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PURLIEU

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Purlieu
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First Edition.



PURLIEU

Hidden Grove: Book I

Michaela Daphne



Chapter 11

“Hello.”

“Hello Evelyn. It is so nice to see you again so soon.”

I stood awkwardly, not knowing what to say.

“I was just about to milk Blossom. Was there something that you wanted?”

“Uhm. Well you see, Mrs –”

“Please call me Mum.”

“Uhm. Well you see, Mum.”

The title came out clumsily. No one could replace my own mother.

I paused, not really knowing how to say ‘I want to test you to see how real you are.’

“I just wanted to thank you for lending me your clothes and nice things.”

She smiled comfortingly.

“Would you join me?”

She motioned towards the cow and we set to work in silence. I’d never milked a cow before. Strangely, she managed like she’d done it every day of her life.

I heard footsteps moving cautiously towards us, and a bleat from Bodie trotting along behind. It occurred to me that this was the first morning I had risen before William. He was probably thrown by my unexpected behaviour, unsure of what had caused it.

I broke my gaze from the udder and stood to face him.

“Good morning,” he said, voice coming out stuttered and shaky.

“Morning,” I replied, equally as tentative.

He glanced to his mother, curiosity written across his eyes.

“Good morning Mother,” he said.

“Good morning Son.”

She wrapped her arms around him. He relaxed.

“I think I would like to make everyone some breakfast. I will take the milk with me. You kids do not mind, do you?”

“Not at all,” William said.

“Wonderful! I will not be long.”

She made her way towards the house, pale in hand. William turned to face me quizzically.

“What?” I asked.

“I did not bring my mother to Purlieu this morning.”

“No. I did.”

“And why did you do that?”

“I dunno. I was curious.”

“Curious about what?”

I looked past him towards the sky, watching the clouds change shape. The wind played melody with the trees but didn't chill the bone.

“I don't know.”

“What do you mean you do not know? Surely you know – one does not act without reason.”

The rabbit-shaped cumulus cloud changed instantaneously to a light shade of grey. He looked me square in the eyes, though I evaded him. The cloud continued to darken.

“I said I don't know.”

“Do not be daft, Evelyn. I can see right through your feigned stupidity.

“I thought the masks came off last night?”

“Maybe for you,” I mumbled.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

I chanced a look at his eyes. They had darkened. It made me feel queasy.

“Evelyn, do not misunderstand me when I say ‘do not play with my mother’.

You do not know her. She is mine to do as I please.”

“I wasn’t –” I began.

“DO NOT TEST ME, Evelyn.”

He stormed off towards Spencer.

He had yelled at me. It had been a long time since anyone had reprimanded me, let alone for something so far-fetched. I didn’t know how to place this new side to him. Was he just grumpy from such a late night? Or perhaps sullen that last night, at the nudging of Mister, I’d cut short any ideas he may have had. Or maybe there was another side to him that he had been hiding from me, suppressing, trying to play a good host.

He clearly did not suspect my thinking him a fool for wanting his mother around, for believing her to be merely a fabrication of his mind like a lonely child with an imaginary friend. He thought instead I were stealing her, changing her, taking her as my own. I felt sick.

My stomach grumbled deceptively. I paced the clearing, wondering what to do, dreading facing him again so soon.

Someone opened the kitchen window upstairs and a whorl of autumn leaves entered. I could hear the crackling of frying as cruel smells of breakfast wafted down towards me.

There were too many unknowns. I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and headed inside. As I entered the kitchen a large gust of wind blew outside, entering through the open window. The leaves I'd watched from outside fly in were picked up again and sent flying straight at me. I battered them away.

William was sitting at the table, his sharp eyes piercing me. His mother was plating up breakfast. She broke the silence.

“Please join us, Evelyn.”

I nodded and slipped into the chair opposite William and gratefully rested my eyes upon the plate placed before me; fresh cut bread, roasted tomatoes still attached to the vine, sunnyside up fried eggs, and soft bacon. It smelled comforting.

She chattered away jovially, not noticing both our apprehension to join in. I wasn't going to unless given some signal of permission from William. I tried to focus on the sensation of the tomatoes bursting in my mouth.

William's mother said, “Did you know that worms taste like bacon?”

Almost choking on the tomato, I snorted with laughter. They both stared at me with wide eyes and joined in. The heaviness lifted.

#

Hours passed into days, and as those days shortened in preparation for winter, they flowed easily into weeks until the middle of autumn had caught us. With it came an ebb and flow of harmony and tension.

I had explored enough of the rooms of Spencer to find interest only in the gardens outside. So I spent my days painting the land.

Sitting in the crook of a tree overlooking the rolling knolls, I watched as William's mother played chase with Mister. He leapt and bound and hid amongst the

piles of leaves that were growing larger every day. Most of the trees were half bare-branched now.

It reminded me of the park I'd spent many hours playing at as a child. The girls could never find me. I always hid in the same place, unafraid of the spiders or ants that would come crawling. They would spend hours searching only to give up and go home, until eventually mum would come calling and I'd stiffly resurrect from the bushel of leaves that they'd failed to check through. She never told them where I hid.

I sketched the memory on the gesso-painted canvas in my lap, priming it for later painting.

“What are you drawing?” William's mother said between rosy-cheeked huffs and puffs.

I glanced towards William who was returning the woven basket to the shed from the picnic he'd taken me on that morning. I still wasn't sure what the rules were with her and had avoided one on one time well enough since our last confrontation. It was easy enough, as she didn't visit that often. But her smile reminded me so much of my own mother's it was hard not to look at her with longing when she did.

I finished the park bench and turned the picture to face her.

“Oh I remember this!” she exclaimed.

I waivered in my seat on the low tree branch, catching myself before I fell. She stared at the painting for a long moment, forehead crinkled, and snatched the pencil and canvas out of my hand.

“As I recall it, the bench was over here and it was much smaller.”

She proceeded to 'fix it', sketching quickly, tongue out the corner of her mouth and returned it to me promptly. She was right. I knew I'd gotten the placement

and proportion wrong as soon as I'd laid it on the page. But how did she know? I looked to her warily as she tottered off to join Mister again. Perhaps this is what William meant by 'playing with her' – by placing the projections of my own mother onto her, she would become as I willed, a confused mess between the memory of my mother and William's.

I decided then and there that I would never imagine any real person into Purlieu. It was too risky.

#

"Come, Evelyn."

William was wearing his walking boots.

"Where?"

"To the stream – Wendy's stream."

I looked to the canvas in my arms. I was so close to finishing the brown legs of the park bench. The sun was creeping lower in the sky and the walk would take twenty minutes each way.

"Oh, but I wanted to finish this one today."

"Evelyn, you sit and paint all day. It is not good for one to live a sedentary life. Do not be lazy."

I felt like I'd done more exercise in Purlieu than I'd ever done – from potato pulling to chasing the chickens back to their coop to tree climbing. Every day called for some kind of lung aching task.

"But I am so close to finishing."

His gaze pierced me.

We walked painstakingly slowly back from her stream, the sun setting behind us.

“We should do this every day,” he said.

The next day William was working the field, turning the soil and bucketing water down on it as I drew nails and hammer from his tool shed. He didn't notice as I jetted past, eager for what I was about to do. Mister was waiting for me in the parlour.

“Right here. This is where I think it should go,” I said to Mister.

There was a perfect space just below the grouping of painted autumn scenes. A spot that looked the perfect shape and size: like it was waiting for me to complete the autumn story with my now-finished painting.

I drove the nail into the trunk of the tree and hung the finished painting of an easy autumn day many years ago. I stood back and admired it a long moment. William entered, hair slicked back from perspiration. I shuffled to hide my masterpiece.

“You are just in time for celebrations.”

He looked back, intrigued.

“Celebrations?”

I jumped aside trilling, “Ta-daaaaaa!”

He didn't share in my joy. Rather the life sapped from his face, turning a sickly white.

He let out a lifeless, “Oh no. No. NO.”

His skin regained colour and went the opposite direction to a steaming red, appearing to seethe. A rumble of fury emerged.

“HOW COULD YOU? You have no idea what you have done! Take it down NOW. Take it down you *stupid* girl!”

He hovered over his insult and I cowered all the more, unable to respond to his order. When I failed to, he stormed forward and ripped the picture from its holding place and towered over me.

“You *offend* me!” he spat.

He threw it to the ground at my feet and flew out the door with a bang that reverberated deafening upon my ears. The painting had a split running the long way through it. Shock gripped at me, debilitating my ability to move or even breathe.

I collapsed in a heap on the floor. Mister fretted about my edges, helplessly. Numbness washed over. I blindly stumbled to my feet and made my way up to the conservatory only to curl in a ball on the futon. I lay there for hours.

#

Toes tingling, I opened my eyes, breathing deep. The air in my lungs felt good. As my toes began to feel normal again, in my mind's eye I saw his face.

“William.”

The horror returned. That look he had given me: if only I could wipe my memory of it. I didn't know how to begin to comprehend what had just happened so I concentrated on my body instead: toes, legs, torso, arms, head. Everything felt normal but a familiar uneasiness returned within me. It gathered around my heart. Tears wet my face.

Wind shook the tree house, bringing with it the noisy rustling of branches and leaves. Its bitter cold ripped through the thick trunk and attacked my body. I rolled over and drew the covers in closer around me. Winter was being impatient. It appeared to be howling, crying out in pain.

I waited for peace, unable to escape, rethinking the day just gone. Yes, autumn had brought with it a balancing act between bliss and confused chaos. William's

ubiquitous patience had worn off. I hadn't expected that. I wondered if I would be better off back home.