

## Always a Woman, Never the Heart

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Trish liked to talk standing straight with her hands tucked away in her front pockets, only taking them out to slap backs and tell jokes. Once when we were alone, we sat with our backs leaning against a large oak and Trish freed my hand away from the security of my own pocket and held it in hers. She circled her thumb around my palm and traced over my tiny lines. I asked if she studied Palmistry. She started at the bottom of the ridge she called my life line and followed it until it crossed with another. She told me that my life and head lines are joined at the beginning and are the longest lines on my hand.

"You have a strong sense of mind, but you let this rule over your body, especially your heart." Her finger landed on a short lonely line at the edge of my hand. "See, this is your heart."

I closed my hand over her fingers and told her it was just a line, they were all just lines.

I reached for Trish's hand, and using my thumb and index, massaged my way through the tiny nooks of her spread fingers, spending extra time at her joints. She told me when she was my age her hands never ached. I told her sometimes age has nothing to do with it. She nodded and looked away, a trace of a smile left on the corner of her mouth. I had the sense that my touch was following her to another place. I massaged deeper and guided her hands to my mouth, let her feel my breath warm against her, fingertips. She inhaled slowly and exhaled twice that long. I stretched my flat hand against hers and compared our sizes. Hers were only slightly larger, yet they seemed stronger, like they had the ability to grab hold of anything they wanted. I had never seen a woman with hands quite like hers; they seemed to bear the burden for the life Trish loved. I could picture Trish in her long sleeve denim, a trail of perspiration receding along her dark slightly exposed collarbone. Her hands were often pinched under gold twine as she hurled another hay bail into the flatbed, only stopping to curse at the men who rested under an isolated tree patch sipping at their coolers, admiring what they could not have. I could see her nails, short and uneven with dirt wedged beneath them digging in the dirt, pulling weed roots, her fingers slender and bent by round, thick knuckles as they broke off stocks of rhubarb.

Sometimes after a day of riding horseback and picking bouquets Trish's hands would smell of a rich flavor of wild flowers and leather, a scent that would hug my nose until it was permanently inscribed into my mind. There were times when she kneaded the pain away from my naked shoulder, and I could feel her dry calluses work through my tissues, yet I felt nothing abrasive. She thought her hands were ugly, but I loved how the curve of my cheekbone fit perfectly into her palm, and how her fingers could smooth any surface, making my back melt and my spine shiver. It was her hands that were the first to peel away an armor that had kept me trapped and hidden beneath it, keeping me from myself and all that I would come to know about who that was. I squinted my eyes and watch the lines on my hand come in and out of focus and I strained until I could see my heart line connect with the others. I showed Trish, and instructed her to do the same, asking her if she could see my lines intertwine. She brushed my cheek with the back of her fingers in a long smooth stroke. "You can keep things out of focus all you want," she told me "but that won't change the truth."