

## Woodside

by Christie Valentine Powell

Michael Anderson always felt a sense of awe in the woodlot. Maybe it was only the closeness of the trees, restricting his view. Maybe it was the dappled light shining through the leaves, or the cool shade after a long day in the sun. Whatever it was, the forest carried a sense of mystery and magic. Even now, when he was much too old for such thoughts, it called to him, beckoning him to explore its secrets.

A clamor of voices interrupted his thoughts. “A story! A story! Give us a story!”

Michael turned. His cousins had managed to start a fire, and now they clambered around their grandfather. As the youngest cousins danced around him, he put on a stern face that didn't fool any of them. “Oh, I'm too tired tonight.”

The boys all laughed, Michael included. Grandpa Anderson was never too tired. “Come on, Grandpa,” Michael said. “Tell them a story.”

His eyes twinkled. “A story?” he repeated. “Oh, no, boys. I tell no stories. The legends I repeat for you are as real as—as that fire there.”

The youngest boys grinned at each other. Michael edged closer. He knew there were no such things as mysterious wood-beings, but in the half-darkness of twilight, even redundant tales seemed magical.

Michael's cousins Christopher and Justin, who were closer to Michael's age, were rolling their eyes. Grandpa looked over the heads of the younger boys. “Ah ha!” he cried. “Doubters? Well, perhaps I should tell you of my own encounter with the sprites. That should clear things up!”

The smaller boys oohed, and Michael leaned forward. He hadn't heard this one before. His grandpa saw the motion, and winked at him before he began. "This was many years ago, before your parents were born. I was walking along a dirt path. In fact, it was that path right there." He pointed at a trail winding through the trees. The younger boys nudged one another, and Michael had a feeling that the tiny woodlot would be invaded by search parties the next day.

"It wasn't the most direct way home, but it had been a long day at work, and the cool shade felt so good I decided to take that longer route." Again he winked at Michael, who groaned. His arms and legs were still aching from helping his grandfather weed that morning.

"It was just a normal day. Or so I thought. Suddenly I looked up, and right there, up in a tree, I saw the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life."

One of the boys, young Alex, asked, "Prettier than grandma?"

Grandpa chuckled. "All right, the second prettiest woman I had ever seen," he corrected.

"What did the girl look like?" Alex's brother Will wanted to know.

"Let's see now...she was very tall and slender. Thick black hair, falling all the way down her back. I couldn't tell what age she was, but I'd guess in her teens. She wore a nice green dress..."

"While up in a tree?" Michael asked.

"She had leggings on, as I recall," Grandpa added. "Anyway, I looked at her up there, and I couldn't help wondering what a nice young lady like that was doing in a tree. I started walking closer. I was almost to the trunk of the tree when she looked down and saw me. All of a sudden, she disappeared right before my eyes."

Christopher and Justin sniggered. "That's it?" Justin muttered.

"Sounds like he had too much to drink," Chris added.

Grandpa stood up. “I’ll have you know I’ve never touched alcohol in my life,” he said. His face was calm, but his eyes blazed. “And it’s me, not you, who says when the story is done.”

The boys laughed loudly. Grandpa crossed his arms. “If you don’t want to listen, you’re welcome to leave,” he said.

For a moment the two boys just stared at him. Then Justin sneered, and turned his back on the group by the fire. As he began to walk away Chris ran to follow him. He turned and gestured to Michael to join them, but Michael pretended he hadn’t seen.

Grandpa sat down. “Where was I?”

“The mystery girl vanished,” Michael supplied.

“Right. That’s exactly what she did. I looked around to see if she had fallen, but I didn’t catch so much as a glimpse of her. I wondered if I had imagined the whole thing. Until a couple of weeks later.” He paused for emphasis, and the younger boys leaned forward again. “I was walking through town, minding my own business, when this kid came up to me. He was one of Olivia Sage’s boys. An odd family they were, extremely odd. He was exactly your age.” He pointed to Jay, at six the youngest cousin there. “He was a wild kid, that one. Couldn’t sit still, not even at church.” Several of the boys squirmed.

“Well, that boy came up to me, and he said he heard I knew about Sprites, and that he wanted to know more about them. Well, I knew more than anyone else—except my pa, of course, ‘cause he’s the one who taught me...”

“What did you tell him?” Jay asked, breathless.

“I told him that sprites are mysterious human-like creatures that live in the woods. He stopped me then—he said he already knew that. Then he asked me if I had ever seen one. I was about to say no when I remembered that strange lady. So I said yes. That little boy was so

excited he leapt straight up in the air. Then he asked me if I could show him where she appeared. It took a while to get there, because it was quite a ways into the woodlot. I was surprised how fast that kid was. He had to slow down to wait for me, and let me tell you, I was no slow-poke.”

Michael nodded. Even now, at his age, Grandpa could outrun most of the men in town—and did every year, at the summer fair.

“I can run fast,” Jay interrupted. “I can run faster than anybody.”

Grandpa chuckled. “Yes, Jason, I dare say you can, but I bet this little fellow could give even you a run for your money. Well anyway, we got to the spot, just over there, and the kid looked around. He seemed really disappointed.”

“How come?” Alex asked.

“Well, I didn’t know why. I started to feel bad, though, because I thought maybe I had imagined the girl. But then, all of a sudden, I saw a blaze of light, right in front of us, and when it faded I saw the beautiful girl again. She appeared out of thin air, like magic.”

“Really?” Jay breathed.

“Really truly,” Grandpa answered. “And then the girl took that boy by the hand, and his smile was so big he could have swallowed the moon. And then she turned to me, and she said she was grateful to me for bringing the wilding.”

“The what?” Michael asked.

Jay looked at him scornfully. “A wilding,” he repeated. “It’s a sprite that was born to human parents. They’re very rare. Right, grandpa?”

“Right,” he agreed. “So the girl said thank you, and then she kissed my cheek...”

“Eew!” the boys shrieked.

“And then she and the boy disappeared into the trees. And no one ever saw him again.”

The boys shivered and moved closer together

“And I was never the same again,” Grandpa went on. “In fact, I was having a bit of trouble with a cold before that day. But when that sprite left, I realized that my cold had gone. In fact, I’ve never gotten sick since. No cold, no fever, no nothing. I owe a lot to that sprite and little Drake Sage.”

Michael shook his head. The child’s disappearance had been long before his time, but he’d heard the story. Most people said he’d wandered away and been eaten by wild animals. He knew his grandfather liked to work true events into his stories, but he seemed to be going too far. He opened his mouth to argue, but a movement in the trees caught his eye.

He turned. For a single moment, he thought he saw a tall figure sitting in the shade of a nearby tree. Then he blinked and the figure was gone. He looked back at his grandfather.

Grandpa smiled at him. “They don’t appear very often,” he whispered, “but you keep your eyes open. You never know what you may see.”