Sophia's Secret Garden

By Nina Dos Rios

Sophia walked across the backyard one afternoon. She looked behind the family garage. For a long time, she thought this place was only full of trash. Broken lawn chairs and old boxes sat in the dust. Spiderwebs covered everything. Sophia thought spiders were interesting, but they were also a little scary.

The area was small. It was messy. Tall weeds grew along the wall, and wild clover covered the soil.

But Sophia did not see a mess. Sophia saw a garden. It could be her own secret place. She walked back toward the house, thinking hard.

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

First, she cleared away the junk. Under the trash, she found smooth pebbles and bright 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. She pried at the base of a thick, stubborn dandelion. She pushed. She twisted. She 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. She had not asked for help. Every time she threw a weed into her bucket, the ground looked a little more like her dream.

The first small patch of dirt was ready. In her mind, she saw rows of bright yellow flowers. She saw green beans climbing up the fence. She looked at her secret corner and made a promise. She would not show anyone until it was finished.

The next morning, Sophia walked toward the garage. She was as quiet as a cat. She carried a packet of dry flower seeds in her pocket.

Her secret spot was still there, waiting for her. She had big plans for this little space. Sunflowers would reach toward the clouds. But for now, there was only 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, wagging his tail.

"Skip, wait!" a voice shouted.

Sophia froze. The bushes parted. Her brother, Jackson, stood there. His messy hair was tangled with leaves.

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"Sophia?" Jackson stood still. He looked at the clean patch of dirt. He saw the old soup spoon. Finally, he looked at his little sister. Jackson was twelve and tall. Sophia was only six.

"What is this?" he asked.

Sophia stood up. She wiped her dirty hands on her jeans. She waited for him to tease her. Jackson liked to build models out of wood inside the house. He usually saw dirt as something to clean off. He never thought about using it to grow things.

But Jackson did not laugh. He did not call her silly for playing in the trash.

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

"You're using a soup spoon?" he asked. He picked up the bent spoon and smiled.

"It works," Sophia said.

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 will turn into a giant puddle."

Sophia looked down. "What can I do?"

"I could build a raised bed," Jackson said. "It would keep the soil in place." He walked around the corner, measuring the space with his eyes. "If we put strings on the fence, your beans can climb. And we can 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 am bored, Sophia. Honestly, this looks like more fun than my video games."

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

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

They watered the dirt 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 just 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 got bored. He stopped visiting the garden and went back to his video games.

But Sophia still visited. One morning, the ground was dark and wet. A gentle rain had fallen overnight. The air smelled of fresh earth. Sophia walked out behind the garage. At first, she saw nothing. The dirt looked empty.

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Then, she saw it!

A tiny green stem was pushing through the hard crust of the dirt.

"Jackson!" she shouted.

Jackson ran to her. Skip barked at his heels.

He knelt beside Sophia. His eyes went wide when 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 a few days, their garden became a patch of bright green. Tiny leaves opened like miniature umbrellas. Sophia and Jackson spent every free moment together in the dirt.

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

As the weeks passed, the garden grew taller and taller.

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

Suddenly, Sophia froze. She heard her mother's voice near the garage. "Do you know what those kids are up to?"

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

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

"Sophia? Jackson?" their mother asked. She stepped around the corner. She looked at the wooden planters, the painted sign, and the tall green plants. "What have you two been up to?"

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

"You did this? All of this?" her mother asked.

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

"You made a beautiful garden," her mother said. "I am so proud of how you worked together."

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

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