom." He grinned. "If you'd been ridin' it, I might've kept my mouth shut."

I laughed. Couldn't help it.

"OK, so I had a broom. That doesn't explain the word 'altar.' Are you even for real?"

My heart set up a hard, insistent rhythm against my rib cage. Absolutely no one knew about my attachment to this tree. Not about the day I'd found it, or my frequent trips into the woods to bare my soul at its knobby feet.

And not a soul anywhere on earth could possibly be aware I thought of the area around that tree as the Altar of the Hidden Heart. Over the years, the phrase had taken on an uppercased status in my mind. So, yeah, Jason's casual mention of an altar shook me to the core.

"Did I say that?" His grin turned a bit sheepish. He looked like a kid caught with one grubby hand in the cookie jar. "Yeah, I guess I did. Well, the truth is, it's a pretty special tree, ya know? I found it one day when I was wandering the property, lookin' for anything that needed tendin'." Another big grin revealed startling white teeth. Imperfect teeth, with a slight overlap of the front two. A tiny imperfection that did nothing whatsoever to lessen the man's magnetism.

His cheeky grin dimmed and a more serious side of his personality shadowed his face. "You'd never believe what I think I saw that day."

I swallowed hard. "Try me." Good heavens. I

sounded more like a sick toad than an educated young lady, well trained to portray a graceful, refined persona.

"Well..." He held my gaze for a long time, then nodded...real slow, like he'd made some kind of momentous decision. Maybe he had. "The day was a bit overcast, and a whole bunch dreary, but"—he shrugged—"Maybe it just seemed that way to me. Anyway, I entered the woods at the same place you did today and...well, you'll probably think I've done gone stark, starin' bonkers, but it's the truth, I swear. A burst of sunlight crashed through that tree and lit it up like some kind of sacred altar. All I could see through the blinding light was that shape, hidden there in the middle. The heart." He studied my face through a narrowed gaze. "You know about that heart, don't you, Peyton Mardell?"

"I've seen it."

"Yeah." He nodded, watching me through a narrowed gaze. "Well, I just stood there, shocked and a little bit embarrassed at myself for thinkin' I saw what I *know* I saw. And then I heard—" He broke off, and a wash of dull red crept upward from his neck and edged toward his hairline. "Aww, never mind."

I touched his arm. "You heard a voice. Kind of in your head, but almost real, too."

His eyes widened, and he nodded. Didn't say a word.

"I believe you, Jason." I hesitated, but curiosity got the best of me. "What...what did the voice say to you? I mean, you know...you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

He looked at the ground. Scuffed the toe of his heavy boot in the dirt. "I guess I can tell you. Kinda

feels weird though. I haven't told anyone else."

"Neither have I," I whispered.

He stepped closer and tucked a strand of flyaway hair behind my ear. "If I tell you my secret, you have to tell me yours."

I nodded. "I know."

"Well, then. What I heard was, 'You'll find her here. Your true love. When the time is right.' And that's word for word."

Like a wild thing trying to escape its prison, my heart pounded my chest with crushing force. My breath came in short, hard gasps, and for a moment, I thought I might keel over and fall at Jason's feet in a dead faint.

"Peyton?" He slipped a strong arm around my waist. "Hey. You OK?"

"I'm fine."

He hooked a finger under my chin and raised it until he could see my eyes. "What did the tree say to you, Peyton?"

I had to try a couple times before my voice cooperated, but I finally pushed a few words through cold, uncooperative lips. "I was only thirteen."

He leaned closer, obviously straining to hear, and I upped my volume a little—as much as I could, with my heart rocking a timpani. "I found the Tree of Hearts on a day when I felt—"

"Did you say the Tree of Hearts?" Jason demanded.

"Y-yes." When would I learn to choose my words more carefully? What a crazy thing to have named that silly oak.

"Unreal." His hoarse voice made funny little tingles run the length of my spine. "That's what I call

it, too.”

By now, I don’t think anything he said could have surprised me. I just nodded.

“Well, anyway, I was having a bad day, and I wandered off from Grandpops’s place to nurse my wounds. I don’t think I’d ever actually entered the wooded area here; it kind of spooked me back then. But that day, I guess the darkness beckoned because my mood was so dark.” I drew a deep breath. “I just came upon the tree. It was the middle of December and all of them were bare—even more than they are now. I hadn’t even noticed ...shape...inside this one until...well, you already know, don’t you? The same thing happened to me, with the sunlight and all.”

When had his arm stolen around me? He bent his head, and warm, peppermint-scented breath stirred against my cheek. “What did you hear, Peyton?”

I lowered my head, but once again, a strong finger tipped my chin upward and blue eyes blazed into mine. “Tell me what the tree said to you.” Something must have scratched his throat, because Jason’s voice came out sounding downright painful.

“The same thing it told you.” I managed to hold his gaze, though everything in me wanted to shy away. “I think you know that.”

His lips quirked upward. “Seriously? The voice said you’d find *her* here?” Exaggerated horror painted his face. “Say it ain’t so!”

From somewhere, I found the strength and the courage to punch his arm. “Stop it, all right? The voice said I’d find *him* here.”

“Him?”

“Yes, him. You.” Horrified, I nearly choked over my strangled explanation. “I mean, him. Him!”

"Me. I knew it." His voice washed over me like sweet, warm honey. "I knew it." He pulled me closer and brushed his lips over mine in a barely-there, teasing slide that came within a hairsbreadth of turning my legs into useless wet noodles. "I knew you were her the moment I saw you."

"Her?"

"My true love."

And then he said nothing at all, and yet, said everything. Warm lips claimed mine and took the lead in a slow dance that robbed my breath and pulled my soul right into the air above our heads, where it meshed with Jason's so completely, so entirely, that untangling the two would forever be an impossibility.

I was lost. Unequivocally, irreparably, inconceivably wrapped up in a love beyond anything I'd ever imagined. So lost that, at first, I only vaguely noticed the sudden warmth that wrapped around us. But then Jason's lips lifted off mine. Weak but wildly exhilarated, I followed his disbelieving gaze to the Tree of Hearts. Sunlight burst through the oak heart and wrapped blazing fingers of light around the two of us.

"Look, Peyton! Do you see it?" His words came out on a disbelieving breath. "Do you feel that?"

How could I not? In an eerie repetition of that dark day in my earliest teen year, the tree gleamed like an iridescent goddess above some ancient altar.

"And so it begins."

I didn't even have to ask to know Jason heard the same words I heard...inside my head, and yet not quite.

He pulled me against his side, but said nothing. We just stood there together, watching the golden aura fade away.

Tree of Hearts

At long last, we turned away from the Tree of Hearts. Jason bent to pick up my forgotten push broom and propped it on his shoulder as we walked away.

“So where were you headed with this thing?”

“To make a home.” I smiled into eyes that seemed far too familiar to have come into my life only moments and a lifetime ago.

He grinned and grabbed my hand in his free one.

“Well, let’s get to it.”

And so it began.

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