



FOUR NOVELLAS
ROOTED *in* TIMELESS LOVE

The Kissing Tree



KAREN
WITEMEYER

REGINA
JENNINGS

AMANDA
DYKES

NICOLE
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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Kissing Tree • K. Witemeyer, R. Jennings, A. Dykes, N. Deese
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From Roots to Sky © 2020 by Amanda Joy Dykes

Heartwood © 2020 by Nicole Deese

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-7642-3612-9 (paperback)
ISBN 978-0-7642-3781-2 (casebound)

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Cover design by Brand Navigation

Karen Witemeyer and Amanda Dykes are represented by Books & Such Literary Agency.

Nicole Deese is represented by Kirkland Media Management.

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*Broken Limbs,
Mended Hearts*



REGINA JENNINGS



For girls who climb

One

1868

OAK SPRINGS, TEXAS

Bella Eden had always known when it would happen—the day before her eighteenth birthday. A girl who commenced with kissing too young was bound for trouble. On the other hand, she couldn't wait until she was staring spinsterhood in the face either. A first kiss just before eighteen was reasonable, she reckoned. And she knew where it would happen. For years, she'd passed by a stately live oak on the way to and from school. Beneath the canopy of its spreading branches was the perfect place, and she'd spent many a walk home imagining exactly how it would occur.

The only thing she hadn't known was who.

But now all was clear.

“What's got you so tickled?” Jimmy Blaggart asked. “You're grinning up a storm.”

Bella's heart was pounding like a steam engine. She pulled him away from the wagon trail and toward the oak. “I have a surprise for you,” she said.

Today was the day, and Jimmy Blaggart was the man for

her. They'd grown up together, but only recently had he paid her any mind. Every day since April he'd walked her home, even staying and visiting for a spell afterward. That could only mean one thing.

The tree's majestic limbs stretched out in every direction, their farthest-flung tips nearly sweeping the ground when moved by the breeze. Jimmy paused as Bella ducked beneath them, and she pulled him inside the green cavern.

"It's like being beneath a colossal green parasol, isn't it?" Releasing him, she spun slowly, mesmerized as always by the unworldliness of her secret enclave.

"How would I know? I don't use a parasol."

If Jimmy wanted their marriage to prosper, he would have to develop an imagination. Bella looked at him again. He was decent enough. Caused no offense. His family was moving after he graduated, so this could be her last chance to make an impression.

She smiled. Tomorrow she would be eighteen, and in another week she'd be finished with school and able to devote more time to her sewing. Soon she would have enough customers to call herself a bona fide seamstress. This kiss was the next step to her future.

"My lands, would you look at this?" The canopy arched higher near the center, exposing the tree trunk. Bella had spent hours getting this spot ready, but it would be worth it. "Look at this. Someone has carved a heart in the tree." She leaned forward as if seeing it for the first time. "What's that inside the heart? *BE*? Why, those are my initials! How strange." She slipped her hand into her pocket and felt for the paring knife, glad she'd thought to stick the blade through a new potato so she wouldn't cut herself.

"Bella." Jimmy's passable face looked worried. "You're a nice girl. . . ."

Pushing the potato off with her thumb, she managed to get the knife free without slashing her pocket. “Look what I have.”

His eyes widened. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to kiss me.” She hadn’t expected that she’d have to spell it out for him.

“You do? Right now? Right here?”

“Yes, I think it’ll be real special.”

He kept one hand extended between them. “And if I don’t?”

“If you don’t?” Bella looked at the tree where her initials were carved. In all her plans, she hadn’t thought there needed to be a threat involved. “If you don’t, I’m going to be heartbroken.”

“But you aren’t going to stab me, are you? Promise me you aren’t going to stab me.” His eyes never left the knife in her hand.

“Sweet potatoes! Are you joshing?” she cried. “This knife is for the tree. You’re going to carve your initials in the heart above mine, and then you’re going to kiss me. Why would I stab you?” Maybe Jimmy had more imagination than she’d credited him for.

Seeing that his epidermis was in no danger of being punctured, he simmered down. “Like I was saying, you’re a nice girl.”

She was not fond of the direction he was going. “You’ve walked me home every day for a month, Jimmy Blaggart. That’s supposed to mean something.”

“It means that I’m partial to those bird dog puppies of your pa’s. I mean to buy one as soon as I get my hands on enough money. You know the one I want? The little speckled one?”

“I did not plan this encounter to talk about a speckled pup!” Bella stabbed the knife into the tree to free up her hands. Getting a kiss out of Jimmy might be more work than she’d figured. She flipped her honey-colored braid over her shoulder and wiped her hands on her skirt to calm herself. “Now, let’s stop fighting,” she said. “It’s just a kiss. Tomorrow’s my birthday, and—”

Something bounced off her head. She looked at the ground to find it. Probably an acorn. There were plenty of old ones from last fall scattered around. “What I was saying was—”

Thunk! And this one stung. Bella rubbed her head and looked above them. Something moved, and the leaves rustled.

“I’m going home,” Jimmy said. “Tell your pa to save that puppy for me.”

“You can’t go home. Not yet.”

“Happy birthday,” he said, then ducked out from beneath the limbs and disappeared from sight.

Bella’s hands clenched into fists. What was wrong with him? Weren’t men supposed to be grateful for every kiss offered? She hadn’t predicted this outcome.

“You can offer your thanks now.”

Bella jumped. The voice had come from above her. “Who’s that? Come out!”

The leaves rustled. Branches parted, and a face emerged. It was Adam Fisher, a classmate and rascal of the first order. And he had the audacity to be grinning at her.

“You should thank me,” he said. “My well-timed missive stopped you from further embarrassing yourself.”

Sweet potatoes, he’d heard the whole thing! “What are you doing up there, besides spying on me?”

“Where else would I go? It’s not like I have a lot of friends.”

Adam and his family had only moved to Oak Springs around Christmas. He was handsome enough, but Bella had already set her sights on Jimmy.

“It’s no wonder,” she yelled. “Who’d want a friend like you? Come down here this instant!”

“While you have a knife? No, thanks.”

He was laughing at her. The most painful episode of her tragic life, and he was laughing at her. She’d make him pay.

“I’m coming up!” What she was going to do when she caught

him, Bella had no idea, but anything was better than standing around like a pitiful, scorned reject. She threw a leg over a low-lying branch and pulled herself upright. Straddling it, she could see Adam crouched on a limb closer to the trunk. “You’re going to be sorry.”

“Next time, just ask for an orange,” he said. “That’s a better birthday present than a kiss from Jimmy.”

She got her feet on the limb and reached for another branch to steady herself. “I’m coming for you, Adam Fisher.”

“Or maybe if you had traded him a speckled pup for a kiss, you would’ve had more luck. He sounded right taken with those pups.”

Drat him. He didn’t seem the least concerned that she was hunting him, but he’d learn.

She moved forward but couldn’t reach the next limb up. She rose on her tiptoes. If she could just stretch a little farther . . .

“And just think, your poor initials are going to be all alone on that tree. What a pity,” he crooned.

That was the last straw. She had to stop the horrible words coming out of his mouth. Then she spotted his foot hanging down from the branch above her. She’d show him. She’d drag him out of this tree if it was the last thing she did.

Bella lunged for his foot. The leather scraped against her fingertips, but she got no purchase because, at the last second, he yanked it away. Her weight shifted, and her foot slipped off the branch. The inside of her leg scraped against the limb as she sat down hard, but then she spun upside down, and suddenly she wasn’t being hit by leaves anymore. There was only air.

She only had time to put out a hand to catch herself, but that was a mistake. The pain was immediate, bringing tears to her eyes and blurring the shocked face of the boy who’d mocked her.

Two

THREE YEARS LATER

From the seat atop his threshing machine, Adam Fisher stopped his four-horse team and studied the town of Oak Springs before him. He hadn't been back since he'd graduated from the one-room schoolhouse in the valley below. His parents had lived in the community for less than a year before moving on, but he planned on it being his home for the next few weeks, and maybe even longer.

"This is a likely spot." Dr. Paulson's black buggy pulled into the shade thrown by Adam's massive machine. "See how the land has a natural terrace down toward the creek bed? More than likely the soil has benefited from spring floods and silt deposits. I would expect that this would be a high-yield valley."

"You would expect correctly," Adam said, surveying the golden ripples of wheat interrupted by scattered homesteads. The heavy kernels bending toward the ground announced that he'd arrived just in time. "I lived here once. These farmers know what they're about."

A few more weeks of the farmers' toil, and then his thresher could be used to separate the yellow kernels from their stalks

and husks. But would they hire him? Another payment was soon due on his equipment, and if he didn't stay busy, he'd never earn enough to make his payments through the winter.

Newfangled machines were more likely to be ridiculed than appreciated in rural Grimes County, and if a prophet had no honor in his own country, a student like Adam would be laughed out of the region. He rubbed his chin, the stubble barely chafing against his calloused fingers. When he'd left Oak Springs, he'd had no need for a straight razor. Amazing what changes three years wrought.

Dr. Paulson shook his reins, and his sharp carriage horse stepped lively. Adam roused his laden team, and they gamely followed. As the names of the local farmers came to mind, so did memories that he'd forgotten. That farm belonged to Mr. Granger, who'd hired him during harvest. The house by the road was the Bond family's. Mrs. Bond had quickly befriended his mother when they'd moved to town and always seemed to be in the Fishers' kitchen when he came home from school. And that farm east of town was Mr. Eden's.

There was one name he hadn't forgotten. Bella Eden. He'd always had a hankering for her. Her sweet, heart-shaped face and waves of light brown hair had caught his attention right off. Unfortunately, he hadn't caught *her* attention—not until he'd broken her wrist. After that, she'd given him the cold shoulder. But that had been years ago. What was she up to now? Probably sewing up a storm, like she'd always planned. If so, she might admire the gift he'd brought her—proof that he hadn't given up on her, no matter how long he'd been away.

Even though her family never had more funds than their neighbors, Bella had always dressed like a fine lady. It was due to her skilled needle, not any extravagant expense, or so Adam's sister had pointed out. Her dresses were the same aged cloth and worn cotton, but she managed to make them look like

something special when she wore them. Adam had noticed that without his sister's help.

But Bella wasn't just pretty, she was spirited. He steeled himself for the possibility that someone had made her a wife by now. In a community like Oak Springs, he'd find out soon.

Dr. Paulson hailed the farmer with a scythe in the field next to the road. The small area of felled stalks around him showed he hadn't begun harvesting in earnest. Swinging the curved blade over his shoulder, he strode toward the road like a cheerful grim reaper, smiling from ear to ear.

"My lands, what is that behind your team?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the thresher. "It looks like one of those iron-clads that dueled at Hampton Roads."

"That is not the *Merrimack* nor the *Monitor*," Dr. Paulson said, "but an innovation that will mean more to this country than either of those ships."

Adam saw the slight twitch of the eyebrow beneath the farmer's straw hat. Multiply that skeptical twitch over the three dozen farmers in the area, and he wouldn't be able to make the payment on his equipment.

"This is a threshing machine, Mr. Granger," Adam said. "I'm here to work the harvest."

Mr. Granger took a second look, and his cherry-spotted cheeks bunched up with his smile. "I'll be! I didn't recognize you, son. Never expected you to be riding in front of something that ponderous. How are your folks?"

Adam relaxed the reins. This was the welcome he'd hoped for. "They're doing well over in Brazos County. My sister married a Lawson boy this summer. From what I hear, they're doing fine too."

"And how are you doing?" Mr. Granger stepped back so that his question clearly included whatever nonsense Adam was hauling.

“Spectacular! As you might know, I spent a couple of years at the agricultural school, but when I saw one of these machines in action, I quit classes and headed north to learn more about them. I traveled with a threshing crew over the plains for a year, learned the business, and saved every dime so I could buy one of these marvels for myself. And now I’m here to show you what it can do for you.”

He pushed his tongue against his teeth to dislodge the feeling that he was no better than the snake oil salesmen who traveled through. This was different. He’d seen the proof of it. He knew how hard these farmers worked during harvest, and this machine would revolutionize their toil, giving them better yields, more profit, and making him a pretty penny in the process.

Everyone would benefit, but he’d already learned the pain of being a true believer in a land of skeptics.

For now, they were friendly skeptics, but his former professor Dr. Paulson had a way of ruffling feathers that few could rival.

“Why don’t you fire up that engine and show me how it works?” The grass crunched beneath Mr. Granger’s boots as he inspected the thresher. “Is it steam-powered?”

“No, sir. Maybe next year I can afford a steam engine. For now, I have the horses. I hitch them to the gearbox on that treadmill, and they walk in circles. That turns the gears, which spins the tumbling rod, which activates the thresher. It’s a sight to behold.”

Adam knew that looking at the idle machine was like studying a hummingbird at rest. Not very impressive until you saw it in motion. He never tired of watching the belts and gears and wondering at how they transformed the slow steps of draft horses into rushing wind and motion and whirling parts.

Mr. Granger was more impressed with his horses. “Fine team you have there. I saw a steam pumper fire engine once in Galveston that looked as heavy as a mountain. It had a team

like that tethered to it. Noble beasts, they were. Must have cost a strongbox of gold.”

Just in case Adam forgot that he owed money on the horses too.

“I’d like to show you what this machine can do,” Adam said.

“Go on, then,” Granger replied with a smile.

“Not here. It takes some space to get it properly laid out. Then we need some cut wheat ready for separating. Also room for the horses—”

“Not asking for much, are you?” Mr. Granger’s laughter died when he saw that neither Dr. Paulson nor Adam shared it. “Well, I’m sure there’d be plenty of folks around here that would cotton to some entertainment.”

“How about tomorrow? I was thinking of that place by the big oak tree. If you could bring some cut wheat—”

“Hold on there, Adam. Why would I be giving you my cut wheat?”

“I’m going to separate it for you. You’ll bring it to me on the stalk, and you’ll go home with straw and grain separated. I won’t even charge you.”

“Charge me? The last time we paid for a show was that acrobat who came through town. He could juggle while standing on his head. Can you juggle while standing on your head?” Mr. Granger snorted. “I didn’t think so. I’d better get back to work. You should’ve known that harvest was the wrong time to come. Nobody has time for diversions while there’s wheat to bring in.”

No time? They wouldn’t believe how much time his machine could save them. Harvest was the only time that he could help. But the sinking feeling in his stomach was growing—that same sharp disappointment he’d met with in Anderson when no one else understood his dream. When no one gave him the chance to prove himself.

Dr. Paulson looked at Mr. Granger with a condescension that was impossible to miss. “In a few years, no one is going

to winnow wheat anymore. Every community will wait with joyful anticipation for the threshing teams to come to town. You'll pay for the privilege of being the first in line to have your wheat processed. But it takes a man of vision to be the first. We'll find our man. Follow me, Adam. We won't accomplish anything else here."

Dr. Paulson had insisted on coming along so he could gather soil samples for his research. Adam wished he had offered to bring the soil back to the university and had made the trip without the professor.

"It was good to see you again," Adam said by way of amends. "Please send my regards to Mrs. Granger."

Mr. Granger spared him a pitying look. "Be careful, Adam. A man's known by the company he keeps."

But Adam wanted to be known for being innovative and intelligent. He had felt that the good ideas of the classrooms needed to come out to the farmers, and he wanted to be their ambassador. If he could convince the farmers to give his machine a chance, he could bring prosperity to Oak Springs while making the payments that would keep his dream alive.

And if he could find Bella Eden, then his joy would be complete.