



The Secret of the Banyan Tree

Nguyen Phung



The vibrant village was split down the middle by a wobbly, exaggerated barbed-wire fence, separating the Phan family's bright blue house from the Trinh family's cheerful yellow one. Young Nam from the Phan side and sweet An from the Trinh side often peeked through the wires, their hearts heavy with the ancient, silly feud that kept them apart. The air crackled with unspoken longing, a stark contrast to the colorful flowers blooming stubbornly along the hostile barrier.



Under the colossal, ancient banyan tree, whose roots twisted like sleepy giants, Nam and An met secretly each midnight. Its gnarled branches, draped with glowing fireflies, provided the perfect shadowy canopy for their forbidden rendezvous. They exchanged knowing glances and shared quiet whispers, their faces illuminated by the soft moonlight.



Their secret language was simple yet profound: tiny, fragrant sachets filled with calming herbs for restless nights, and carefully folded handwritten notes tucked into the crevices of the tree's bark. Each note was a tiny burst of hope and affection, a testament to their unwavering connection amidst the village's deep-seated division.



One particularly still night, as Nam and An held hands, a faint, unsettling scratching sound echoed from deep within the earth beneath their very feet. Their eyes widened like saucers, their playful smiles fading into expressions of bewildered curiosity. The ancient banyan tree seemed to hold its breath, waiting.



Suddenly, a gnarled, shadowy hand, dry and grey like old bark, slowly clawed its way out from beneath a pile of decaying leaves. It reached out with surprising speed, its bony fingers curling tightly around An's ankle. Both children gasped, their cheerful faces contorting into cartoonish masks of pure shock and terror.



With a surge of courage, Nam pulled An free, revealing not a ghost, but a cleverly disguised trapdoor hidden beneath the leaves. A faint clinking sound drifted from the dark opening, hinting at something more substantial than a mere spirit. A shiver of realization, both chilling and intriguing, ran down their spines.



Peering into the gloomy underground cellar, Nam discovered his own grandfather, looking disheveled and bewildered, but unmistakably alive, his leg bound by a heavy chain. A wave of shock and understanding washed over Nam, as he realized the family's "secret incense formula" was tied to this hidden, tragic truth.



Determined to right the wrongs, Nam, with An bravely by his side, found a sturdy rock and with mighty swings, shattered the old chain. The grandfather, blinking in the dim light, slowly began to stir, a glimmer of recognition sparking in his eyes as he took his first free breath in years. It was a powerful moment of liberation.



Hand in hand, with the now-free grandfather walking cautiously beside them, Nam and An bravely approached their bewildered families. The sight of the long-lost patriarch, combined with the children's earnest pleas, brought a stunned silence, then a flurry of confused whispers from the assembled relatives. It was time for the truth.



In a heartwarming display of unity, the barbed-wire fence was finally taken down, replaced by a vibrant garden of shared flowers and laughter. The two families, now one, gathered around a large table, sharing delicious food and happy stories, with the once-chained grandfather smiling peacefully among them. The ancient feud was over, replaced by a joyful, unbreakable bond.