

## Sherm

It had to be there! It had always been there. For as long as Lexie could remember it was there. She squinted through the downpour hoping to catch a glimpse of the towering oak, to no avail.

*She had only been 11 years old.*

The tree had been part of their family for generations. Gramps and Gammie were married under its branches 67 years ago. According to Gramps it was a full-grown tree even then. Over the years the monstrous limbs had been climbed by countless children. Multiple tire swings had come and gone. Young couple's initials were carved deep in the bark, surrounded by hearts.

*It had been an "accident...never solved...*

"Sherm", short for Sherman, was what the massive tree had fondly been called for ages. although no one remembered why. Leaf raking parties in the fall and picnics in the spring were ingrained in her memory as some of her favorite family events under the tree.

*She had hidden the small knife deep in a crack near the top of the tree, as far as she had dared to climb...*

Her parent's death in a car accident had left her as the only caretaker for Sherm. Then when she had moved across the country for a career change the titan oak was all alone.

*But things can always be found.*

The article she had read online three days ago from her small hometown newspaper gave her few details. "The tree was old and decayed and dying. It was dangerous and must be taken down." No definite date was given, just "by the end of the month." She had taken the first available flight. Today is April 30.

*How long could fingerprints and DNA last....?*

Sherm was like a family heirloom. She had to see him one last time!

It had to be there....

The flames from the bonfire stretched high in the early evening sky. The announcement had said that Sherm had been too diseased and decayed for the wood to be of any practical value. So the entire town had been invited to the memorial event to watch the tree burn. As the families gathered around and enjoyed the warmth and fellowship Sherm was performing one last service to his community.

*From the top of the tree everything had seemed so clear, and simple, and safe...*

Children playing and laughing...

*Her father had been out of town,,,only Lexie and her mother at home,,,*

Men pitching horseshoes by the fire light,

*The pounding on the door in the middle of the night...*

Women chatting...

*The face in the window..*

Hamburgers, hotdogs, cole slaw, iced tea...

*Her mother grabbed the only weapon she could find...*

Speeches by local officials,,,

*The door crashing down,,,the man tripped...into the knife...*

Fireworks!

*Her mother passed out,,,never remembered...*

The fire would take days to burn itself out. Lexie could not stay around her home town that long, She had responsibilities. But, it had to be there!

*The man had stumbled away. The body was found the next morning, in a ditch,,,half a mile down the road,,,*

As she stared into the crackling fire the clarity of the truth suddenly hit her; Sherm was still protecting her, as he had for all these years! The reassuring memory flooded back to her, the knife had been a gift from her crafty cousin. A knife which he had carved from one of Sherm's fallen branches.