

Sophia's Secret Garden

By Nina Dos Rios

Sophia crossed the backyard one afternoon.

She had always thought the space behind the family garage was just full of trash. Broken lawn chairs and cardboard boxes were covered with spiderwebs. Sophia thought spiders were interesting, but a little scary.

It was a small area of ground. Tall weeds grew along the wall, and patches of clover covered the soil. It was a mess.

But Sophia saw a garden. It could be her secret place. Sophia walked back toward the house, thinking.

In the kitchen, she found a sturdy soup spoon. It was not a garden tool, but it would do. She grabbed a small plastic bucket from the porch. Then she hurried back before anyone could find her.

When she cleared away the junk, she found pebbles and pieces of glass. They sparkled in the sun like hidden treasure.

Then Sophia knelt on the hard dirt. She pushed the edge of the spoon into the earth, prying at the base of a thick, stubborn dandelion. She pushed, twisted, and pulled. The roots were long and strong.

Sophia wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. She felt proud of her hard work. She had not asked for advice or help.

Every time she threw weeds into her bucket, the ground looked a little more like her dream garden.

The first small area was ready. She imagined rows of bright marigolds and green beans climbing up the fence. She looked at her secret corner and promised not to show anyone until it was finished.

The next morning, Sophia moved toward the garage, as quiet as a cat. She carried a small handful of dried marigold seeds in her pocket.

Her secret spot was still there, waiting for her. She had big plans for this space. Sunflowers would reach toward the clouds. For now, it was the dirt and the promise of what might grow.

She did not hear the rustle of leaves at first. Skip, the dog, had followed her. He trotted toward her. He was wagging his tail.

"Skip, wait!" Jackson shouted.

Sophia froze. The bushes parted. Jackson stood there, his messy hair tangled with leaves.

"Sophia?" Jackson stood still and looked at the cleared patch of dirt. Then he saw the soup spoon and finally his sister. Jackson was twelve and tall. She was only six.

"What is this?" he asked.

Sophia stood up and wiped her dirty hands on her jeans. She expected teasing.

He liked to build models out of balsa wood. He usually saw dirt as something to clean off. He never thought about using it to grow plants.

"It's mine," she said. "It's my garden. Don't tell Mom and Dad."

Jackson didn't laugh. He didn't call her silly for playing with trash.

Instead, he stepped carefully over a rock. He knelt down for a closer look.

"You're using a soup spoon?" he asked, picking up the bent utensil and smiling.

"It works," Sophia answered.

Jackson looked at the edges of the patch. "It's a good spot, I guess. The sun hits it most of the day. But when it rains, it is going to be a giant puddle."

Sophia asked, "What can I do?"

Jackson said, "I could make a raised bed. It would keep the soil in place."

He walked toward the corner, measuring it with his eyes.

"If we put strings on the fence, you could grow climbing beans," he suggested. "And we could paint a sign to say it is ours."

"You really want to help?" she asked.

Jackson looked at her. He reached down to scratch Skip behind the ears. "Yeah, I'm bored, Sophia. Honestly, this looks like more fun than my video games."

The two kids spent every day behind the garage. She cared for the plants. He used pieces of wood to hold the soil in their garden.

"It is amazing," Sophia whispered. "God put everything inside the seed. It just needs the warmth and water to start, and sunlight to grow big."

They watered the garden with an old plastic bottle.

"Are you sure you planted them deep enough?" Jackson asked on the third day. "Maybe they are too cold. Or maybe the soil is too hard."

"Seeds do not grow faster because you watch them, Jackson," she teased. "They grow when they are ready. You have to give them time."

Days turned into a week. Jackson stopped visiting the garden and went back to playing his video games.

Sophia still visited. One morning, the ground was soaked. A gentle rain had fallen overnight. The garden smelled of wet earth.

Sophia walked out behind the garage. At first, she saw nothing in the soil. Then she saw it!

A tiny, green arch was pushing through the crust of the dirt.

"Jackson!" she shouted.

Jackson ran to her with Skip barking at his heels.

He knelt beside Sophia. His eyes widened as he spotted the tiny bit of green.

"It's alive," he said.

"It's not just a sprout," Sophia said. She pointed to the delicate first leaves. "We did it right! We gave it what it needed, and it grew."

Within days, their garden became a patch of green. Tiny leaves opened like miniature umbrellas.

Sophia and Jackson spent every free moment in the garden.

"Look at this one," Sophia whispered, pointing to a sturdy shoot. "It doubled in size overnight."

As the weeks passed, the garden grew.

"We can't hide it anymore," Jackson said. "The sunflowers are already taller than the fence. Someone is going to see them."

Sophia froze when she heard Mom say, "Do you know what those kids are up to?"

"They are together behind the garage all day, every day," Dad said.

Sophia stood up and looked at Jackson. They had been so careful. Now their parents had found their secret garden.

"Sophia? Jackson?" their mother asked as she looked at the wooden planters, the sign, and all the green plants. "What have you two been up to?"

Sophia said, "It started as a mess of weeds. I wanted a secret garden. Jackson helped me build the planter."

"You did this? All this?"

"Yes, we did," Jackson said. "It took a lot of work, and time, and water."

"You made a pretty garden," Mom said. "I'm so proud of how you two worked together."

Sophia smiled. Her secret garden was now a special place for the whole family. Someday, they would share the harvest, too.