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## **PURLIEU**

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APRIL 2016  
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Purlieu

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First Edition.



# PURLIEU

Hidden Grove: Book I

*Michaela Daphne*



## Chapter 10

The days continued in the same fashion. Delectable food, painting, talking, tending to the plants and animals, and William's obvious pursuit of me. He would reach for me and I'd turn away, all the while wanting to do the opposite. Over meals I could finally look into his eyes, knowing there was a table between us. I would see past the reflection of myself, and into an endless depth. I yearned to know him in his mysteries as we spoke incessantly. Yet in those eyes, I sensed a hiding.

I searched the rooms of Spencer for answers whilst William tended to the land outside. He had encouraged my exploration so I didn't feel sly as I went from room to room, touching, smelling, turning over objects. He had said it was my home now too.

There were eight rooms in total: my own at the top, or rather, as William referred to it, the conservatory, with his mother's boudoir beneath. The nursery on the next landing was fascinating, holding aged yet well kept toys and swaddles. I enjoyed mostly the childish scribbles and crayoned stick figures stuck to the walls, all featuring him and his mother and grandmother. I wondered what happened to his father. I asked him one day but he snapped back at me unexpectedly.

"Even if I knew where my father was, why would I care?"

"I dunno. Because he's your father."

"You yourself said that your father was no good."

"My dad wasn't always like that."

"But he is now. He clearly does not love you anyway."

He was right, I had told him about my dad and his distance since the death of my mother. Maybe he didn't love me, he only put up with me because he had to, because he was my dad?

The larder was below the nursery with food supplies of crushed wheat, dried fruits, and jars of preserves. It was also used for general storage with neat stacks of boxes containing old tools and sewing stuffs off to one side. I fingered through the contents of the boxes but there were no memories there, just utilitarian articles. I left disappointed for the kitchen and its never-ceasing supply of chocolate.

When William had finished his chores for the day he would take to the den that sat beneath the kitchen. It was a simple room with a lone chair and fireplace. He'd light the fire and sit back in a winged velvet chair, staring into the flames. I called it his thinking room.

I asked him why he would manually do his chores when, at the whims of his mind he could imagine them already done.

“Mother always taught me to never do anything with my mind that could be done first by my hands.”

And so he escaped to his thinking room at the end of each day, tired and sore from the labour of his hands.

There was little mystery to be found in the washroom but I spent countless hours in the parlour below it, astounded by the multitude of paintings. I did as I had dreamed of doing on that first day: deconstructing strokes, wondering about motivation, gazing upon the beauty of the subjects.

There was nothing else to be discovered in Spencer, so I assumed he wasn't hiding anything after all. I did wonder where he slept at night though. I dare not ask him, in case he snapped at me again. He didn't like my questions.

The days grew shorter, the night cooler, breeze past more frequently and the plants began to change. It started with the bed of crimson flowers. They grew sturdier,

as if preparing for the harsh winter winds and potential frost. The soft petals deepened to a hard burgundy and became somewhat crisp around the edges.

Colour came in abundance as the flora began their transition from green to brown. The deciduous trees that lined the edge of the clearing acted like a ring of fire, enclosing us in the place and Spencer became like a blushing schoolgirl.

A bolero was no longer enough to accommodate for the cooling weather. I ventured into stockings and enclosed shoes teamed with hats and light scarves. I would curl up in a blanket in the clearing, painting away, day after day.

Before I knew it the leaves had turned a mixture of red, orange, and yellow and began their descent to the ground. We splashed and played in the piles of crusty leaves, throwing them in the air and letting them fall like snowflakes. Mister loved them too. He would take leaping bounds from long range into the centre of the largest piles with a satisfying ‘crunch’ on landing. His head would pop up after a moment of silence, and then he would hop out and do it all over again.

I sat one afternoon watching him play in this way and as his head poked up amongst the leaves, the beauty of the sight jostled me into action. I had to capture it with my brush. I loved the contrast - his dazzling black fur against the jungle of red, orange, and yellow. I hurried to put colour to canvas. William was sitting opposite me, charcoaling. I assumed I was his subject. We continued in silence for a while, interrupted only by the ‘crunch’ of Mister landing in the leaves.

I sighed with contentment, pausing mid-stroke of Mister's left ear to look to William.

“You know the best thing about this place?”

William looked up from his work, but I didn't wait for his answer.

“It's always changing but it's always beautiful,” I said.

William nodded slowly. I could see his mind ticking over. He put his charcoal down and shuffled over to me.

“I think you may be ready, beautiful.”

“Ready for what?”

“For the potential of Purlieu.”

I sat in curiosity at his words, my imagination running wild. Of all the things I had already seen, I found it hard to conceive of anything more. Never had I experienced such pleasure, such joy, such enchantment but in this place.

That evening I entered the rooftop bedroom as usual, dressed in a flowing nightdress. William usually said his goodnights as I headed off to bathe after dinner. Uncharacteristically on this night, he waltzed into my room. He stood, dressed in a pinstripe-grey Edwardian suit with matching bowtie, top hat, and polished black dress shoes. He looked even more handsome than usual.

He bounced on the balls of his feet.

“The day is not yet done, Evelyn. Go to mother’s boudoir. You will find an appropriate outfit for this evening’s frivolities. I will be in the garden.”

He didn’t give me a chance to respond, leaving me with my mouth half open and brain desperately trying to keep up. The cogs eventually began to turn again and I went to the room below, curious as to what William had planned.

There, propped up by a coat hanger over the door of the open wardrobe was a dazzling ball gown. The champagne coloured satin covered a bone-lined bodice that led into a chiffon full-skirt. There were sparkling jewels dotting the fabric in sweeping lines along the lace that pulled across the body. It fell perfectly to the ground. The fabric was soft at the touch and smelled of cinnamon.

Without hesitation I ripped off my nightclothes and unzipped the gorgeous gown. I found some shoes to match in the wardrobe and stepped into the dress, careful not to tear the chiffon. I twisted to zip it up and it did so nicely, fitting snugly around my torso. I peered down upon myself, delighted to be wearing something of such elegance. The bell-bottom swung with my every move as I shuffled towards the mirror.

Again my mouth fell half-open.

That's me?

I smoothed my auburn locks out, patting down the flyaways and slipped a gold hair comb from the dresser into it, pulling back my grown out fringe. There was no need for jewellery - the dress did it all.

I turned to leave his mother's boudoir in a flutter of excitement, keen for whatever waited ahead of me. A sparkle of something caught the corner of my eye. I retraced my steps, careful not to trip on the voluptuous gown, and peeked behind the door. Hanging off the brass door hook was a glistening black masquerade mask. It was simple in design, hiding only the tip of the nose and across the eyes, covered in black glitter. I leaned in to inspect it further and realised that the sparkle I saw was from hundreds of tiny black gems that were hand-stitched to cover the entirety of the mask. It sparkled in the light of the gas lamp hanging by the door, catching the well-cut gemstones.

There was a note attached to it in William's curling script. 'The final touch' it read. I followed the unspoken instruction and it slipped easily onto my face.

Gingerly, I made my way down the stairs, holding either side of the walls for balance. The garden couldn't come fast enough.

What could it be, that would require such extravagance?

I opened the door of the parlour to a clear autumn night. The trees their familiar shades of red, orange, and yellow, but the clearing had transformed into something more than its normal beautiful self.

Everything shimmered with a dazzling twinkle, as if someone had come along in a crop plane and sprayed the grounds with glitter. They held their normal shades of colour and the constant glow around every object, but with the gentle blow of the wind they sparkled.

That was not all that was different. The clearing was filled with people. It had been weeks, maybe months since I had seen anyone other than William. To suddenly see so many, I froze in shock. They were dancing to classical ballroom music from an orchestra that I noticed quickly by the flowerbed. The men were dressed as William, however mostly in black. The women wore ball gowns like my own, but none faired to the beauty of the one I wore. Everyone was masked in elegant Venetian masquerade masks, holding their high hair in place like a ball from Queen Elizabeth's early years. Wrapped up in their partners they danced a dance they all seemed to know.

The dance floor parted and there was William, staring at me, below the eyes of a simple black mask, a quiet smile on his face. The guests drew apart from their partners, away from the dancing. The music came to a halt. I still stood in the open door to the tree, unable to move for the surprise of it all. Quite unexpectedly they began to clap. A thunderous roar of hundreds of people applauded my entrance. They had been waiting my arrival.

William moved forward, clapping slowly but surely, eyes unable to look anywhere but at me. A few men bowed and women curtsied as he passed. Apparently

he was as important as I. He was only a metre from me when he stopped. He bowed low, still not shaking my gaze.

“You look beautiful. As always.”

He gently took my hand and kissed it. He flicked his eyes away as he turned to face our audience, still holding my hand. He bowed to them. They returned the favour. The music started up again and the people returned to their dancing, not missing a step.

William looked back upon me and my breath came out shakily. My mouth opened and closed like a fish on dry land, but he took my unspoken questions into his own hands.

“Tonight, the masks come off.”

I lifted my hand to the mask over my eyes.

“Not that mask - this mask.”

He waved his hand in front of my eyes and gestured towards the masquerade.

“Evelyn, this is for you: a congratulations that you are ready. This is just a fraction of the power of Purlieu. These people are here for you. They are from me, to you.”

He tapped his temple. My face crumpled, still not understanding. He bit his lip, thoughtfully. He tried again, changing tone.

“The imagination is a wondrous thing. What you see before you is real, but real in not a way that you would normally consider to be real.”

The furrow burrowed deeper into my forehead.

“I thought this up in my mind - and now you see it clear as day.

“Evelyn, what ever you believe in Purlieu, you will see, you will experience.”

My forehead changed from misunderstanding to scepticism.

“You recall the conversation we had about the memory of my mother - that I do not need her memory, or things to remember her by?”

I thought back and nodded.

“The reason I do not need her memory is because she is here with me whenever I want her to be. Let me show you.”

He closed his eyes for an infinitesimal moment and smiled, turning away to face the crowd of dancers. I strained my eyes to see what he was looking so fervently at. Eventually I saw where his gaze lay. She looked just as stunning as any of the other women; her golden curls a mountain on her head, her matching black mask twinkling in the light. She moved through the crowd towards us, again, men and women curtsied as she passed. Her eyes were set on William, but she every so often glanced towards me questioningly.

She stopped five paces before us, smiling, her rose-red lips parting in joy. William returned the same dazzling smile. She turned to face the crowd that had stopped their dancing once more. She curtsied and they returned the favour before continuing with their dancing. She spun back to face us.

“Hello Mother. I would like you to meet someone very special.

“This is Evelyn.”

Her smile widened and she strode forward, closing the gap between us and threw her arms around me. Her hold encapsulated me, embracing me in a way I'd not felt since my own mother's arms. It was comforting. Warmth radiated out from her and she smelled a sweet scent of cinnamon and pomegranate.

She drew back, holding my shoulders, and took a good look at me.

“She is beautiful.”

She sang it in a kindly way, as if agreeing with a statement William had made.

“Evelyn, this is my mother.”

She removed her mask and the full effect of her beauty hit me. Her effervescent eyes danced in the light, protected by a heavy set of eyelashes. Her eyebrows compensated for the prominent cheekbones that propped up her subtly rouged cheeks. She glowed with the same hazy glow around her that filled the clearing, but within her there was a glow that I could not place the origin.

I felt my cheeks burn from the pressure of the important moment. I stuttered out of self-consciousness.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.

“You have impeccable taste.”

I motioned towards the house.

“Yes, I do enjoy fashion,” she replied.

We held one another’s gaze and she began to hum dreamily along to the music.

“I think I might re-join the dancing.”

She took me in her arms again, cinnamon and pomegranate abounding and whispered in my ear.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Evelyn.”

She pecked my cheek, glanced at William a final time, and glided off to the dance floor, tossing her mask to the side. I stared after her as she disappeared into the flow of the dance. William put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me in close. He sighed, speaking into my ear.

“She left me several years ago now. I awoke one morning to find a note at my bedside saying I was ready to fend for myself and she was ready too. That she would not return. It was as her mother before her had done. That it was now her turn.

“I was filled with grief for a very long, cold winter. Then it dawned on me: in my distress I had forgotten about Purlieu and its power. So I thought late into the night before I drifted to sleep about what I wanted - what was the greatest desire of my heart.

“I awoke to a bright spring day with the smell of fresh cooked eggs in my nose and my mother hovering over me with a breakfast tray. She comes as I please - as I imagine in my mind, just as she did with her mother before her.

“She is not my mother in the sense of my real mother. No, my real mother is out there somewhere living another life. But what you see before you, well, she is exactly as I remember her the day before she left.”

“And why have you never left?”

“I have, remember? It is how I brought you here. I have ventured outside of Purlieu before, but always with the intention to return.”

“No, I mean, why do you stay here, why don't you leave for good - to find your mother or find a life outside of Purlieu?”

“Purlieu is my home. I like it here, where I am perfectly in control. I do not want Purlieu to cease to exist. Besides, I have no need to leave now, Evelyn. For I have you. I want to live here forever with you.”

I lost my breath. William broke his eyes away from the crowd and looked down upon me, removing his mask.

“The possibilities are endless here, Evelyn. Whatever you desire most, you can acquire. You have only to imagine.”

I thought about that first night I had spent in Purlieu and what I had awoken to.

“Is that how Mister is here?”

“Yes Evelyn - you desired Mister and so he came to be!”

“And the chocolate?”

His mouth opened in a wide smile.

“Yes, you definitely dreamed up the chocolate yourself.”

The word ‘chocolate’ still came unnaturally off his tongue.

I let the thoughts settle, the story William had finally shared. I had been here for so long, feeling like I knew him. But now I truly knew him. I could see deep into his soul of longing and pain. And I understood.

“This,” he gestured to the masquerade. “Is a kind of inauguration ball to welcome you to the possibilities.”

His voice hovered over the last word.

“So, let me get this straight: these people aren’t real, but they are?”

William thought for a moment.

“Let me demonstrate.”

He stood up straight and looked to the crowd of dancers. Their outfits changed to blazing red, gold, and then back to black. The people became of African descent, Chinese, and back again to Caucasian. The music changed in an instant and the style of dancing too – tango, lindy hop, and back again to their graceful waltz. The music and the people disappeared altogether. Silence hung in the air.

William looked to me again.

“Do you see what I mean? They are my will. And I will them to be.”

The people with the music returned.

“Let us dance.”

He took my hand and we did. We spun around and round in fast small circles. We swung into step with the other dancers and William led me. I felt unusually light

on my feet, never really putting any weight on either foot before we moved to the next step. Not that I knew where to step anyway, but with him as my guide, I had not a problem.

The orchestra continued playing late into the night, and no one slowed in their sway to the music. The atmosphere was alive with an inescapable ecstasy. I felt as if I were caught in a dream.

The place glowed that familiar glow and the trees, the branches, the flowers shimmered as the cool autumn breeze pleasantly passed on by. The clearing was an intoxicating whorl of colour and sound and yet William before me was clear as day. The outline of his face stood out against the racing background.

I don't remember leaving the ball, only staring up into his captivating eyes as I lay in his arms on the futon. He held me close. Even through my exhaustion my body found the energy to tingle with delight. I dodged his lips.

Mister nibbled at my toes. I peeled away from William. A moment later he snuggled in close behind me.

It didn't take long for my eyelids to become too heavy to keep stretching open. I couldn't fight the gravitational pull anymore. I gave up the pointless struggle. I met with rest and was guided to daybreak by a spiralling night of light-filled dreaming.

#

I didn't want to open my eyes, still exhausted from the preceding frivolous night. The memories resurfaced: a gown, a masquerade, William all of a dazzle, his mother, the music, the people, the dancing. 'The potential of Purlieu', that was what William had said.

The potential, where what you want, what you imagine, comes to be.

I snapped my eyes open realising the possibilities of the day before me. William was still asleep, holding me loosely in his arms. I looked down upon myself and saw the satin underlay of the gown. I relaxed a little, remembering my better judgement but momentarily trembled that he had been too close all night long. My father had taught me better than that.

He'd come home one day from the station fuming. I could see it in his usual friendly brown eyes that had clouded over.

“I can't believe it, it happened again.”

Mum and I looked to him questioningly as he threw his holster on the bench.

“Another girl. Another rescue.

“Ugh. I just don't know when it will stop. Why do they keep falling for these guys?”

“This one, today, had locked herself in the bathroom for an hour before a passer-by heard her calling for help. He'd beaten her to a pulp.”

He turned to my mum.

“She was the same age as Evelyn.

“How do they get themselves into these messes? Why don't they know any better?”

But I knew better. Besides, William wasn't like those other guys.

I slipped out of bed quietly, careful not to wake him. Stretching, I felt the ache of unfamiliar muscles. I noticed the rest of the dress lying haphazardly over a chair by the door and William's shoes and shirt tossed to the side. More memories flooded as I pulled an overcoat over the dress underlay and slipped on some boots.

I shook my head at the stupidity. The cool autumn night had made the heat between our bodies comforting. Thankfully a sliver of prudence – or perhaps fear - had found its way to my brain. I was wiser than mere hormones.

I made my way downstairs slowly.

I could will anything into being, he had said. Anything I desired. And his mum comes and goes as he pleases. Would I want my own mum back? It had been years since she died. Dad hadn't recovered and my relationship with him had certainly taken a sour turn, but did I want her? Did I need her, especially if it weren't the real her?

If I wanted anything, I wanted the real her, not my own concocted perfected version of her, acting upon my will, giving my own advice back to me. Is that what William's mum was - a 'perfected' version of her - saying as he willed her to say, doing as he willed her to do?

I reached the base of Spencer and skipped the last step, concentrating in my mind's eye on the garden outside. Mister bound down behind me. I paused to take a deep breath and opened the door to the dazzling light of another day.

The wind whistled as it past, scooping up piles of leaves and dumping them metres away. Some danced along the ground, spiralling like a pinwheel, becoming a blur of red and orange.

There she was, just as I had imagined her, just as she were the night before. Her creamy skin stood out like a yellow umbrella in the pouring rain as she pet Blossom. The ribbon on her straw hat matched her emerald eyes. Her golden hair hung over the shoulders of her blouse and shone in the sunlight. Although focussed on the cow, she looked around at the sound of the door creaking open. A smile spread wide across her face, those rose red lips the focal point.

I walked slowly but surely across the grass between us until I finally stood  
before her.

## 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 minds 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.