

ANNA'S TREE

By Brandy Woldstad

No one could really own a tree, but Anna claimed this one. She loved to sit on her favorite branch to whittle figurines and take a break from village life.

As she climbed through the canopy of leaves to her favorite branch, she swallowed a scream. A filthy leg dangled from her branch. No one in the ten years she had visited this tree had ever been in it. Ever.

“Hello? Are you okay?” Anna asked.

The owner of the leg leaned over. Anna squinted as bits of bark and dirt landed on her. An old man whose face was layered with dirt leered. Tendrils of his leaf-clumped beard draped over his legs and wrapped around the tree.

“You’re a pretty one,” he said.

Anna shifted. “Who are you?”

The man chuckled. “Your friend.” Wind rustled the leaves.

“I don’t know you.”

The man locked eyes with her. “What do you want to know?”

“Your name and why you’re in my tree.”

The man’s legs slithered out of view. “A name tells you nothing but what to call me. As for your tree. Well, I’ve been here longer than you have.”

Goosebumps prickled Anna’s skin. “What do you want?”

“Ah, a meaningful question. One that tells you more than simply my name.”

Anna grabbed the trunk and lowered her body.

“I want you as my bride.”

“What?” Anna squeaked. She scrambled to the ground.

The man leaped from his branch and landed next to her. His beard tethered to the tree. “Come. There isn’t a reason to be afraid.”

He was right. There wasn’t *a* reason... there were many. Fear propelled her legs until her foot caught on a root and tripped her.

The man touched her hair. “Beautiful, like autumn leaves. We’ll make a great pair. You and me in *our* tree.”

Anna gagged at the rotten smell of the man. “I won’t marry you.”

His raspy chuckle knotted her stomach. “It’s your destiny... Anna.”

“You know my name?”

“I know much about you. You visit my branch every day to think or whittle figurines. And... You’ve claimed me as yours.”

Anna’s heart stopped. “What?”

He moved close enough she felt his breath in her ear. “I’m. Your. Tree.”

Anna gasped. The man grabbed her wrist and pulled. His rough skin scraped hers as she struggled to free herself.

His thin beard slithered around her body and tugged her closer to the tree. Her feet dug into the ground as her struggle for freedom became a tug-o-war. His strength was no match for hers.

Out of desperation she grabbed her pocketknife out of her pocket and opened it with one hand. The man grinned, unaware of the knife. Her body lurched towards him while she sawed at his beard wrapped around her waist.

The hairs cut easily until the last tendril. Its thickness required her to shift from a sawing motion with her knife to a chipping motion. She whittled away at the tendril. The man screamed in pain and lunged.

With a yell of desperation that echoed across the valley, Anna bent the tendril and put all her strength into her final cut. In an instant, the man crumbled to dirt.

A quiet settled around Anna and the tree as she wiped her blade clean. She waited. Unsure of what had just happened. She slipped her knife into her pocket and touched the tree. Nothing happened.

With a deep breath, she grabbed hold of the first branch. The tree stayed still. She grabbed the next branch and climbed her tree.