

NOURISHED

'I swear, your garden remembers what it was like to be a forest.'

Laura laughed as she said it, although she was filthy, hair plastered to her forehead, arms striped with thin red scratches from the brambles we'd been fighting all day.

'This tree remembers,' I said.

I looked up at it again. It dominated the garden, too tall for the space, its trunk twisted off-centre, as if it had grown crowded and never recovered. One side leaned heavily, branches reaching toward the house; the other was sparse and uneasy. Even in still air, its leaves never quite stopped moving

This smart new-build on the edge of Oakgrove was my first home, and it had felt like a bargain. Too good to be true, really. The covenant was buried in the paperwork. My solicitor had frowned, tapping the page with her pen.

'Unusual,' she'd said. 'But enforceable.'

All the original trees on the land had been cleared but this one remained. I was bound to its care, nourishment, and protection, on pain of forfeiting my right of occupancy.

I signed.

Of course I did.

Two years later, the storm came through. I woke in the night to a deep, rending crack. From the bedroom window, I saw one of the main branches split and hanging, raw wood exposed and shuddering with every gust.

And beneath the wind, faintly, I heard crying.

I cut the branch down at first light. As the saw bit into the wood, the sound sharpened: a thin, gaunt keening that crawled straight into my head. I told myself it was exhaustion, the long winter, living alone. But when I went inside, it followed me. Room to room. Relentless.

I bound the tree's wound with honey and cloth, hands shaking in the rain. The crying stopped immediately. I slid down onto the muddy ground and sobbed with relief.

For a while, it helped.

Then the rot set in. Leaves curled black. Bark softened. The sound returned: louder now, constant. Around the base of the tree, brambles thrived as if delighted, thick and thorned. One afternoon, hacking at them, I cut my hand badly. Blood soaked into the soil.

The keening faltered.

Quietened.

That was when I understood.

I won't tell you everything I did after that. Only that missing pets aren't uncommon on this estate, and the tree looked better. For a while.

Now it's sick again. Worse than before. I haven't slept. The crying never stops.

I called Laura, said I needed help with the garden. She came at once. She always did.

'Done!' she said, tossing her shears aside.

We stood back, admiring our work. The ground around the tree was cleared to bare earth. The sun was setting, deep red shadows spreading across the lawn. The crying paused, as if holding its breath.

I tightened my grip on the spade.

I looked from it, to the shears, to Laura. And then to the tree.

'Thank you,' I said softly.

You'll never know how much.

