

## The Saving Tree

She ran for her life, pounding up the steep, wooded slope, heedless of the thorny bushes and whipping branches that might slow her escape. She ran as if in a nightmare, acutely aware of the predator pursuing her, trees and bushes a gray blur on either side of her. She ran with only one thought! Survive. She was prey and the chase was on.

Impossibly heavy footsteps pounded into the earth behind. Her heartbeat quickened in response. Her vision tunneled to what was directly in front of her, thin trees and a thick carpet of old dead leaves with no path to follow. Up ahead, she saw blue sky at the crest of the hillside. Like a wild animal intent on its weak target, her pursuer crashed through the forest, his menace pushing at her back like a horrifying, bilious, evil wind. Faster, faster, faster was her only thought. If you stop, you are dead. If you hesitate, you are dead. If you look back, you are lost forever. She tasted her own mortality, reached deeper for a strength she didn't know she had, and burst out of the forest into a huge field. A single large tree stood about ten yards away. Time was running out. Her legs pumped furiously as her feet pounded across the field. Her mouth opened in a silent scream... From behind came a rasping snort, too close. Ahead the tree loomed closer. Her head was void of thought and full of panic. She could only focus on that tree, desperately whispering "help me help me help me." Refusing the instinct to veer around the huge rough trunk, fear driven adrenalin pushed her exhausted legs even harder. Her vision toyed with her terrified mind creating an opening where none could exist, as she tumbled through an impossible door, and into the tree.

Drenched in sweat, lungs heaving, she fell like a pile of rags to the cool tiled floor. The sense of menace and cloying evil clung to her like putrid sludge as a gasping Larissa gave in to a flood of tears. She cried as only a person caught in a net of utmost terror can cry. Her small frame shook violently as her sobs morphed into rasping breaths. Her wet face lay against the floor, her thin arms clutched around her narrow chest, her legs jerking in small spasms as the muscles tried to relax. She barely seemed like a girl at all, but more a wretched creature vomiting up her terror. It was a mercy when her mind slipped into unconsciousness.

Larissa slowly blinked her eyes. The air around her was warm, comfortable, and smelled of freshly baked bread. Her body ached. From her tangle of dirty brown hair to the tips of her toes, she ached. "Have I fallen?" She often spoke her thoughts aloud when she was upset, or as in this instance, confused. Slowly, gingerly, she began moving and testing each limb to ascertain if any injuries seemed evident. Although her muscles were tender, nothing seemed broken. With a soft grunt, Larissa pushed herself into a sitting position. The room blurred a bit and she closed her eyes and remained still until the dizziness passed.

Stretching her legs before her a thousand small cuts and scratches appeared between the edge of her shorts and the top of her socks. Memory exploded in her. The man following her. Her decision to run. His pursuit. The whole nightmarish chase until...what? Her eyes explored the room around her. Pale yellow, slightly curved walls encircled what seemed to be a small kitchen. Beautifully carved wooden cabinets hung over blue stone counters that held a deep white sink, as well as several sets of drawers. On the

opposite wall stood a large cast iron stove, complete with several loaves of delicious looking bread resting on its top, their tempting aroma eliciting a small involuntary growl from her empty belly. Above her Larissa was surprised to see bundle after bundle of dried herbs hanging from the rafters and obscuring the ceiling. She could be in any old country cottage. She just didn't remember any cottage at all.

Across from her position on the floor, beyond the arched doorway, a sweet lilting voice brought bits of a song along a dim hallway. Larissa ignored her aching muscles and got her feet underneath her. After a bit of a stumble, she pulled herself together, resisted the urge to grab some of the bread, and passed through the archway, down the short hall, and out a Dutch door into the most wonderful garden she had ever seen.

Old growth apple and pear trees lazily released their petals into a warm breeze that caressed Larissa's face. Her eyes drank in the purples, red, yellows, and pinks of flowers short and tall that filled her vision. A gently winding path rolled out before her like an invitation to explore this magical place. The scent of honeysuckle enveloped her as she meandered along the path, her fingers gently caressing blossoms and tall slim grasses as they trailed behind her. Larissa was filled with wonder and a deep sense of contentment, her nightmare experience forgotten in the moment. So lost was she in this euphoria, that she nearly stumbled on the figure kneeling at the side of the path tending to a wilting rose bush.

"Was it man or beast?" A quiet question, in a silky voice, plainly asked, floated up to her like a butterfly seeking nectar.

“What?” Larissa watched the figure slowly turn toward her. A sweet smile sat on a sweet face of a girl not much older than herself, fifteen, sixteen at the most. Sparkling eyes the color of glacial ice beamed up into her own light brown ones. Satiny skin like coffee with extra cream, smooth and somehow glowing reminded her vaguely of the Tree and made her wonder if the girl was enchanted.

“The Thing that chased you,” a tender sadness reached up to her, “Was it Man, or was it Beast?”

Larissa easily folded her thin tanned legs beneath her to sit beside the stranger. Her clothes seemed faded as well as dirt stained beside the vibrant white blouse that flowed like a waterfall onto the deep blue skirt that pooled around the girl. Breathing deeply Larissa inhaled the peace of the garden and then locked onto those icy blue eyes.

“Both.” In the sparkling blue depths, she saw recognition and understanding and pain.

“As was mine.” The girl nodded, once, twice, allowing her own pain to surface briefly before returning that sweet smile to her perfect face.

Taking Larissa’s pale hand in hers, she gave a slight squeeze and began to speak rapidly.

“Time is short, and I know all of your questions for I have asked them all myself. You must be still, and I will tell you all that I can before I go.”

“Go? What do you mean, GO? Go where? Where are we? WHO ARE YOU?”

“I know it’s frightening but do be still and I will explain.”

Panic writhed up her spine like a garden snake. Questions exploded in her head as if it were the 4<sup>th</sup> of July on the town common. Larissa sat frozen as the strange girl reached inside the pocket of her full, ocean-colored skirt and placed a clear, heart shaped crystal into her hand, all the while keeping her grip tight on the other as if to keep Larissa from floating away.

“You see this garden?”

Brown eyes roamed over the glorious flowers and Larissa’s head bounced up and down.

“You saw the kitchen? And the doors all along the hallway?”

Larissa slowly nodded, desperate to understand, yet not sure she would like what she learned.

“You remember the Tree? The impossible door?”

Another hesitant nod.

“This...” waving her free hand to encompass everything around them, “All of this, is your Salvation. You will have your every need met. Food, “pointing to the fruit trees and beyond them to a large vegetable garden, “clothes, “the girl touched her milk white lace blouse and the soft pleats of her generous skirt. “As many, or as few, rooms as want or need.”

Her mouth opened, questions rushing up her throat. This could not be happening.

Larissa felt the grip on her hand tighten. Around them the air had thickened and taken on a rosy glow. The strange girl fixed her in her icy stare and spoke even more quickly.

“This is the Saving Tree. It appears when a girl is in the most extreme danger. Only one girl at a time may exist here. Once you’re in, you cannot leave until another takes your place. “

The girl was fading, or was it just the foggy air? Larissa was hearing what she said but couldn’t really grasp the significance. She HAD been saved. This she knew. She was moments from being destroyed. This she knew. But. But. The girl’s voice was smaller now in the heavy air.

“One day the next girl will arrive & you will pass the heart to her. You will be released. You will return to your own time and place. You will LIVE to live again.”

The crystal in her hand grew warm. Larissa looked down at it briefly, felt the grip on her other hand dissolve and knew the girl was gone.

There was no way to determine how long she sat staring at the heart in her hand. Only the faint numbness in her legs suggested it had been a while although the light had not changed.

Birdsong filled the air. The sweet smells of grass and flowers floated back to her on the gentle breeze. Larissa slowly stood, absently brushing the dirt from her tattered clothes. Dreamlike, her feet set out along the path, her fingertips gently brushing along the open blossoms on either side, pollen slowly building up a golden luster on her skin.

The recent flight from death and worse, the surreal escape into a tree, the strange disappearing girl...all had sent her psyche fleeing into a safe and quiet corner of her mind.

It was too much to process. Larissa thought in snippets, carefully avoiding the impossible shift in her reality.

“That air is warm. I like that” her words were whispered like tender butterflies fresh from their cocoons.

“It’s very quiet here. I wish there was a dog. I like dogs” Soft yipping sounds grew in volume as a black and white mongrel pup came scampering down the path to sit panting at her feet, its skinny tail brushing pebbles and insects from one side to the other.

Larissa froze in place, eyeing the adorable creature with suspicion. A battle began in her head between the tempting notion of endlessly granted wishes and the horrifying impossibility of this reality. A sudden torrent of hysterical laughter burst out of her, sending the pup into a whining run back the way it had come. Larissa hugged herself tightly, falling to her knees, gales of laughter quickly descending into throbbing tears. She raised her tortured, tear covered face to a sunless sky, pleading with the heavens.

“Mummy! Mummy! Mummy! I want my mummy! I’m Just a girl! Please!”

In the darkened room the soft beeping plays a soulful melody for the small form in the large bed. A woman sits at the bedside, absently smoothing the light blanket, mindful of all the tubes and wires attached to her precious child, murmuring continuous words of love and hope. A quick sparkle from a small clear crystal heart on the bedside table catches her attention. She assumes her husband left it there and picking it up she tenderly presses it into her child’s cool palm.

“Should we tell her that belonged to Eva?”

“That sweet girl who finally came out of *her* coma this morning?”

“With the ice blue eyes, yes, Eva was her name.”

The two nurses whispered by the doorway, sensing the pain so palpable in the small room.

“No, let it be. Perhaps it will bring this child good luck.”