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Our Hope Chest

AUSTEN TUCKER

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COLOPHON

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by Austen Tucker



Heather

Come to think of it, Xander was the one who found the hope chest.

We were hiding in the back of my bedroom closet, behind the winter coats and old church clothes nobody wore anymore. Mom and Dad barely used the space, but the previous owners had left junk on the shelves and forgotten it. We only shoved ourselves back there because the clothes muffled Mom and Dad's arguments downstairs. It was credit cards that night, I think. You hear the first argument through the vents and you're terrified. After a while, you just want it to stop.

Xander found the false wall because he couldn't sit still. "Heather!" he screamed at me. I shot him an evil glare and put a finger to my lips. We had never tested what our parents could or could not hear from back there, but he was too excited to keep calm. First he clawed, then kicked, and finally pulled an iron fire poker from one of the storage boxes and jabbed straight through to a tiny cubbyhole barely big enough for the chest.

We tried to pull the chest out, but it was just too heavy for two pipsqueak kids to handle. So we chipped away more of the flimsy false wall until we could slip inside, together, and dig through our hope chest. The stain was weathered down to bare, gray wood on the top, and the corners had been chipped by one too many moves, and despite the chill in that attic the chest was warm to the touch. Honest. Maybe I'd

been reading too many pretty-princess stories, but I can tell you this: from the moment we laid eyes on that thing we knew it was magic. Magic.

Downstairs, the argument reached up through the insulation, took our ears, and yanked. Hard. Glass shattered. Feet pounded baseboards. Doors slammed. Two days later they sat us down for the last family meeting. Mommy and Daddy won't live together anymore; here's your new schedule, new families, new responsibilities. You know the drill. It wasn't a great night. But there, with the chest and the costumes under our greedy little fingers, we were enchanted.

Our noses filled with mothballs. We coughed and choked for a while, patted down our pajamas, and fanned the air. Inside were costumes: Zoot suits, sundresses, fedoras, bonnets, animal ears, tails. Xander wanted to give up then and there; he never liked to play make-believe. But we dug deeper anyway.

We settled on the animal costumes after we'd emptied the chest. There were hoods and there were headbands and there were tails meant to go on belts and tails meant to clip to dresses and... well... everything in between really. The thing was full of costumes and props.

"Can't believe they hid this," Xander said. He was fingering a pair of fox ears in one hand, a tail in the other. Then he tossed them both back into the chest. "So we've got clothes and fake ears. Big deal. I should have brought a board game or something."

But I could feel the magic hanging off those costumes. Maybe it was because I was still a little girl obsessed with pretty princess fantasies. Maybe it was the sound of Mom and Dad screaming downstairs keeping us frozen in place. But the chest was magic and I wasn't about to let it go that easily.

I picked up a pair of bunny ears. They were white and had ribbons tied around the tips. I had a thing for bows back then. So I picked up these ears and played with the headband, reveling in the warm sensation that reached all the way into bones. "They're cute," I said. Then I started rooting through the dresses to find something that would match.

"Come on," he said. "They're stupid. Where's the secret? I made ears like this in school last week. Big whoop!" Xander stomped his foot in consternation. "Come on, Heather. I'll go get a game or something."

"Not yet," I told him. Sure enough, there was a nice red sundress in the clothing pile. It matched perfectly. "Let's at least play around a bit. I mean, it *was* hidden."

He shuffled his feet. "Yeah."

"And I'm the big sister, so I get to make the decision. And right now I need a model."

"What?"

Before he could protest I threw the bow-riddled bunny ears onto his head and then... well, you already know what happened from there. I just figured it'd be best to explain

how this whole song-and-dance started if you're going to put this on cable.

• • •

Xander

Whatever Heather told you about Coney Beach, don't believe her. It all started on a dare—

Oh. She told you about the first time? Huh. That's not like her. I swear to God I don't remember anything about it. Things just got foggy when I turned into a bunny. One second I'm an eight-year-old kid hiding from an argument downstairs, the next I'm this bunny girl who really had no good reason to exist. And I mean full-out, fur coat and button-nosed bunny; like, reach-into-the-TV-and-pull-out-a-cartoon-character rabbit. You can't fault me for being dazed.

And yes, before you ask she had me play dress up and walk around in these oversized Mary Janes we found at the bottom of the chest. I'm not ashamed of that. The rules changed once we found those costumes. Why be limited when there's magic? Sometimes we were sisters. Sometimes we were brothers. Sometimes we switched before dinner and never talked about it again. It was private, mostly. That was just how we were.

Let's see... anything else from that time, you say? Truth be told it's all hazy to me. I mean, I remember things, sure. Disconnected flashbulbs of moments. Vacations to different states, school assemblies, new family members I was sup-

posed to love after seeing them one time. The only other event that sticks out is the night we packed up the chest. We carefully slid the ears and tails into boxes of toys and insisted that we unpack them ourselves. Then we'd hide the ears in attics, in plastic bags in the woods, everywhere our parents couldn't find them.

I can tell you every hiding spot we used for the costumes, but ask me details about my tenth birthday and I've got nothing. I had to celebrate it twice, I think. That was back when my parents were competing for "best family."

We had a whole chest full of other selves and pretend worlds to escape into: stalking cats in the forest, playful dogs at home, silent foxes in the city, bunnies that picked wildflowers on spring evenings. (There's a story behind that one, 'course, but you'll have to drag it from Heather.)

It's just weird. I know that time existed. It's *there* like some lump in my throat, but I can't say it out loud. You'd think having access to magical artifacts would lend me some fantastic memories, but all that's there are the Big Moments we're talking about here.

Which brings me back to Coney Beach, actually. What a horrible, horrible idea *that* was!

To start with, Coney Beach happened long after the family's dust had settled. Things were stable, if not uneasy. (Things are always uneasy when you call two houses home.) We'd been costuming for a good eight years by that time. God. Eight years. We'd moved to a bigger apartment years

back, so Jake and our stepmother Claire could move in. The only reason we brought him along is that we felt sorry for him, sitting home while we took off for the weekend. Heather insisted, even though I said no way. He made me uncomfortable. He had a way of looking abandoned that made adults soften and children check their pockets.

Don't tell Heather that, though. She'd never let me live it down.

• • •

Heather

We spent our last week as a family holed up in that attic, breathing R-49 flavored air, careful to be present from time to time so Mom and Dad didn't think we had run off. They didn't seem to notice anyway. Too many lawyers, contracts, and negotiations for that to register our absence.

The second week after the hope chest I remember crying a lot. We sat on dusty boxes in the attic and made small talk about what kind of people lived in the house before us. Witches, maybe. Or perhaps there was some secret society that dealt in magic items. We tried on every costume and tried to play make-believe but neither of us were feeling it.

Downstairs our parents were quiet. Too quiet. Mom cried a lot and Dad flipped through papers. It was nice not to hear a shouting match for once. We felt like we were dying. Xander and I discussed secret little plans to stay together, just in case Dad moved across country or something. Eight

years old, and planning on our survival. Weird to think about now.

One minute stretched into five, into ten, into thirty. We sat on boxes and looked at each other, trying our best not to cry.

“We can’t tell anybody,” Xander said. He pointed to the ears in the chest. “They’ll take it away for experiments.”

“I know.” So we made plans to pack up the hope chest. Every night we’d try on a new outfit; if it wasn’t magic it stayed in the chest, and if it was magic we’d stuff it into a dollhouse, an old binder, sock drawers, you name it.

Dad sold the house within the month, and we had our own portable magic show spread between two houses. Every time I think about the place, my mind goes right back to that attic and the chipped false wall, costumes littering insulation rolls like dirty laundry.

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Xander

I don’t know why we thought costuming in public was a good idea.

We’d taken the costumes out on vacation before: mostly on the beaches, since it meant we could use the swim goggles that turned us into dolphins. Sure, we got caught a few times coming in and out of the water, but there were so many people around that by the time someone noticed we could duck

into a wave and disappear. What Heather had planned was something different entirely: a public performance.

I don't know why I said yes. Maybe I missed doing it. Maybe I just wanted to be caught.

We packed separately, drove separately, and arrived separately. Not that Coney Beach was that far off (we only lived a half-hour away), but we didn't want to set off any alarm bells. Animal ears aren't exactly standard fare at a park like that, after all.

Jake was there too. I remember he had the camera. That was supposed to be his job: take pictures, hold our stuff. Nothing more. Honest. He kept wandering off to make calls, and I figured he was just bored.

So we found some locker rooms, changed, and paraded around the midway. I was a cat. She was a rabbit. In the noontime sun our fur shimmered; cameras clicked and whirled around us and we posed, smiling, holding up peace signs and putting our arms around strangers.

"This is what these costumes were made for," she told me. In our peripheral vision loomed security personnel and an ever-growing group of photographers. We were putting on a better show than their mascots and they knew it.

What were they going to do, though? We hadn't broken any rules. Sure, we were bending the rules of reality, but what could they do about that? Heck, even when the tabloid photographers started crowding in for questions they could only do so much to stop them.

Then the crowd started getting grabby, and things really went to pot.

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Heather

Xander and I costumed every day for the first year. Even if it was only for a few minutes while our parents had private talks in the bedroom, or for an hour while they met with the marriage counselor, or for an entire day in the local woods when they met with lawyers, we costumed. What would you have done? I'm sure Mom and Dad would've loved to hear that their children were using some strange magical talisman they found in a hidden hope chest. Would have gone over swimmingly.

No thank you; we kept the costumes a secret. When Mom asked us to relay messages to Dad, we had the costumes. When Dad bartered our time with him for support payments, we had the costumes. When the vitriol flew and the "favorites" game started, we had those costumes.

And furthermore. Oh yes, the wildflower story. He told you about that? I'm kind of surprised, really. It's not one we talk about anymore. But hey, if he's willing, I'm willing. Fast forward a few years. I think we were both in middle school, then. Yes, definitely; it was after Dad and Claire hooked up. Claire had this huge house and massive mortgage on a forest plot behind a farm. So we'd go over there every other week-

end, our costumes in tow, and we'd go out in the forest to play.

Well, Claire had a son named Jake. Our stepbrother, at least in spirit. It was hard to feel emotional attachment when you see someone four days out of a month. So they did their best to include Jake, Xander, and I as a whole family unit, but you know how it goes. Xander and I always had an excuse. We didn't know him at all; how could we trust him with our prized possession? So we'd slip into the forest and leave Jake behind. Worked for us quite well, most times.

Well, one morning we went out to pick honeysuckle. I remember that part well because I loved picking honeysuckle and Xander was really sweet to play ball. We had played "freedom fighter" the last time we were out there (foxes and hedgehogs and all that war-game rot), and he was okay with going out dressed up as a bunnygirl to pick flowers. So we took bunny-ears and pink ribbons and adorable little dresses deep into the woods, changed, and went bunny-hopping along the tree line. Sure, it was a little babyish for us, but I had a thing for the simple things back then. Something comforting about it, you know? He got to play a pretend war with the brother he never had, and I got to explore the forest with the sister I never had. We didn't think about whether or not it was age-appropriate. That's just how we worked.

With the bunny ears you'd have thought we could have heard Jake coming. Not a chance. We were too busy giggling and having a good time to notice, you know? We were laugh-

ing and cooing at squirrels in trees and generally trying to pretend that nothing was wrong.

But sure enough we came to a bend in some deer run and there he was, jaw agape, a pair of mouse ears clutched in his sweaty fingers. We almost ran into him, we were that clueless. But when he saw us both there he let out a yelp that sent both Xander and I diving for cover. “What are you doing, Heather?” he asked. “Who is your friend? And why didn’t you invite me?”

• • •

Xander

It was fun at first. Then people got grabby. Hands grabbing at our ears. Parents grabbing their wallets and throwing out crazy numbers. Kids (dozens and dozens of kids) surrounding us. Walking was like wading through a swamp, and it was all we could do to find an opening and bolt.

But as we ran through the park, our hands intertwined, I kept thinking about all the moments I forgot. Her steps were wild and erratic, big bunny feet long removed from two-leg travel. Kids kept grabbing at my tail, pulling and tugging, and it was all I could do to keep our bodies from falling into the swirling torrent following our paces. Maybe, deep down, I *wanted* to forget all that stuff. All those awkward moments and screwed-up relationships. Maybe I wanted to go out with a bang.

Think of all the wonderful things we *could* have done: written books, picked up instruments, learned to get past... well... Mom and Dad, for starters. Instead we dug through the same costumes, day in, day out. Dancing for each other but never, ever getting out of our shells. Funny how that works, eh?

At every turn we found people waiting, endless crowds of people with fingers on shutters, hands outstretched to touch our ears, voices cooing with astonishment. We ducked through overpriced shops, dipped through hedgerows plastered with advertisements, plowed through families out to have a nice time. We were the center of attention for the first time, and we weren't doing too well with it.

Then it all stopped. The cameras turned away from us. The crowd fell to silence, jaws agape, every face pointed the same way. We could have run. We could have disappeared and kept our secret to ourselves. But we couldn't bring ourselves to do it.

Because Jake was already there, and the national news crew was his doing, not the crowd's. A pair of mouse ears twirled around his left hand. We watched as he raised them high above his head, lowered them over his hair, and became an overnight star.

• • •

Heather

“It’s magic,” I explained. Xander stayed quiet. “We found it in our old house. Sorry for keeping a secret.”

“So I just put them on?”

“Well. Hey!” And I tried to stop him. I really did! But he put the ears on faster than I could react and before I knew it we had a real mess on our hands.

All Xander had to do was zip his lip. Hell, he could have even said he was Honey (that was his name when we went out honeysuckle-hunting, after all), but he stepped up. “It’s me,” he said. “I lost the toss this week. We played ‘freedom fighters’ last time, and she wanted to pick flowers.”

A pause. Then Jake started laughing. “You?” he screamed. His fingers ran along the hem of Xander’s dress. “But you’re... you’re a girl!”

He looked at a root twisting under his paw. “Yeah. She was a boy last time. We trade off.”

“You’re a *girl*!”

Tears started to well in his bunny-girl eyes. God. I had never seen him cry.

“Seriously, what happened?” He squeaked a bit to himself. “Did you lose a bet?”

And that’s when Xander stormed off. He threw the ears into a bush and went sprinting back to our hiding place, all tears and sobs, with the hem of his dress catching branches all the way to where we stashed the duffel. Jake kept on laughing louder and louder. I don’t know why Xander even

mentioned this one to you. Look at me; bawling all over again. Hand me a tissue.

I mean, Xander was too *embarrassed* to costume again. In a week he was into football; in a month he was hanging around new friends, playing new games, talking new lingo. We split the pile of costumes in two and that was that. Whenever I brought up the topic he'd have something to do. Even when we went camping, and had an entire nature reserve to ourselves, his costumes were back at home, zipped into the lining of his bed.

Point of fact, we didn't costume together again until Coney Beach. Sure, I caught glimpses of him playing as a fox in his room, or rooting around as a raccoon in the basement, or digging in the forest like a bunny, but whenever I wanted to do something together with him he was suddenly too busy to care.

I was around family for most of my high school career, on one side or another. Yet without that hope chest's treasure to keep Xander and I together I started feeling very, very lonely. Mom was always busy working, Dad had Claire. Jake was there, and Jake was kind. Why *not* let him in?

So I told Jake the rest of it. Everything he hadn't already pieced together from that morning in the woods. The years of hiding, all of it. He didn't ask to put the ears on. He asked how many people knew. Just don't tell Xander, okay? Please? He hates me enough already. If he knew Jake want-

ed to become famous; if he knew just how it was all supposed to happen...

You just can't tell him. Mom already hates me and Dad's too busy with Jake's PR and handlers to care. We had the costumes, sure, but that's all over now, and he's all I got left. God. I don't know what I'd do, you know?

• • •

Xander

The longer we stood there, the thicker the crowd became. The big names were all there: professional photographers, news cameras, children laughing and pointing, children staring with wide-eyed wonder, college kids flashing me rock-on signs with the hand not wrapped around a beer. But Jake kept preening and I kept looking for an exit through a crowd that grew thicker and thicker with each passing moment. I'm sure we pegged the Nielsens for y'all.

Goddamn. Don't ever get divorced like that. Don't turn your children into luggage and act surprised when they learn how to disappear. Trust me on that one. Because you'll ask them if they're okay and they'll say okay even if they're swirling in a magical fantasy-world, afraid to breathe for fear of being discovered... I got off topic, didn't I? Right.

So we were standing there and the cameras were flashing all around us. I tried to yell over the din and explain the cat ears and twitching nose away as great prosthetics, but they

just kept screaming and clamoring while the security staff closed in around us.

Jake posed and smiled, preened and squeaked. Heather and I hugged. She cried. And that's the time I saw the kid.

We discovered, later, that the boy's name was Tim. Not that you could use that in your piece, minor and all that, but I wanted you to know his name. So Tim was at the park with his father, a single part of some larger touring unit, complete with matching ball caps and school T-shirts. Sure, most of the kids turned to Jake when he started his little show, screaming and clamoring and tugging on their parents' arms with incessant screams of "I want one!", but Tim kept his eyes trained on us. In his mouth quivered envy, wonder, confusion.

The crazy thing was that I *knew*. Like that chill you get when someone walks over your grave, you know? The father's shirt was too wrinkled, his attention too insincere, a man trying to outshine his wife in his son's eyes. Tim didn't care; he just looked for something, anything, outside of himself. I knew the look. A thousand memories flashed through my head. Some hurt. Some had dulled over time. But I saw Tim, and he saw me. I couldn't stop myself.

Nobody said a word when I walked over to him. Even Heather, bent out of shape as she was, released her embrace when I pushed away. I pulled off the ears, shifted back to a human, and took a knee right in front of him, man to man, and shook his hand.

“I bet it’s hard,” I said to him. Now that I was closer the eyes said it all. The shock. The trauma.

“I just want to play pretend.”

“Don’t let anybody tell you it’s stupid to want to be happy,” I told him. Then I put the ears on his head and watched the change gloss over his body.

The boy, flabbergasted, batted at his ears and played with his tail. Then I stood up and rejoined Heather, who continued to flip her rabbit ears in fear as the cameras flashed and flashed.

And as we stood there, staring at Jake as he posed and posed, one memory came back to my mind. We went to Disney once, Mom and Dad and Heather and I, about two years before the family fell apart. While we were there Mom bought us all Mickey Mouse Ears to wear around the park, cheap ones, all made-in-China molded plastic and all. Everyone else tossed them when they got hot and sweaty. But I wore mine every single goddamn minute we were there, even going so far as to chase them down when a strong wind blew them away. There’s even a picture of me posing in the ears with Mickey Mouse, all smiles, the mouse’s autograph in my little red book.

For that one day, outside the chaos and media buzz and endless interviews Heather, Jake, and I had to give, some little boy got his ears.

I got to be his Mickey Mouse.

Hell. He got to be his Mickey Mouse.

His father, his worried mother, the moving and arguing and shifting of families and homes and friends, all of it went away for a few hours.

I didn't mind losing the costumes after that. Not really. The whole world knows now. Our secret isn't ours anymore, and maybe it never should have been. For eight years I thought getting caught would be the worst thing that could happen.

Turns out, sometimes you hide so long you forget the door opens both ways.

Just don't tell Heather I'm glad it happened, okay?
She'd never let me live it down.



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