

Tending Ben's Garden

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*Note: Descriptive terms in this novel were in general use
in the time period during which the story takes place.*

Prologue

Spring 1929

Ben's amber ringlets shimmered like summer wheat tassels in a breeze. He examined the maple tree above him, watched the shiny broad leaves sway, heard them over the sound of his brothers' laughter on the tire swing.

Filtering through the leaves, a ray of sun found, lost, found an old pine cone, setting it apart from the rest of the world in a dusty halo of gold.

Ben noticed it all. Barely three, Ben noticed everything of worth.

Kate dug deep, her blonde, bobbed hair bouncing as she created a mound of sandy significance in front of her.

"Ben Boy, you aren't helping." She thrust a garden trowel at him. "You asked me to play with you. Smooth this down until I tell you not to."

Ben's chubby hands grappled with the thick metal trowel. He patted lightly at the mound.

Kate grabbed the trowel. "No, like this." She shaped the mound with hard, even slaps before cramming the makeshift shovel back into his hand. He pounded at the sand. Kate huffed disgust at her baby brother's sand-shaping incompetence.

Leo sat down across from Kate in the sandbox.

“Who said you could play?” she demanded, shaping a new mound with precision.

“Mama.”

She tossed a metal bucket at him. “Then you have to fill that.”

Leo wrenched the trowel from Ben’s hand and started to dig. The baby’s pale blue eyes filled and his bottom lip quivered as he watched his older brother dig with his little shovel. Shuddering a sigh from head to toe, Ben paused, then lightly patted the mound with his hand.

Kate glanced up and saw Leo with the trowel. “Give it back!” she hollered. “That’s Ben’s.”

Yanking the trowel out of his hand, she whacked Leo across his red striped shoulder with it. Ben exploded with his baby belly laugh, Leo ran into the house crying, and Kate was called “Katherine May” and forced to stand in the corner after making her four brothers butter and jam sandwiches for lunch.

Chapter 1

Wednesday, May 20, 1931

“Paris-inspired,” the *Good Housekeeping* magazine ad had stated. “Smart frocks for Junior Miss.”

“The blouse of heavy flat crepe for Junior Miss has overlapping tucks about the hips...skirt on bodice top is pleated down the front...rose beige, Lucerne blue, or navy....”

Kate had wavered for a while before deciding on the Lucerne blue in her note to Papa. Whatever the shade of blue, it sounded French.

She’d added the chiffon nylons shown on the next page. If Papa was spending \$16.75 on her dress, why not another \$1.65 for her nylons? It was for her birthday, after all.

Kate was sure that Papa had bought her the dress for her birthday a few months earlier.

Before he’d been killed by the crash.

So she’d searched everywhere on the farm she could think of. First closets, then under beds. She knew he would have had to hide it from Mama and Mémère. They would think such a dress far too “mature” and costly for a twelve-year-old girl. Especially these days.

Mémère thought the Devil hovered about women’s knees anyway.

But Kate knew that her papa would have spent a hundred dollars on her if she’d wanted something that dear because

she was Papa's princess. Hadn't he told her that every day of her life? No matter how tired he'd seemed when he'd come home from the bank, Papa had always bowed to her, and she'd curtsied to him. He'd kissed her hand, and she'd giggled as he'd followed it up her arm to tickle her neck and then lightly kiss each deep dimple.

She was his Princess Kate.

She had searched the barn, loft and all. Every outbuilding, including the outhouse. She'd even volunteered to clean the chicken coop when it wasn't her turn, the nastiest job on the farm. But there was no package to be found.

Tommy had received a coveted aviator's cap like his hero, Charles Lindbergh, for his fourteenth birthday just a week earlier. That had cost plenty, she was sure, yet Mama had bought it for him. Kate had thought about stealing it and burying it in the old apple orchard. Had it all planned out. But then she decided that Papa probably would have wanted him to have the cap.

Might as well have something Papa wanted come true.

"Katherine May."

Mémère was speaking English instead of French. Kate figured that her grandmother must be in a good mood.

"Yes, Mémère."

Kate couldn't figure out how someone who prayed so much could look and act like one of Beelzebub's own. If she hadn't shared a bed with her, Kate would have suspected horns under the white braids coiled about her grandmother's head and a tail beneath her floor-length black skirts.

“Gather the eggs for town.” Mémère poked a scrawny finger at Kate, her shawl clamped about her hunched shoulders. “Break not one, please.” Her small black eyes pinched her crinkled face like two June bugs.

“Yes, Mémère.”

“Stop twisting your hair. It makes you look like a Baptist.”

“Yes, Mémère.”

Ben's Garden

Ben's garden consisted of a patch of dirt near the barn. Papa had dug it for him the previous year. How Ben had begged and cajoled for his very own garden to tend! Papa had promised him seeds to sow—beans, cucumbers, and melons, potatoes, lettuce, and corn. Ben wanted sunflowers, so Kate stole some of the sunflower seeds Mémère liked to nibble when she tatted and mended.

Kate had helped Papa turn the soil and throw stinky manure fertilizer on Ben's garden last fall. This spring Kate alone had helped Ben hoe the soil, sow the seeds, and water the rows.

She had danced with him in the garden at dawn.

There was a scarecrow, of course. A bedraggled broom served as its body. Metal scraps from a rusty, abandoned tractor in the orchard served as arms that whirled and clanked in the wind. Mémère had given Ben a shawl to drape about it. Using a shiny pie tin for the head, Ben had painted the face with black tar. Circles for eyes, no nose, a wide grin that spanned most of the tin.

Tommy had warned Ben that the scarecrow was supposed to be scary to keep the crows, rabbits, and deer from eating his garden.

Ben had laughed; he thought that was silly. If the birds, bunnies, and deer wanted to eat from his garden, that was fine with him. That's why he had planted it.

He'd built the scarecrow for them to play with.

Chapter 2

Friday, May 22, 1931

“Vern.” Mrs. Etta Crane smiled and motioned to a thin blond boy wearing short pants and a roomy green shirt. “Could you please open the back door to invite a breeze?”

As the schoolroom quieted with a smattering of shushes, the hubbub of boys yelling and bats smacking baseballs grew louder through the open windows. Diminutive Mrs. Crane announced that she would not be their teacher after the spring term because her husband had finally found work in Detroit. She went on to explain that monies earned from the sale of the pies they’d brought that evening would go toward keeping the school open next fall.

Kate heard the words but didn’t fully comprehend them. Her focus had been on the doorway since she and Tommy had arrived half an hour earlier.

“Where’s Tommy?” Margaret whispered to her.

Mémère would think that the Devil was hovering around Margaret Vandervelde’s knees tonight, Kate noted. Unfortunately, Mémère had made sure that the Devil would remain a safe distance from Kate’s knees when she had transformed Mama’s mauve crepe dress for her. Yet Kate momentarily forgave Mémère her orneriness because on this night at least, Kate would not be wearing a dress sewn from a chicken feed sack.

“Tommy’s outside,” Kate answered. “Where’s Harvey?”

She flattened the already-flat mauve hair bow clipped to the back of her chin-length blonde hair. Tommy had told her it looked like an airplane propeller on the back of her head. She bit his pinkie finger for that. Drew blood.

“Harvey’s coming later,” Margaret said before setting her strawberry pie next to a sad-looking apple pie, her name neatly scripted on the card beneath.

Evening in Paris perfume “borrowed” from Mama wafted from Kate’s wrists, but the fragrance was waning. A sweat stream trickled down her back. She needed Harvey Vandervelde to walk through that doorway soon.

Pie-laden tables lined two of the four walls of the one-room schoolhouse. In front of the other walls, parents and children sat in uneven rows of narrow wooden folding chairs. Men’s dimpled fedoras and women’s close-fitting cloche hats fanned moist pink faces. The men were sweating, while the women “glowed.”

“What kind of pie did you bake?” Gracie Mortensen asked her.

Spotting the other three Mortensen sisters throughout the crowd, each wearing chicken-feed-sack dresses that matched Gracie’s, Kate couldn’t help but swish her skirt as she spoke.

“My grandmother baked it.”

Gracie’s eyebrows arched.

“But I helped her,” Kate lied.

“We’ll start the bidding at five cents,” Mr. Dekker announced, his resonant voice quieting the room.

“I’ve been meaning to stop by and pay my respects, dear.” It was Mrs. Wagner, whose wide face appeared as red as her dress. “Such a shame, your father.”

“Thank you,” Kate knew to say, even if she didn’t mean it. She leaned to watch the doorway through the crowd.

“He wasn’t the only one, of course,” Mrs. Wagner continued, wiping her expansive brow with a lace handkerchief. “But to leave your mother and you children....” She sounded as if she’d swallowed an entire tin of Mr. Rademacher’s homemade maple syrup. “Of course, many of our congregation pray for his soul to reach heaven.”

Kate stared at the wide, red woman, who seemed to be the only one not moving in the room. She didn’t make any sense. Papa had been killed when a Ford pickup had hit him crossing Amsterdam Street. *Not the only one what? Nobody had been with him that day.*

Briar Rose was a princess who awoke after a hundred years of sleep when a handsome prince kissed her. The words echoed through Kate’s thoughts like a litany, as it seemed to do whenever someone spoke of Papa’s accident.

Adjusting her feathered hat, wide, red Mrs. Wagner smiled a benevolent farewell before settling her girth tentatively onto a wobbling chair. Kate hoped for splinters.

“Kate!” Gracie rasped, then whispered, “Sam Kersten bought my pie for two dollars.”

Listening to bids on pie after pie, Kate’s gaze rarely left the open doorway, which showcased a pumpkin and gold sky. A welcome breeze stirred a blue flower print cotton

curtain—and her bangs—as evening swallowed day. It embraced the crowd with a cooling comfort.

Kate thought of Ben. She'd told him that they couldn't say good night to the lake tonight. But tomorrow night they would stay all the longer, she'd promised. She'd smiled. He hadn't, his blue eyes huge with sadness.

Couple after couple sat sharing pies. Only a few pies remained, including hers.

She heard Margaret call to him before she saw him.

Harvey Vandervelde. Seventeen and the loveliest, smartest, best dressed, most popular boy within a hundred miles, to Kate's mind. One blond lock flitted across his forehead. Eyes as blue as a midwinter sky flickered across the noisy room.

Hands stuffed deep within his trouser pockets, Harvey spoke briefly with his sister. He shook his head a few times as Margaret smiled. Sighing, he turned and threw a weak “hello” smile Kate's way.

Kate thought she was breathing. Then again, maybe she wasn't. Sweat more than trickled down her back now. She swished for self-assurance.

“Here's a fine peach pie created with tender loving care by Miss Kate Penton. Who bids five cents?”

Ten minutes later, Kate's bottom barely touched the chair as she ate her peach pie with Harvey Vandervelde. Two dollars he'd bid and won. She wished it had been more than Sam Kersten had bid on Gracie's pie, but she was sitting next to Harvey Vandervelde. He had chosen her pie—and had outbid at least three others to win it. He'd smiled at her.

It didn't even matter that he'd voted for Emma Karlstrom in the prettiest girl contest. Kate was sure it was only because their mothers were best friends.

Kate's heart thundered so she couldn't hear Tommy talking to her.

"We're leaving, Kate," Tommy repeated through a mouthful of stolen apple pie. "Let's go."

"What?" she asked, finally focusing on her brother.

"Let's go."

"But I'm still eating my pie with Harvey," Kate announced, daintily nipping at a slice of peach on her fork.

Harvey's eyes met Margaret's across the emptying room. "I can take Kate home," he offered.

Tommy shrugged, swiped one more mouthful of pie from a half-empty tin, and left.

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Kate walked through her front door at least an hour after her curfew. She fully expected Mama or Mémère or both to meet her with a switch.

Not that she cared. Harvey had indeed driven her home—along with Emma Karlstrom. Kate had been crammed in the back seat.

Emma and Harvey had shared the contents of a silver flask, singing "I Got Rhythm" loud enough to scare the feathers off of Mrs. Wagner's hat. Along the way, they'd stopped at telephone pole after telephone pole looking for bottles of homemade gin that Harvey had stashed earlier.

Evidently he couldn't recall which telephone poles he'd hidden the homemade hooch behind.

Before he'd dropped her off, a staggering Harvey had told Kate to make sure to tell his sister that he had fulfilled his promise to her of showing Kate a good time at the pie social—and that Margaret couldn't tell their parents about the gin still that he and Robert Dykheusen had built in Robert's basement.

That's also when he had kissed Emma, who, Kate decided, despite her flowing blonde curls, had eyes too close together to have won the prettiest girl contest.

The screen door closed with a single muted thud. Kate sighed. Mama and Mémère sat at the dining room table. Any thought she might have had of sneaking through the parlor up to the bedroom disappeared like Ben's feet into a puddle. She closed her eyes and prepared herself.

Mama poured steaming tea into the pink and rose decorated china teacups she had painted years earlier before setting the teapot between herself and Mémère. She nodded at Kate, reminded her to wash before bed and to say her prayers, and bade her good night.

Splashing her face, Kate wondered. Mama hadn't said a word to her about coming home late. About letting an older boy drive her home.

And Mama and Mémère never stayed up past ten o'clock.

Kate donned her nightdress and tiptoed back down the stairs and across the wooden floorboards without a creak, as she had learned to do through the years, to eavesdrop from the parlor.