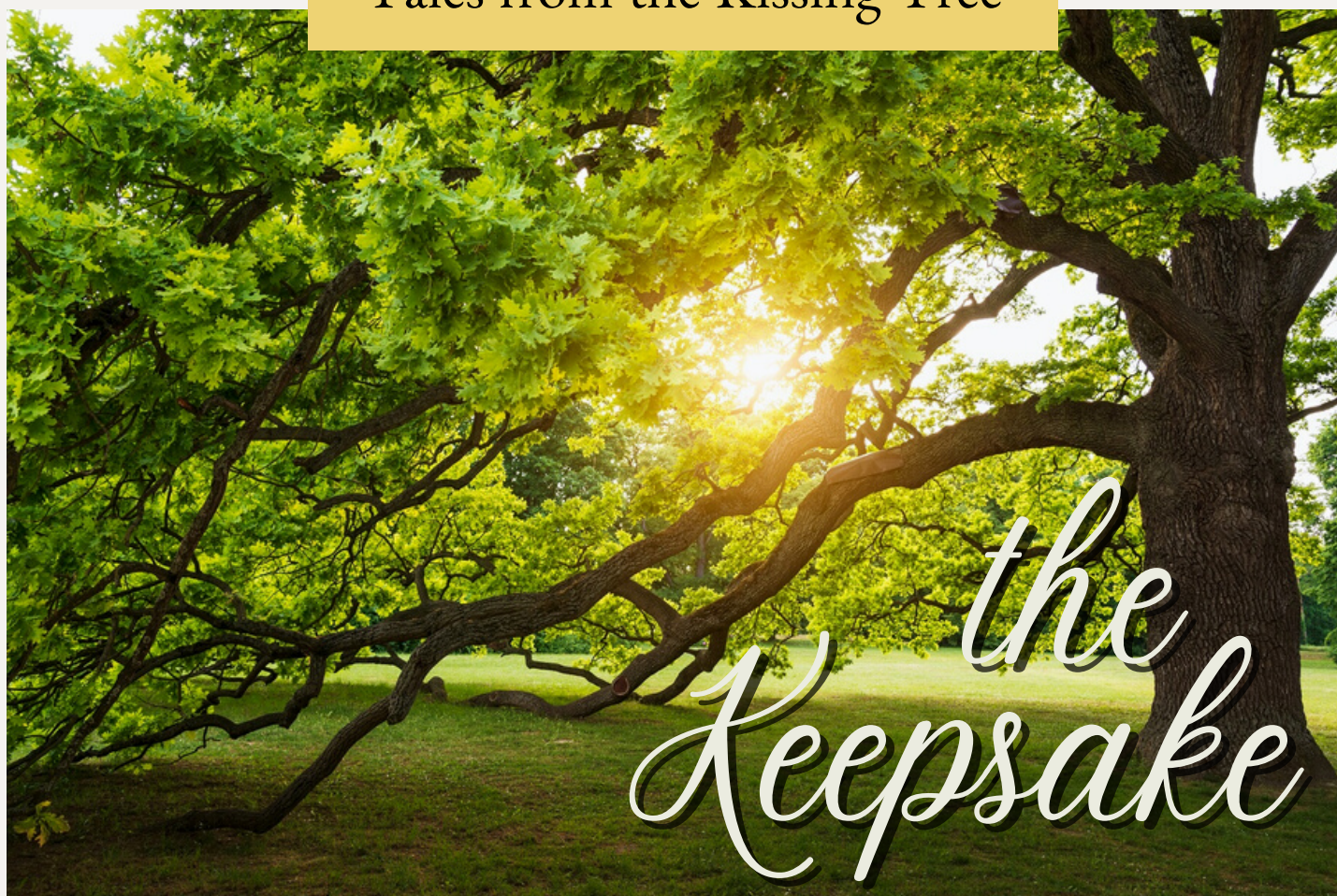


Tales from the Kissing Tree



BY KAREN WITEMEYER

The Kissing Tree is a multi-generational novella collection that releases October 13. All the stories center around a giant oak tree where courting couples go to carve their initials. The heroine in Karen Witemeyer's story, *Inn for a Surprise*, is building an inn near the

legendary kissing tree—a romantic destination she plans to market to the ladies who read her *Tales from the Kissing Tree* column published in *Lippincott's* literary magazine. The initials carved in her beloved tree serve as the inspiration for her successful series. The story that follows is just such a tale . . .



1889 – Oak Springs, TX

"Alvin? I'm home." Mabel Cassidy closed the front door behind her, untied her bonnet strings, and hung her sensible straw hat on the hall tree. It sported a touch of lace around the brim but no flowers or bows.

Her husband didn't care for all the rigmarole of modern millinery, so Mabel curtailed her more feminine headdress whims to please him. She

compensated with excessively lacy handkerchiefs and embroidered shawls. A woman needed a touch of romanticism in her life, after all, and heaven knew, Alvin Cassidy would not be supplying it.

Her husband was a good man. An able provider. Dependable. Principled. One couldn't find a more godly Christian. Sentimentality eluded him, however. She loved him anyway, of course. Just as he

loved her despite her sass and vinegar. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind, and her husband better gird his loins, for she intended to do just that.

She strode down the hall toward their bedroom at the back of the house. "You better have a good reason for pulling me out of my literary society meeting. You know how much I love a healthy debate, and I nearly had those two Clovis women backed into a corner when that boy brought your note around." Mabel shoved the bedroom door open.

"Really, Alvin. You demand I come home at once, then you don't even put in an appearance when I arrive? I've half a mind to march right back to--" Her

tirade dissolved like wet salt when her gaze hit the bed.

Her keepsake box sat in the middle of the mattress. Open. With a note in her husband's scrawl propped against it.

What on earth?

She glanced around the room for her husband, but of course, he wasn't there. Why would he leave a note if he were? Then again, why would he send for her if he wasn't going to be here? Alvin was nothing if not sensible, yet nothing about this situation made a lick of sense.

Knees feeling a tad wobbly, Mabel lowered herself to the edge of the bed and reached for the note.

***Wear this ribbon in your hair and
come find me in the place I first
kissed you.***



Stunned, Mabel lifted her gaze from the note to the box and found a green ribbon dangling over the edge. She reached for it, threading the tattered satin through her fingers. The green. Not the blue one she'd worn when she'd been baptized. Or the red one she'd kept from her mama's collection after the dear lady passed away. He'd chosen the green one.

Did he actually remember what she'd been wearing that day? The day he'd chased her behind the schoolhouse, announced she was the girl for him, then kissed her right on the lips before she could say anything in reply? She'd been all of fourteen. He, seventeen. But true to his prediction, they'd married two years later.

THE KEEPSAKE



Mabel raised a hand to her lips, the sweet memory coaxing a smile. "Alvin Cassidy, you old coot," she murmured in wonder. "You do remember."

Feeling like a schoolgirl again, Mabel grabbed the ribbon and hurried over to her dressing table. She reached for her brush, then hesitated at the sight of her gray hair plaited into a braided bun. A sixty-one year-old woman did not go about town with hair down around her shoulders like a girl still in short skirts.

Mabel narrowed her eyes at her reflection and jutted her chin. A woman of one and sixty had lived enough to earn the right to indulge in a few eccentricities. If she wanted

to wear her hair down, by golly, she would. Awash in memories of the young man she'd fallen in love with, she tugged pins free, undid her plaited bun, and pulled the brush through her hair.

Alvin had been a quiet, serious young man. Not the charismatic type to capture a girl's attention. Yet he'd had a kindness about him that had drawn her in. Tall and a bit on the thin, he wasn't particularly handsome, but she'd never forgotten the day she'd first caught him looking at her with manly interest. Mercy, but her stomach had fluttered like a bowl full of butterflies. The attention of a serious man focused solely on one gal was far more tantalizing than any fleeting attention a charmer could offer. She'd never looked at another boy after that day.

Pulling a top section of hair back from her face, Mabel tied it off with the green ribbon then examined herself in the mirror. The wave from her undone braid lent a bit of full-



ness to her thinning hair, and the style reminded her of younger days. She pinched her cheeks as schoolgirl fluttering assaulted her stomach at the thought of rendezvousing with her young man.

As she left the house, excitement bubbled through her, making her steps quick and her grin wide. She earned several odd glances and

curious greetings as she bustled down the road to the old schoolhouse, but she never slowed, A fall breeze sifted through her hair and cooled her blushing cheeks as she

entered the schoolyard, empty on a Saturday. Upon reaching the schoolhouse, nerves took hold and slowed her pace. She paused at the corner of the building, smoothed her bodice, and pressed a flat palm to her rioting belly.



Alvin waited on the other side of that wall. Her Alvin. The man she loved with all her heart. The man who apparently had a bit of romance in his old soul, after all. Now was not the time for hesitation. A gesture like this didn't come around every day. And if she ended up looking the fool—well, it was worth the risk.

Slowly, she rounded the corner and spied her husband, dressed in his

Sunday suit, hands in his pockets, feet kicking at the bricks at the base of the wall.

"Alvin?" she ventured.

He turned. Straightened. And smiled just as he had that day more than four decades ago. The years faded away, as he strode toward her. She didn't see wrinkled skin or gray hair. She saw a boy of seventeen, young and virile as he reached for her hand.

"You came." He smiled at her as if she'd just given him the greatest gift he could imagine. And that's when she knew. He loved her as much today as he had back then. Treasured her above all others. Found joy simply in being with her. The realization humbled her. Melted her heart. And made her appreciate the man she married, the one she had



*Come find me in
the place I first
kissed you.*

taken for granted far too often over the last forty-five years.

"Of course, I came," she said, emotion thickening her voice. His gaze flicked to her hair, and his smile changed to something almost . . . roguish. His arm twined about her waist and clutched her close to his chest. She tipped her head back to keep his face in view.

"Mabel Cassidy," he said, his voice rough and gravelly, yet the heated look in his eyes made it roll over her like warm butter. "You're still the gal for me."

Then he kissed her. Only this was no hurried peck like the one bestowed by a seventeen-year-old boy. No this was the

kiss of a man who'd had four and a half decades of practice. A man who knew how to take his time and savor a moment so that his woman could attach new memories to the ribbon that would go back into the keepsake box. Memories of a lifelong love with the man who'd been her partner, her rock, her best friend.

A bit unsteady on her feet when the kiss ended, Mabel reached for his arm. Alvin patted her hand into place then gestured toward the road. "Take a walk with me?"

Not quite trusting herself to form a coherent sentence, Mabel opted for a nod then happily strolled at her husband's side. He didn't say a word, but he didn't have to. Silence lay comfortably upon them. When he turned off the road, however, and led her in the direction of the giant oak that had become the stuff of local romantic legend, she finally found her voice.

"The Kissing Tree?" Young people went there. Courting couples. Not those plagued with bursitis and bunions.

"Why not?" Alvin gave her a look that dared her to object. "Don't see why the kids should have all the fun."

The man was full of surprises today. Mabel grinned. "Lead on, Mr. Cassidy."

He did. And more than that, he carved their initials into the Kissing Tree with all the skill of a master whittler. She used to fuss at him for leaving shavings all over the porch. Now she admired his skill with deep appreciation.

As they stood beneath the sweeping branches of that mighty oak, Mabel couldn't help but think of how well the tree represented their love. It had started small but found fertile soil to put down roots. It grew over the years,



weathered storms, and sheltered others beneath its branches. And now this tree would carry the legacy of their love into future generations.

"I love you, Mabel." Alvin's quiet words brought a tear to her eye.

"I love you, too." She squeezed his arm and laid her head against his shoulder.

He kissed the top of her head then reached above them to slice off an oak leaf with his knife.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Fetching you a new keepsake for that box of yours." He handed her the leaf.

She held it to her bosom, her heart bursting at the seams with love for this man. "You're my greatest keepsake, Alvin Cassidy. I'm never giving you up."

"That's good," he said with a wink. "'Cause I plan to pester you for at least another twenty years."

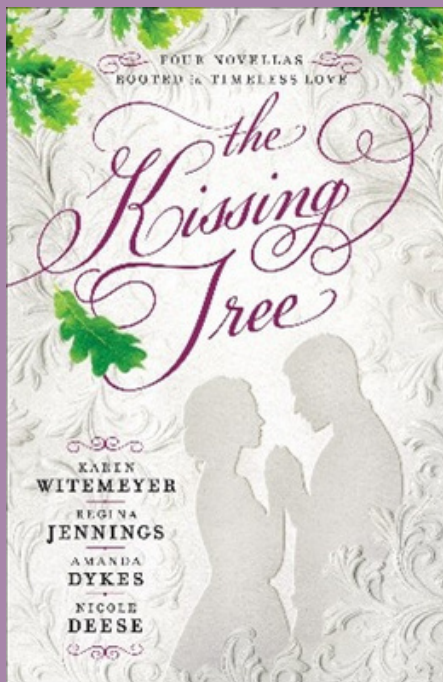
"Better make it thirty," she said, her voice saucy.

"I'll do my best, Miss Mabel."

Which suited her just fine, because Alvin Cassidy's best was fine, indeed.

I hope you enjoyed this tale from the Kissing Tree. Be sure to watch for Alvin and Mabel's cameo appearance in *Inn for a Surprise!*

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Blessings,
~Karen Witemeyer



The Kissing Tree

by
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October 13th