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The Lost Garden

Tales from Goswell

Written by Katharine Swartz

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The Lost Garden

Tales from Goswell

Katharine Swartz



LION FICTION

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PROLOGUE

Goswell, West Cumberland, October 1919

The rain lashes against the windows and the sky is dark with lowering clouds as she gazes out at the lawn now awash in puddles and steeped in mud. It makes her ache to remember how only a few months ago Jack was out there, toiling in the hot sun – it had been such an unusually warm summer for West Cumberland – and the lawn had been verdant, the garden so full of beauty and life. It had all looked so lovely, and her father had been so pleased.

She presses a hand to her thudding heart and turns away from the window, and the view of mud and gloom. As she walks through the house she can hear Tilly, their housemaid, humming under her breath as she moves around to stoke the fires burning in every fireplace on this grey November day. In the kitchen Mrs Stanton is starting on supper, and she can hear the busy clang of copper pots. She passes her father's study, and hears him clear his throat, and then the rustle of papers.

All is well. Or as well as it could be, in the year since Walter's death.

She walks towards the kitchen where the hall narrows. She thinks about going upstairs to change into her walking boots, but there seems little point and she does not want to

have her mother call to her from the bedroom and ask her to come in and read a few verses of the Bible, a bit of poetry, something to while away the afternoon.

She won't take a coat either, or even a wrap. She stands by the kitchen door, waits until Mrs Stanton has gone into the larder and then slips like a ghost – already, she feels like a ghost, and she wonders if Walter must have felt this way, if he had *known* – into the kitchen, out the back door, into the little courtyard where the coal is kept. Through the gates and around past the old stables, along the path that leads to Bower House where Grandmama lives, on the other side of the church.

All around her the churchyard is wet and dark, the bare branches dripping with rain, heaps of soggy leaves clumped by the headstones. Jack should clear those, she thinks, before she remembers. Jack is gone.

She walks down the path and around to Grandmama's garden, the gate to the walled garden in front of her. She knows if Grandmama looked out the window of her dining room she would see her there, standing in front of the wooden door, ivy curling around its arched top. Five hundred years ago it had been the herb garden for the monks, or so her father said, before the Reformation. Now it is her garden, hers and Jack's, and it deserves her farewell.

Already she is soaked and her feet are numb. The rain is relentless, the wind from the sea cold and unforgiving. So unforgiving. Yet after a few moments she forgets the wind, the rain; she feels strangely serene and suddenly surprisingly buoyant because she knows that there is no going back now, and that knowledge brings only relief.

She struggles with the latch to the walled garden, a few rooks wheeling and screeching above her, as if they sense her unnatural purpose. She knows that if anyone came along

now they would see her soaked and shivering in the middle of a garden, wrestling with a latch. Yet even as part of her acknowledges this, another deeper part knows she will not be seen. She is becoming a ghost; she imagines if she looked down she would see her body waver, like a reflection in water. She cannot live in this world, not with the knowledge inside her, the intolerable heaviness of her own reckless cruelty.

The latch finally lifts, and she enters the garden. *Her* garden, the garden her father gave her and that Jack made. Even in the beginning of winter it is beautiful to her, the damson trees thrusting their stark branches to the sky, the borders now full of straggling weeds, although in summer they were rampant and wild, heavy with flower and fruit, which is what she had wanted. Life – pulsing, vibrant life – in all of its glory.

Now she stands in the middle of the garden and looks towards the little house, her house. Once it was warm inside enough for its fragile occupants, but now it is cold and dark and empty. There is nothing left for her here now, nothing but memories.

She leaves the walled garden and walks back through the churchyard to the vicarage, and then through the rose garden, the bushes' stark branches black with rain, and down the stone steps to the muddy acre of sheep pasture that leads to the beach road. She knows her father could see her if he just turned his head, but she feels he won't. He has most likely drawn the heavy curtains against the cold and dark.

She continues walking, the rain running down her in icy rivulets, her dress soaked completely through, and no one sees her. No one stops her.

If only it would all be this easy, she thinks. If only it was a matter of walking, one step at a time, into eternity.

Walter was pushed – so suddenly, so unfairly – but she will go willingly. She will choose it. And yet she knows the entrance to eternity is not such a simple thing, although as she nears the beach she thinks perhaps it is after all. Perhaps this step is as simple as any other, if you just close your eyes.

And so she closes her eyes, and lets the rain beat over her, and everything in her demands she take that small, final step into forever.

CHAPTER ONE

Marin

It started with a door. Not just any door; a wooden door with an arched top and a rusted latch, set in the middle of a high stone wall. Marin Ellis gazed at the weathered wood in both fascination and frustration, for she'd tried the latch and rusted as it was, it wouldn't budge.

She had never been the sort to indulge in fancy. She'd long ago accepted she was practical to the point of tedium. And yet this door, and whatever lay beyond it, had, briefly at least, captured her long-dormant imagination.

"Is that the entrance to a secret garden?" Rebecca's voice carried across the icy expanse of overgrown lawn. Her boots crunched on the frost-tipped grass as she came over to join Marin, her hands thrust into the pockets of her coat. It was four o'clock on a February afternoon in a remote corner of West Cumbria, and dusk was already settling on the rolling pasture that stretched to the sea, a quarter of a mile away.

"It does look like a door to a secret garden, doesn't it?" Marin agreed with a little laugh. "It's probably just a door to the churchyard, or maybe to a path that leads to the beach. But in any case, I can't open it."

"Let me try." Rebecca pushed at the latch for a moment, but as Marin expected, it didn't move so much as a centimetre. She pressed her face against the door and peered into the crack between it and the wall. "All I see is bramble. If it leads to the churchyard, it's all grown over."

"Oh, well. It doesn't matter." Marin shivered as she turned towards the house; it looked lonely and lost in the oncoming darkness, with its blank windows and funny little turret. Or perhaps she was the one who felt lonely and lost, wondering how they'd both arrived in this place, even though she knew the answer very well.

She glanced at Rebecca, who had turned away from the door, looking, as she did in these unguarded moments, so young and vulnerable and impossible to reach. Marin's heart gave a little aching pulse of sympathy and grief. Rebecca had lost so much, so young… just as she once had.

"Don't be sad, Marin," Rebecca said quietly, catching her half-sister's sorrowful gaze. "This is our new start, remember."

"Yes, I remember." Smiling with effort, Marin walked back to the front door of the little house to lock up.

It had been theirs since just after Christmas, when they'd come up to the Lakes on a brief holiday. They'd been driving through the sleepy village of Goswell, on the Cumbrian coast, when Rebecca had suddenly asked her to stop the car, and surprised, she'd pulled over on the steep, narrow high street that ran through the village.

"It looks like a little castle," Rebecca had said, staring at the house that was perched on a lip of land that jutted out from the churchyard. "And it's for sale."

"It's a funny little house, isn't it?" Marin had answered, nonplussed. It had long windows of stained glass and a crenellated turret on one side, a weedy bit of garden out front. From behind the house Marin could see the square Norman tower of the church.

"It's lovely," Rebecca said, a world of longing in her voice, and Marin glanced at her half-sister in wary surprise. For the last three months, since she'd become guardian of fifteen-

year-old Rebecca, they'd been living in Hampshire, struggling on in survival mode, half-sisters and yet also virtual strangers, separated by twenty-two years in age and now drawn together out of necessity and grief.

Rebecca hadn't been hostile to Marin or her sudden arrival in her life, but she hadn't been overly welcoming either. How could she, when they barely knew each other? Rebecca had been born after Marin had left university and had already been estranged from their shared father for several years. She'd seen Rebecca only a handful of times since then, a few excruciating holidays and weekends where she felt like an interloper in this happy life her father had made for himself, with his new family. She had no place there.

Not until now, when all Rebecca had was her. Both her parents had been only children, their own parents dead. And so Marin had tried to keep Rebecca's life going in Hampshire: driving her to school, sorting out their father's estate, managing the housework and washing and bills. She'd thought about getting a job or going freelance, but all her energy was taken by simply dragging herself – and Rebecca – through each day.

She was, Marin knew, a sad substitute for two loving parents. She wasn't a mother. She'd only had a few semi-serious relationships in her entire adult life. To suddenly become the sole guardian of a fifteen-year-old had been shocking.

And it had, Marin acknowledged, to have been shocking for Rebecca as well; suddenly she was saddled with a thirty-seven-year-old half-sister who barely knew how to fry an egg. Marin had gazed at the row of glossy cookbooks in her stepmother's gourmet kitchen in bemused incredulity, knowing she would never be able to make the kind of elegant meals Diana Ellis had no doubt regularly cooked

with effortless ease. Diana had been carelessly glamorous in everything she did; she'd also only been four years older than Marin. They'd never had anything close to a relationship.

The holiday up to the Lakes had been an escape from the oppression of life in Hampshire, yet Marin had never intended to make it permanent. It had been Rebecca who had suggested it.

"We could buy it," she'd said quietly, as they sat in the car and stared at the little house, with its stained-glass windows and turret. It looked like the kind of folly you'd see in the garden of a large estate. A sign on the gate announced in grandly curling script that it was Bower House. "*You* could buy it," Rebecca amended before Marin could think to reply. "With the money from my trust."

"Buy a house in Cumbria?" she finally said, shaking her head. "Why—"

"We could start over. It's beautiful here, you said so yourself. We don't need money, not really, and if we rented out or even sold the house in Hampshire we'd be fine. You told me you could work from anywhere if you started freelancing. Why not?"

Marin had just kept shaking her head, overwhelmed by this utterly unexpected leap in Rebecca's thinking. "The question isn't so much why not," she finally said, "as why."

"Because I'm tired of everyone looking at me funny because they know my parents died," Rebecca answered fiercely. "I'm tired of wandering around the rooms where they were and knowing they're never coming back. I'm stuck, and so are you, and I want to start over."

"Starting over won't change things," Marin told her quietly. "Your parents will still be gone." A lump rose in her throat. Her father would still be gone. And there had been so

much she'd never said. "And even if you moved somewhere new, you couldn't keep their deaths secret. You wouldn't even want to, Rebecca. It would be almost like a lie if you did."

"I know." Rebecca nibbled her lip, her face turned towards the window, and once again Marin had been struck by how young Rebecca was. How alone, except for her. In the three months since the accident Marin had never seen Rebecca cry. She'd sometimes go very quiet or sullen, but she never shed a tear.

But then neither had Marin.

"It would be different here," Rebecca said after a moment, turning back to Marin. Her jaw was set stubbornly, a flash of something like ire in her eyes. "It wouldn't be this huge shadow looming over everyone and everything, the way it is now. People wouldn't *remember* all the time."

"Maybe not, but what about your school? Your friends?"

Rebecca shrugged. "When something like this happens, you find out who your real friends are."

"Oh, Rebecca."

"There's nothing I wouldn't leave. You left your life in Boston, Marin. Why can't I do the same?"

Marin sighed, both tempted and torn. To start over… to have something new and different to look forward to… yes, she could see the appeal, unlikely though this place was. "This is hardly something to rush into," she said.

"Can we at least look at it? The inside?"

"I suppose…"

Rebecca had insisted on ringing the estate agent from the bed and breakfast they'd booked into that afternoon, and they had a viewing the next morning.

"It was built in 1905, by the vicar of the church," the agent told them as they wandered through the rooms, dust-

ridden and yet with lovely proportions and elegant, tiled fireplaces. "He had it built for his mother-in-law. A sort of dower house."

"And yet it's called Bower House," Marin had observed, and the woman let out a trill of laughter.

"Yes, odd, isn't it? But in any case, it was gifted to the diocese in 1929, and they let it to various tenants over the years. The garden overlooks the church—"

They hadn't spent any time in the garden, because it was drizzling an icy rain and Marin wasn't much of a gardener anyway.

"And yet completely private, of course," the woman continued. "Separated from the churchyard by a wall, so you won't have people nosing about. The vicarage was sold recently, about a year and a half ago, to an American family. Are you moving to the area?"

"Thinking about it," Rebecca answered before Marin could demur.

The kitchen, they both agreed, was the best part of the house. A large square room with sashed windows that overlooked the garden, and a huge blue Rayburn that took up nearly an entire wall.

"Heats the whole house," the agent informed them cheerfully. "I know it's freezing in here at the moment, but this thing will keep everything cosy and warm when it's running."

Marin had laid one hand on top of the range, the enamel ice-cold under her hand. She had been able to imagine, quite suddenly and surprisingly, how the kitchen would look with sunlight pouring through the windows, everything cheerful and clean, a kettle whistling merrily on the range, a jar of early daffodils on the windowsill. A place of both comfort and hope, the kind she couldn't remember ever having.

Rebecca had given her a beseeching look and Marin turned to the agent. "We'll have to think about it," she said.

Over a lunch of fish and chips at the local pub, Rebecca laid out all her arguments. She was halfway through her first year of GCSEs, so the sooner they moved, the better. They could come up after February half-term; that would give them enough time to sort out the Hampshire house. She'd looked at the local secondary school online last night and it had received a very good OFSTED report.

"Rebecca, you currently attend one of the best public schools in the country. A state school in a remote part of—"

"Don't be a snob. I can get a perfectly good education there if I apply myself, which you know I will."

Marin had just shaken her head, helpless in the face of Rebecca's determination. "I don't understand why you want this so much," she said quietly. "It's miles from anywhere, Rebecca. No shops, no museums, no distractions—"

"Maybe that's what I like about it."

"You're fifteen. Don't you want friends around and things to do? Places to go—"

"Not really." Rebecca had glanced away, her mouth turning down at the corners, her eyes shadowed. "I'm not like most fifteen-year-olds, Marin. Not any more."

And Marin knew that all too well.

It had taken a week, but Rebecca had worn her down eventually. She'd done her own research on the village and the school, had toyed with the possibility of going freelance, setting up her own business offering IT services. Nothing was keeping them in Hampshire except for Marin's reticence, her fear of taking Rebecca into something so different and unknown. Her fear, perhaps, of going there herself.

"Why don't you let the Hampshire house for a while?"

Rebecca had suggested. "Then, if we decided it's an epic failure, we could go back after, say, six months. We have to give it at least that long." She spoke firmly, as if she suspected Marin would sneak back as soon as she could.

And so Marin had done as Rebecca had said, and let the house out; the solicitor had approved the use of Rebecca's trust fund for the purchase of Bower House. They'd packed up their things – leaving nearly all of the furniture behind – and driven up to Goswell on a grey day in late February and now they were here, about to start their new lives.

"I can't wait till our things arrive," Rebecca said as Marin locked up the house. It was just past four o'clock and it was already dark. And freezing. Marin didn't remember it being so windy the last time they'd been here, but now an icy wind blew off the sea, making her eyes water and sting. The windowpanes had rattled with it as they'd walked through the house. She hadn't remembered that, either. She found the rattling, along with the lack of traffic or people noise, quite unnerving.

"We don't even have many things," she told Rebecca as they headed back to the car. "We'll have to buy the basics from charity shops." They'd both agreed it was better to leave the Hampshire house furnished with all of its sleek, modern pieces, and beyond a couple of mattresses and chests of drawers that the movers were bringing tomorrow, they hadn't anything but their clothes and personal items.

"I can't wait," Rebecca answered cheerfully. Marin hadn't seen her so animated before, but then there had been precious little to get excited about. She wanted, for Rebecca's sake, to feel just as excited, just as optimistic, and yet as she gazed down the darkened street, the howl of the wind a lonely, mournful sound, sheep huddled miserably in the pasture by the church

lane, she wondered what on earth they'd got themselves into. They weren't even in the middle of nowhere, she thought with something close to panic. They were on its *edge*.

When you were already struggling with grief, already feeling isolated and alone, was it really a good idea to move somewhere as remote as this? What if Rebecca wasn't able to make friends? What if the school was awful? What if they both hated it here, and they had no one to turn to?

They could always go back, and yet Marin acknowledged that option wasn't all that appealing either. Life in Hampshire had become nothing more than an endurance test for both of them. She hadn't made friends there; the few neighbours who had stopped by with casseroles and sympathetic smiles had seemed cloying, unnatural. She didn't want to go back and she was afraid to go forward. Not a very good place to be.

"Tomorrow let's try to open that door in the garden," Rebecca said as Marin started the car. "I want to know what's behind it."

"Probably nothing but bramble, as you said," Marin answered, and suppressed the little flicker of curiosity she still felt about that door.

"It might be something, though," Rebecca insisted. "Maybe some kind of secret garden."

"Maybe," Marin answered dubiously. She glanced back at the garden, but the door was lost in darkness.