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One Wish

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1

The Wishing Tree

Tanya Fairchild sensed there was something wrong with the place from the moment they walked in.

‘This is it.’ Her mother unlocked the door to Hawthorn Cottage and pushed it open. ‘What do you think?’

Tanya followed her mother into the dark space beyond the door, dragging her suitcase and her heels. Her eyelids had begun to twitch. She rubbed at them, wondering if some dust had flown up, or if it was perhaps the effect of the darkness after coming in from outside. She wrinkled her nose. ‘It smells . . . funny in here.’

Oberon, her plump, brown Doberman, clearly agreed. His claws clicked over the wooden floor as his large, wet nose took in the scent of the unfamiliar surroundings.

‘Well, of course it does.’ Her mother set down her own suitcase and reached for the nearest window, throwing the shutters wide open. Bright sunshine streamed in. ‘We’re the first booking of the season. It’s bound to smell a bit musty – the place has been closed up all through the winter.’

‘No, it’s not that.’ Tanya looked around the holiday cottage, trying to figure out what it was that was bothering her.

Her mother continued to open all the windows, flooding the place with light and fresh air.

‘Look how sweet it is,’ she exclaimed, pointing to the tiny kitchenette, where an old-fashioned whistling kettle sat on a gas hob, and mismatched floral teacups, pots and pans were arranged on brightly painted shelves.

Opposite, a living-room area held an inviting blue sofa, a small coffee table and a larger, white painted table with three chairs.

‘These must be the bedrooms,’ her mother said, moving to two doors at the back. She opened one of them. ‘Oh, Tanya, they’re lovely. Come and see.’

‘In a minute,’ Tanya replied distractedly. It was clearer now, the sound she had picked up on as soon as she had entered the cottage: a light scuffling that seemed to be coming from underneath the floorboards. She knelt down and put her ear to the floor, trying to locate the source. It was difficult to hear, for her mother kept calling out with every new discovery. ‘Mine’s a four-poster bed . . . and just look at the Victorian bathtub!’

Tanya covered the ear that wasn’t pressed to the floor and listened harder. There it was again . . . scuffle, scuffle, scratch. The smell was stronger here, too: an earthy, outdoorsy sort of smell. Oberon trotted over, his head tilted to one side, listening.

Maybe it’s just a mouse, she thought, realising as she did so that her stomach was tensed into a hard knot. ‘Please, please, let it be a mouse. Or even a rat. Anything but that . . .’

The scuffling paused, became a rustle. Then, alarmingly close to Tanya’s ear, came another sound: a busy sniffling, snuffling noise that was far too concentrated to be coming from the nose of a mouse. Her

eyelids twitched again; a warning sign. Still she hoped that she was mistaken, that it was not really one of *them* that she was about to see.

She didn't have to wait long before a crabby little voice growled up through the floorboards.

'Summer already? It must be summer, because every summer they come. Horrible, stinking humans! With their noise and their chatter, and their dirt and their disgustable, rancidious food smells!'

A sharp tap by Tanya's ear made her jump. Something had struck the underside of the floor. She shifted position, peering down through a gap in the floorboards. A tiny, bloodshot eye, half hidden beneath a bushy, grey eyebrow, glared back at her through a plume of dust. Oberon gave a yelp of surprise, then sneezed violently.

'I can see you, you little maggot!'

'Who are you calling a maggot?' Tanya said indignantly. 'We've only just arrived. We haven't done anything to you!'

'Doesn't matter.' The glare deepened. 'You're all the same. A nuisance, that's what.'

'I could say the same thing about you,' Tanya retorted. 'Always getting me into trouble for no good reason. It's not my fault I can see you – I wish I couldn't, you know!'

'Be careful what you wish for,' the horrid little voice said. 'I could easily stamp out your eyes while you sleep.'

The words sent a chill over the back of Tanya's neck, but the stubborn streak in her would not allow herself to be bullied.

‘And I could easily stamp you out altogether,’ she whispered. ‘I should think you’d fit quite nicely under the heel of my shoe.’

She held her breath. The bloodshot eye widened, then narrowed.

‘Insolent wretch!’ The eye vanished from the gap and was replaced by a glimpse of jagged, yellowing teeth. ‘You wait. Just you wait!’

A low growl rumbled in Oberon’s throat. He couldn’t understand what was being said, of course, but he knew that his beloved Tanya was being threatened – and he didn’t like it one bit.

‘Tanya?’

Her mother’s voice nearby startled her. She sat up, banging her head on the corner of the coffee table. ‘Ouch! What?’

Her mother was watching her carefully, a puzzled look on her face. It was a look Tanya had seen many times.

‘What are you doing?’

Tanya rubbed the sore spot on her head. ‘Nothing. I . . .’ She hesitated, tempted, as she so often was, to simply tell the truth. ‘I mean, I thought I saw a . . .’

Her mother’s expression was changing, from puzzled to impatient.

‘Tanya, please don’t say “a fairy”,’ she said. Her voice was suddenly weary and very quiet. ‘You’re twelve, much too old for all that nonsense now.’

‘A . . . spider,’ Tanya finished, her shoulders slumping. It was no good. Her mother had never listened

before. Nobody had. Why should things be any different now?

‘Oooooh! A spider, am I?’ crowed the voice from beneath the floorboards. ‘So, the daughter can see me, but the mother can’t . . . Oh, I’ll have some fun with this, you see if I don’t!’

Tanya got up from the floor and sank miserably on to the sofa, the fairy’s gleeful laughter ringing in her ears. The relief on her mother’s face did little to make her feel any better. It wouldn’t last. The fairy had promised trouble, and Tanya knew only too well that she would get it. It was just a question of when.

‘Why don’t you make a start on unpacking and I’ll put together some lunch?’ her mother suggested.

Tanya nodded glumly. She got up and collected her case, then trudged to the back of the cottage. The first bedroom was larger, with the four-poster bed her mother had described, and a quaint, old-fashioned bathtub just visible through another small door into the bathroom.

The second bedroom was simpler and smaller, but bright and cheerful with crisp lemon bedding and matching curtains. She heaved her suitcase on to the bed and unzipped it, pulling out her clothes and shoes into a higgledy-piggledy pile, then went over to the tiny, criss-crossed window and stared out. A rambling flower garden with a narrow stone path lay before her like something from a picture book. As she watched, a little brown hedgehog ambled across the grass and two robins perched on a crumbling birdbath. She smiled faintly, then almost tripped over Oberon who had crept in and settled on the rug behind her. He thumped his tail as she

scratched his chocolate-brown head, before gathering an armful of clothes to put away. Oberon settled down for a snooze.

She worked quietly, listening out for any telltale scratches or muttering from under the floorboards, but none came. She hoped that this was the only fairy in the house. In the countryside, she knew, fairies were never very far away. Tanya had endured many a stay with her one surviving grandmother, Florence, who lived in an old country manor in Essex.

Tanya had never liked the house and dreaded it every time her mother sent her there, for it was crawling with fairies. In the kitchen alone, there were two: a funny little creature in a dishrag dress who hid behind the coalscuttle, and an ancient, grumpy brownie who lived in the tea caddy and was fond of rapping her over the knuckles with its walking stick every time she reached in for a teabag.

Then there was the unseen clan that had invaded the grandfather clock and who were the reason the blasted thing never worked. Their sly insults rang in Tanya's ears every time she passed it. Worse still, a froggy-looking creature with rotten-egg breath lived in the bathroom pipes. Much like a magpie, it stole anything it could lay its clammy little fingers on that happened to be shiny. Despite the unpleasant idea of spending her holiday sharing a cottage with whatever it was that was lurking under the floorboards, Tanya had to admit that it was better than going to her grandmother's house.

Before long, the last item had been put away and her mother was calling her for lunch. She returned to the

living-room area and helped her mother carry the dishes and bowls to the table. Once seated, she poured some orange juice and helped herself to salad, bread, ham and a hard-boiled egg, munching in earnest as she suddenly realised how hungry she was.

Unsurprisingly, Oberon had awoken from his nap and was now resting his head on Tanya's knee, his long, brown nose sticking out from beneath the tablecloth. She smuggled him a piece of ham, and would have got away with it had he not wolfed it down so noisily, prompting a sigh from her mother.

'Oh, Tanya. I've told you about feeding Oberon titbits – you know he's becoming an awful scrounger. And besides, he's getting rather plump.'

'He's not plump,' Tanya muttered, but all the same she couldn't help feeling a bit guilty. Oberon was a dreadful beggar at the dinner table and a thief, too, when he thought he could get away with it. 'It's just . . . puppy fat.'

It was her fault, of course. It had started a few months ago, when her father had left. The first few weeks hadn't been so bad, because it didn't feel real, not at first. She could pretend that he was just away on business, like he so often was, and that soon he would be coming back. However, after a month of weekend visits and strained conversation, and the house gradually emptying of his belongings, it finally began to sink in that he really was gone. It was then that Tanya began to miss him terribly. And so did Oberon.

So when Tanya had found him curled up on a tatty, forgotten pair of her father's slippers – the last of his

possessions left in the house – she'd done the only thing she could think of to cheer him up: she had given him a biscuit. In that moment, seeing him crunching happily and wagging his tail, Tanya, too, had felt better. It was an easy fix and it didn't last. She knew that, but now Oberon had come to expect it, it made it so much harder not to give in. Especially when he looked at her the way he did now, with those beseeching brown eyes of his.

She stroked the tip of his nose with her thumb. 'Good boy. Go and lie down now.' He lumbered off obediently and she pushed her plate away, her appetite gone now that thoughts of her father had crept into her mind.

'What's the matter? Not hungry?'

Tanya stared at the empty third chair at the table. 'Why are there three seats if there are only two of us?'

Her mother lowered her eyes and wiped her mouth. 'Because the cottage can take up to three people.' She hesitated. 'I know you miss him. I still do, too—'

'You miss him?' Tanya scoffed. She couldn't help it. 'You were the one who made him leave!'

'It will get easier.' Her mother's voice was pleading. 'I know you don't believe it now, but things are better already.'

'How?' Tanya demanded.

'Because at least the shouting and the arguments have stopped.'

Tanya got up, knocking into the table.

'I'm going for a walk,' she said stiffly.

Her mother looked crestfallen. 'Don't go far and don't be too long.'

Tanya nodded and collected Oberon's leash, along with some spare change, and zipped them into her rucksack. Oberon trotted to her heel as she opened the cottage door, passing beneath the archway that was busy with climbing roses, their scent heavy and sweet in the thick July air. She closed the door with a heavier bang than intended, then started off down the little stone path that led through the garden and away from the cottage.

Her mother was right: the arguments had stopped. She should be grateful for that, she knew she should. Yet, somehow, what the arguments had left behind was almost as bad, because it was silence. And in that silence Tanya's loneliness and anger grew and began their own ugly fight, growing louder and louder until it was all she could hear.

Soon the path came to an end and opened out on to a road. It was busier here with cars trundling along in search of somewhere to park and the cries of seagulls overhead. Tanya lifted her nose to sniff the air and the briny scent of the sea filled her lungs. The sea wall was just a stone's throw away; she could see it from here.

At the side of the road a wooden board read: *Welcome to Spinney Wicket!* On the opposite side, a white signpost pointed in various directions: Seafront, Pier, Pavilion, Spinney Castle. She took a few steps in the direction of the pier, then paused. Faint strains of funfair music reached her ears, along with shouts of laughter. It was enough to change her mind. She knew from experience that the only thing lonelier than silence was to be alone around others who were having fun.

‘Come on, Oberon,’ she said. ‘We’ll go this way instead.’ With that, she set off in the direction of the castle, Oberon’s nose bumping the back of her legs as she went.

The new path took her along a little dirt road, overgrown with wildflowers and overlooked by fields of sheep and cattle. After a good five minutes of walking in solitude, she began to feel uneasy. The sounds of the seafront could no longer be heard and she hadn’t seen another soul since she took the path.

Little snickering, chittering noises from the long grass caught her attention, and once or twice she thought she heard whispers from within the greenery. Tanya kept her eyes on the path; she’d had enough of fairies for one day.

Suddenly, the dirt road came to an end, bringing her to a wide-open meadow. Shielding her eyes from the sun, she gazed into the hazy distance. There, on top of a hill, Spinney Castle sat like a crown. At the highest point, and in some of the windows, dark shapes moved; people were exploring.

From the corner of her eye, a flash of emerald light caught her attention. She turned towards it, squinting. It had come from a large, solitary tree that stood halfway between her and the castle. As she stared at it, another flash – bright blue this time – dazzled her eyes.

‘What on earth are those lights?’ she wondered aloud. Mesmerised, she moved towards them, quickening her pace. Oberon bounded along beside her, hardly able to control his excitement at all the new smells. As they drew nearer, Tanya watched for the mysterious lights.

They seemed to go off all of a sudden in a chain: one, two, three. Silver, green, silver again. Nothing for a further minute . . . perhaps the source of the mysterious lights had seen her approaching? But no, there were another two. Lilac and turquoise this time.

As she got closer still, Tanya could see the tree in greater detail. It loomed above her, almost as wide as it was tall. Its trunk was thick, gnarled and knotted. It looked very, very old. The thought struck her how odd it was for the tree to be here all alone in the meadow. There were no other trees close by; the nearest were off in the distance by the castle. Stepping beneath the cool shade of its branches, she stared up into the dense, green leaves. There she found the answer to the strange lights.

Glass bottles and jars, in their dozens – no, hundreds – hung from the branches above. They were all shapes and sizes, and every colour she could think of. Most were coloured glass, but some were plain or had been painted. Each one contained something. She reached for one of the lower hanging ones, a small, tear-dropped bottle of pale blue. Inside, rolled tightly and bound with string, was a piece of paper with something written on it.

Are these messages? Tanya wondered. *If so, who are they for?* The harder she looked, the more she saw; it seemed that every little twig was adorned with something. And that was not all, for there were also ribbons and strips of cloth tied to the tree, too. A soft breeze rushed through the leaves, whispering over the bottle tops to create a lilting melody. The ribbons rippled and the bottles danced as though they approved, and the movement sent them swaying out into the sunshine

where rays of light bounced off them in jewel-coloured flashes.

Tanya stood there, drinking it in with her eyes. She did not know what the tree was, or what all the bottles and jars were for, yet somehow it didn't matter. It was the most beautiful tree she had ever seen in her life, and it seemed to her to be curiously magical, too.

And, as she held that very thought, the knots in the gnarled tree trunk twisted and rearranged themselves. Two of the knots opened . . . and blinked. Below them, a third knot puckered before opening in an enormous yawn.

Tanya stood rooted to the spot, unable to tear her eyes from the face in the tree. The tree-eyes – dewy and green – fixed upon her and the mouth opened once more to reveal a twiggy, crooked set of teeth.

'One wish, what'll it be?' it said. 'For you have found the Wishing Tree.'