

THE
HAUNTED FOREST
TOUR

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- PROLOGUE -

Mike Fradella had finished off three beers after work, which didn't seem like quite enough to make him hallucinate the pine tree growing through his front porch. In the desert town of Cromay, New Mexico, he wouldn't have expected to see a ten-foot-tall pine tree growing *anywhere*, much less right next to his porch swing.

He got out of his car and stared at the tree for a long moment. It didn't go away.

This had to be a prank. Mike was pretty sure none of his buddies had done it, since their style of humor was more the "pull my finger" variety than anything this elaborate. It was also destructive—they hadn't merely placed the tree on his porch, they'd pried up some of the boards to make it look like the tree had sprouted right through the wood.

Kids, maybe?

They'd never really been a problem before, except for the mouth on Agatha Donald's son. Mike wouldn't mind seeing that little brat get his mouth washed out with sandpaper-wrapped soap, that was for sure. But Agatha's son was only six and unlikely to have engineered this particular project, and an out-of-the-way place like Cromay didn't see many visitors, especially where Mike lived, five miles out of town and a half-mile from the nearest neighbor. Still, *somebody* had done it.

Mike walked up the steps. The punks had gone to an enormous amount of trouble, because it really did look like a tree had just grown right through his porch. He'd been at work all day, and then the bar for another hour, so the pranksters would've had time to pull off something like this, but why? Why wreck his front porch for a joke, and then not even hang around to see his reaction?

Or was he being secretly filmed for one of those dumb-ass reality shows? *Extreme Makeover: Destruction Edition*.

He sure hoped his homeowner's insurance would cover this kind of thing.

Mike ran his hand along the tree trunk. It was definitely real.

He went inside and called the sheriff.

* * *

"That's very...odd," said Sheriff Nelson.

"I know! Who do you think did it? Crackheads?"

Sheriff Nelson shook his head and scratched at the gray stubble on his chin. "Crackheads would've left the job half-finished. And this is too elaborate to be the work of kids, even college kids from out of town. I feel a bit silly asking you this, Mike, but is it possible that you hired professionals to plant a tree in your front yard and just miscommunicated the location?"

"No, it's not possible! What kind of idiot do you think I am?"

"Don't take offense. Like I said, I felt silly even asking, but we both would've felt sillier if that turned out to be the case. You have to admit, there aren't a lot of logical motives for this kind of vandalism." Sheriff Nelson crouched down on the porch, turned on his flashlight, and shone it down into the gap. "I'll be damned."

"What?"

"Take a look."

Mike crouched down next to Sheriff Nelson. The sheriff moved the flashlight beam in a small circle. "See those roots? This wasn't recently planted."

"Well, it sure wasn't here this morning!"

Sheriff Nelson stood up and dusted off his knees. "Mike, I feel kind of silly asking you this question as well, but you wouldn't happen to be trying to pull one over on me, would you?"

"Of course not!"

"I didn't think so. Again, I felt foolish even asking, but a professional has to cover all of his bases. I don't know. The best theory I've got is that this here tree grew right through your front porch."

"In ten hours?"

The sheriff nodded. "It's an acceleration from the norm, that's for

sure."

"It's a freak show! I mean, what kind of tree grows that fast? What kind of pine tree grows right through somebody's front porch out here in the desert?"

Sheriff Nelson shrugged. "I may have to call in a botanist for this one."

"Botanist? Call a magician! This is insane, Sheriff! The insurance company will never believe that some radioactive mutant tree broke my porch. Even if this thing were a cactus it wouldn't make sense. I'm gonna be doing overtime for the next three months to pay for this!"

"Now, now, don't worry about the insurance company. I'll file a full report. Their claim investigator won't be able to argue with the evidence right in front of them..." He trailed off, staring into the distance.

"What?"

"Was that tree there before?"

Mike looked where the sheriff was pointing. About five hundred feet away, in the open desert, was another pine tree. This one was about twice the height of the one protruding from his porch.

"No," he said.

"Then it's very peculiar."

"Maybe it was there and I just didn't notice."

"Now, Mike, neither one of us is prone to being an idiot, and I think it's safe to say that we're both observant enough that at least one of us would have noticed it," said Sheriff Nelson. "I'm definitely going to get an expert out here. Don't they have a lot of pines in New Jersey?"

"Sheriff!" Mike frantically pointed at a spot in the middle of the dirt road. A thick tree trunk burst from the ground, sprouting branches as it grew. Mike and Sheriff Nelson stood there and gaped as the tree rose fifty feet high within thirty seconds.

"I...I'm dropping the prank theory," Mike said.

Two more trees popped up in the distance. Sheriff Nelson grabbed his walkie-talkie and pushed the button on the side. "Francine? You there?"

The sound of splintering wood, breaking glass, and a large object being overturned made Mike flinch. A moment later, a tree burst through the top of his house, stretching past the roof high into the air.

"Francine, I need you *now!*" Sheriff Nelson shouted into the walkie-talkie.

It's Armageddon, thought Mike. End of the world and that kind of stuff.

The front of Mike's car began to rise. As he and the sheriff watched helplessly, it rose almost completely upright and then toppled over onto its side.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Sheriff Nelson shouted. He and Mike sprinted over to the sheriff's vehicle as a second tree burst through Mike's front porch, taking the swing with it. Mike threw open the passenger-side door and got inside the car, slamming the door shut behind him. He instinctively reached for the seatbelt, then immediately decided that he very well might need to leap from the vehicle at some point.

Sheriff Nelson thrust the key into the ignition and started the engine. Mike cried out in surprise as a tree appeared right next to his window, the branches scraping across the glass as they rose. As more and more trees sprouted from the ground, they sped out of the driveway and down the road.

"Sheriff, what's going on?" Mike wailed.

"I couldn't explain the one piddly little tree on your porch! What makes you think I can explain this?" Sheriff Nelson swerved to avoid a tree that burst through the center of the road.

They raced the five miles into town, with Mike clenching his teeth so tightly that he thought they might explode into white powder. Trees continued to pop out of the ground on all sides of them, and Mike's heart gave a jolt as one scraped the rear bumper.

Finally they made it to Main Street, the only paved road in Cromay. It was pure chaos. People screamed and ran for non-existent safety as tree after tree appeared, breaking through shops and homes.

If this wasn't literally the end of the world, it was pretty damn

close.

Seventy-eight-year-old Mrs. Tunstall pushed her husband, who'd been confined to a wheelchair six years ago, at a full sprint, a sight which would have been comical under other circumstances. The tip of a tree caught the wheelchair under the front wheel, abruptly jerking it upward. Mrs. Tunstall wailed as the handles popped out of her grasp, with Mr. Tunstall clutching the sides for dear life to avoid tumbling out. He managed to hold on until he was about five stories high, and then he slipped out of the wheelchair, bellowing as he plummeted onto the sidewalk in front of his wife.

Mike winced, slammed his fist over his mouth, and turned away. The sight on the other side was no better, as Hugh the video store clerk dropped from the air onto the copper statue of John Cromay, the town's founder.

"Sheriff! Thank God!" cried Craig Zebsmith, who'd been one of Mike's drinking partners after work. Sheriff Nelson rolled down his window as Craig rushed over to the car. "You've gotta get me out of here! You've gotta—"

A tree popped up right in front of Craig, catching him under the jaw and snapping his head backward in a mist of blood. The rising tree quickly hid the rest of the grisly sight.

"There's gotta be someplace we can get these people that's safe!" Sheriff Nelson said. "These trees can't break through *everything*, can they?"

The copper statue toppled over, landing on top of Video Store Hugh's mangled body.

"Let's just get out of here!" Mike insisted.

Sheriff Nelson looked as if he wanted to make some sort of heroic, selfless statement...but then he slammed on the accelerator and they sped down the street. Mike watched in horror as a tree burst through a pump at the gas station, spraying fuel everywhere.

"Aw...crap!" Sheriff Nelson slammed on the brakes as a pair of trees broke through the pavement directly in front of them, blocking the road. He put the car into reverse and looked back over his shoulder as they rocketed backwards—

"Watch out!"

—smacking into a man who ran out into the road behind them. He disappeared behind the vehicle too quickly for Mike to see who it was. Sheriff Nelson slammed on the brakes again.

"Don't stop!"

"I'm not going to just leave him there!"

"Pretty soon there won't be any road left!"

A tree popped up underneath the sheriff's car, knocking it onto its side. Safety glass from the windshield sprayed over both of them, and Mike dropped onto Sheriff Nelson with a loud grunt. The sheriff cried out in pain.

We're dead, we're so dead, Mike thought as he scrambled through the front windshield. He shook the glass off his hands and reached back inside for the sheriff.

"You broke my damn arm!" Sheriff Nelson shouted.

"C'mon, c'mon, let's go!" Mike grabbed the sheriff's good arm and tried to pull him to safety.

A tree came through the ground directly beneath the sheriff, bursting right through his chest. Mike screamed and frantically scooted away as the expanding tree ripped the car in half.

Mike got to his feet, stumbled a bit, and blindly ran down the street, barely even noticing as some branches slashed across his cheek. This was *not* the way he'd planned to die. He hadn't exactly given a lot of thought to the ways he might want to perish, but killer trees were definitely not on the list.

"Mike!"

He spun around. It was Jo-Anne Sanes, vigorously waving to him from the doorway of Jo-Anne's Sweets, her candy shop. Mike wasn't a big candy eater, but he and Jo-Anne were both divorced and he stopped by every once in a while for some harmless flirting. She stepped out of the way as he rushed inside, colliding with the gumball machine and sending it crashing to the floor. Multi-colored gumballs rolled everywhere.

"We won't be safe here," he blurted out as she pulled the glass door closed.

"We might be. Those things can't cover the entire town, can they?"

"I don't know. They seem to be doing a pretty good job."

The glass front of the store shattered as something exploded. It sounded like it came from the gas station.

Mike took Jo-Anne's hand. "We should run for it."

"No," she said, pulling away. "We need to hunker down someplace safe! This'll all stop, I know it!"

A tree burst through the floor of the shop, displacing an entire shelf of candy jars. A second tree followed almost immediately after, popping up directly beneath Jo-Ann and lifting her to the ceiling.

The tree easily broke through the roof. Jo-Ann did not. Her body hit the floor, landing on broken glass, Atomic Fireballs, and sour gummi worms.

Mike ran out of the shop, barely able to breathe. The trees were almost forest-thick now, and the shrieks of Cromay residents were like rusty nails through his eardrums.

A rising tree tore across his back. He stumbled forward into another one. Branches sprouted beneath his feet, lifting him up, and he instinctively hugged the tree as tightly as he could.

He quickly rose into the air. More branches sprouted from the tree, slashing across his arms and legs. One branch ripped right through his left forearm, and he could do nothing but close his eyes and scream as he went up and up and up...

Finally, the ride stopped. He waited for a moment, completely unmoving, and then forced himself to open his eyes.

From this vantage point, hundreds of feet in the air, he could see trees rising for miles. There was an end to it, though—they seemed to be forming a perfect circle.

The top branches wobbled in the wind, and he held on more tightly.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes again, and wrenched his arm free. His scream of agony echoed across the brand-new forest.

The branch beneath his feet seemed to be relatively sturdy, so he manipulated himself into a position where he could apply pressure to his injured arm while still holding on. As long as he didn't bleed to death, he could stay up here until they sent a helicopter or something. A forest sprouting up in the middle of the desert would

certainly attract quick attention, right?

He was starting to feel light-headed already. Hopefully it was just from being up so high and not from blood loss.

Be strong...you've gotta be strong. Wait this out and you'll be okay, and you'll have one hell of a story to tell on the talk shows. Movie deal, book deal, merchandising...you'll be rich. Just wait it out. Don't bleed to death.

The branches beneath him rustled.

A clawed hand wrapped around his ankle.

Mike screamed for the last time as he was pulled off his perch.