



Sarah's Song

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Sarah's Song

A *N* O V E L

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New York · Nashville

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Worthy

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

worthypublishing.com

twitter.com/worthypub

Originally published in hardcover in 2004

First Trade Paperback Edition: November 2023

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Book design by Fearn Cutler de Vicq

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kingsbury, Karen.

Sarah's song / Karen Kingsbury.

p. cm. — (The red gloves series)

ISBN 0-446-53235-5

1. Older women—Fiction. 2. Nursing students—Fiction. 3. Female friendship—Fiction. 4. Nursing home patients—Fiction. 5. Reminiscing in old age—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3561.L4873S27 2004

813'.54—dc22

2004006484

ISBNs: 978-0-4465-3235-8 (hardcover); 978-1-5460-0694-7 (trade paperback); 978-0-4465-0602-1 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

LSC-C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sarah's Song

*It's not too late for faith to find us.
Not too late for right to win.
Not too late, let love remind us.
Not too late to try again.*

*In my life the straight and narrow had a face, and
it was yours.*

*I took crooked paths around you, shut you out,
and locked the doors.*

*Long I wandered tired and aimless, seeking all the
world might hold.*

*There you waited, true and blameless, soul of
goodness, heart of gold.*

*Nothing lasting came of those days, months of bit-
ter freezing rain.*

*I was blinded, couldn't see you, choosing sorrow,
living pain.*

*Then one day I looked behind me, at the way life
could've been.
Suddenly I had to find you, had to see your face
again.*

*Somewhere in my mind I see a place for me and
you.
A place where faith might find a future, give us
both a life brand new.
Together in God's mighty grip is where we both be-
long.
Find me, know me, teach your heart the words to
Sarah's Song.*

*It's not too late for faith to find us.
Not too late for right to win.
Not too late for love to bind us.
Not too late to try again.*

P R O L O G U E



THE RITUAL WAS SACRED, drawn out for twelve days, the same every Christmas.

Sarah Lindeman looked out the smudged window of her cramped room at Greer Retirement Village, and already she could hear the music, feel her tired, old vocal chords coming together to sing again. The way they came together every thirteenth of December.

The box was opened, its contents spread across the worn bedspread. Twelve envelopes, yellowed and faded by the years, the way all of life was faded now. All except the memory of that single year, the year when heaven cracked open and spilled stardust and miracles into the life of a young woman who had given up hope.

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She was that girl, and the year was 1941.

Patched together, the events of that time created a journey, a story she remembered still, every teardrop and smile, every exchange of words, every bit of laughter. Every impossible twist and turn down the alleys of a yesterday even time couldn't touch.

Sarah had broken the story into twelve parts, created twelve paper ornaments, each with a single word or words to remind her. Over the years it became the ritual it was today. Twelve ornaments, one each for the twelve days of Christmas, a chance each December to drift back through the decades, back to 1941, and remember it all again.

And there was the song, of course, playing in the background, standing like an anthem for all they'd known, all she missed now that he was gone. The notes, the melody, the haunting refrains pulled from the story of their lives. Always she would sing the song. She would hum it at first, and then as the days of December wore on, the words would come. They would come as they had at the beginning, born of despair, desperate for a second chance.

All of it, every word, every note, for Sam.

Sarah turned around, leaned hard into her aluminum walker, and shuffled to the bed. Distant voices filled the hallway outside her room, staff assistants talking to the

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elderly residents the way young people did these days, loud and condescending; someone going on about the cooking staff and its bland version of lasagna.

And somewhere above it all the piped-in refrains of “Silent Night.”

Sarah eased herself down next to the envelopes. The bed seemed lower all the time. Her hips hurt worse this year, and each breath came slower, with more effort. No doubt her time was short. Death wasn't far off.

Not that Sarah minded. Dying, after all, would reunite her with Sam.

Had it been thirteen years since his death? Thirteen years since she'd shared this Christmas ritual with the man who had made it possible? Back then they'd gone through the twelve days together—taking out the ornaments, finding their way through the days and months and years back to 1941, remembering their story.

Singing the song.

She was eighty-six now, and if Sam had lived he'd be ninety-one. Instead, cancer had taken him—not slowly over a course of years, but in six months. That May he was traveling with her to Los Angeles to see the kids, to welcome the birth of a great-granddaughter. A sluggish few weeks, a bad blood test, and he was gone before Thanksgiving.

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At first Sarah lived alone in the old house where they'd raised their two children and entertained grandchildren. The house was as much a part of the glorious past as anything else because it was walking distance to the park, the place where it had all come together.

But more years passed and she grew tired, too tired to dress in the morning or take a walk or shop for groceries. Heart failure, the doctor told her. Nothing imminent, just a slow and steady decline that would worsen over time.

After her diagnosis, the kids had taken a week off work and tried to talk her into moving to LA. Sarah was gracious, glad for their concern, but only one place could possibly serve as her final home, the place where she would live out her days.

The facility was built across from the park the summer after Sam died. Greer Retirement Village. Assisted living, they called it. An oversized bedroom with space enough for a recliner and television. Also a kitchenette with a sink, a microwave, and small refrigerator. The staff organized bingo on Tuesdays, Bible study on Wednesdays, low-impact aerobics on Thursdays, and old movies on Fridays. Meals were served on china and linen twice a day in the dining room, and on weekends they had live entertainment in the form of Mr. Johnson, the assistant manager who also played the piano.

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Most of all, each room had emergency buttons near the bed and in the bathroom, and staff assistants who came by to remind residents about their medication—how much and when to take it.

And so, after a few days' discussion, the kids had come around and reserved Sarah a place at the village. A room on the first floor overlooking the park and the bench. The very same bench where Sarah had written the song in the first place.

"I'll never leave," she told the kids before they returned to LA. "This—" She waved toward the window and the park and the bench beyond. "—is where I'll feel your father every day." She hesitated. "I'll come see you; don't worry."

They understood, both Harry who was fifty-five that year, and Sharon, fifty-three. And at first Sarah kept her promise, heading for California two weeks each summer and two weeks in January. But her heart failure progressed, and three years back the doctor ordered her to stop flying. Sarah was moved to the third floor, to a wing that was more nursing home than assisted living.

But she kept her view of the park bench.

And she kept the ritual, the twelve days of Christmas.

Sarah rested her weathered fingers on the first envelope and a thrill worked its way through her. The story

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always did that to her, always moved her heart a few inches closer to her throat and made her mouth dry. No matter how many decades had passed, the memory of that year made her feel young and in love and awed by the miracle they'd shared.

She dusted her fingertips over the old envelopes one at a time, the numbers scrawled across the fronts reminding her, filling her spirit, readying her soul for the remembering that was to come. If this was the last time, the last Christmas, then she'd need a little help.

Her eyes narrowed and she lifted her face toward the window. "Dear God . . ." The words were a scratchy whisper. "Make the days come to life again, every moment. Please."

The quiet prayer hung in the room for a moment, and then slowly a thought began to form. If this was the last time she was going to remember, the last time she would sing her song, then someone had to hear it. Not just hear it but feel it—feel it in the fabric of their heart the way Sarah did.

God had promised her that much, hadn't He?

A stranger needing encouragement, a doctor or a nurse, one of the staff assistants. Someone at Greer Retirement Village who would be changed by "Sarah's Song," the way she had been changed by it so long ago.

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She cleared her throat and struggled to her feet again. The walker seemed lighter, her bones filled with an energy that came every December. When she reached the window, with a clear view of the park bench, she finished her prayer.

“Send someone, God. Someone who needs hope.” She could feel her eyes dancing despite the cataracts that clouded them. “Someone who could learn the song.”

When she finished praying, a certainty filled her and made her long for tomorrow, the first of the twelve days. Something different was going to happen this time; she could feel it in her soul.

Now all she had to do was wait.

CHAPTER ONE



DECEMBER 13 DAWNED bright and sunny, unseasonably warm according to the morning nurse. Sarah didn't mind. Temperatures in South Carolina could change in an afternoon, and snow wasn't out of the question. Even for the week ahead. Snow had been a part of their first December; it was bound to come sometime in the next twelve days.

Beth Baldwin was in charge that morning. Beth was a young caregiver who never spoke more than the essentials. *Good morning. How are you? Nice December we're having.* That sort of thing. Beth was married, or at least Sarah suspected as much since Beth wore a wedding ring. She was a pretty girl, a gentle caregiver, but her eyes were

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wild and restless. They reminded Sarah of something she couldn't quite take hold of.

"Beth, dear, do you know what day it is?" Sarah leaned forward so Beth could ease her into her red Christmas sweater.

The young woman blew a wisp of dark hair off her forehead. Her voice was pleasant, but she didn't make eye contact. "Monday, December 13."

A soft chuckle came from Sarah's throat. "No, dear. I don't mean the date, I mean the day." Sarah waited until she had Beth's attention.

"The day?" Beth straightened, one hand on her hip. "I give up; what's special about today?"

"Why, it's the First Day of Christmas!"

Beth cocked her head. "You mean like the song? The partridge in a pear tree and all that Twelve Days of Christmas stuff?"

"Yes." Sarah tugged on the sides of her sweater, and when it lay smooth around her scant frame, she eased back against the pillow. "Today's the first day."

"Hmmm." Beth took hold of the water pitcher sitting on Sarah's bedside table. "I thought those were the twelve days after Christmas."

"Only in the history books, dear. My twelve days begin today."

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“Oh.” Beth stopped. “Okay. That’s nice I guess.” With purposeful steps, she went to the sink, rinsed the pitcher, filled it, and returned it to its place. “I guess that means one thing.” She stopped and gave Sarah a lopsided smile. “Twelve shopping days until Christmas.”

Sarah pursed her lips, the prayer from last night playing over in her mind. Beth wasn’t the one; she wouldn’t hold a conversation, never mind listen to a story that stretched over twelve days.

“You know the routine.” Beth headed for the door with a glance over her shoulder. “Press the call button if you need anything.”

“Thank you, Beth. I’ll be okay for a few—”

She was gone. Sarah stared at the closed door and gave a gentle shrug of her shoulders. Just as well. If Beth wasn’t the one she’d prayed for, better to be alone for the first day of the ritual. She’d been waiting for this moment since the leaves began turning orange back in October.

The envelopes lay fanned out on her nightstand in numerical order, the small plastic tree set up a few inches away, pressed against the wall. Sarah shifted to that side of the bed and let her legs hang over the side until her woolly socks rested on the cold linoleum floor.

The first envelope called out to her, begging to be

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opened. She lifted the flap, removed the paper ornament, and studied the word scrawled across both sides.

Tomorrow.

That's what she had wanted that cold January day, wasn't it? Everything about tomorrow. Today, what she had in the moment, was never enough. Not Greer or her parents or their faith. Not even Sam. Everything she'd done back then was focused on tomorrow, that far-off day when she could go after everything country music had to offer. Everything a young woman with her looks and voice and determination deserved. Everything her small town of Greer couldn't offer. Every moment of it.

Tomorrow.

Sarah studied the word, the faded ink, and bit by bit the piped-in music, the conversations in the hall, the aches and pains of nearly nine decades, all grew dim. She closed her eyes, and in a rush she felt herself going back, pulled into a time that still existed, a time that had never really ended at all. She blinked her eyes open, and she was no longer perched on the edge of her bed at Greer Retirement Village.

She was twenty-three, in her parents' farmhouse across the street from the high school. Her mother was canning in the kitchen and the smell of warm apples and cinnamon filled the air. It was Christmas Eve 1940, and

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Sam Lindeman was over. The way Sam always had been back then.

Sarah fingered the paper ornament in her hand and blinked. She felt the weathered skin above her eyebrows bunch up and she pulled herself from the memory. She couldn't start in 1940. No, she had to go back to her girlhood days, when she dreamed day and night of catching Sam's attention, dating him, and one day marrying him.



Sam was five years older than her, the brother of Sarah's best friend, Mary. Though the Lindemans sometimes vacationed with Sarah's family, Sam never noticed Sarah in the early years. His age stood like an ocean, the span of time too far to consider bridging. But sometime after her twelfth birthday, despite their age difference, Sarah fell hard for him.

"He's so cute," she would tell Mary whenever the two were visiting. Back then, they spent hours listening to records in Mary's room, pretending they were famous singers.

"Nah," Mary would wrinkle her nose and turn up the music. "He's just my bossy brother."

Sam played football for Greer High and Sarah used to dream of aging four years overnight, waking one morning,

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showing up at the high school, and being Sam Lindeman's girl. They would graduate high school and head for some foreign land—Spain, maybe, or the South of France or the Bahamas. One of the places her teachers were always talking about.

In the dream, Sam would lead tourists on daring excursions and she would gain fame and fortune singing—not in a church choir the way her mother wanted her to sing, but in fancy dance halls and nightclubs, decked in beautiful gowns, with Sam sitting in the front row smiling at her.

The dream never panned out. Every morning Sarah woke up still twelve years old, and the next year Sam graduated from high school and went off to college without so much as a good-bye to his kid sister's little friend.

Years passed, and Sarah kept singing. By the time she turned seventeen everyone in Greer knew about her gift.

She'd been born with a voice that could silence a room; a voice her mama said would make angels cry with envy. Sarah proved it again and again, every Sunday when the church choir featured her as a soloist. Each week Sarah smiled and sang her heart out. But she hated singing in a choir robe. She kept a small calendar beneath her bed where she counted down the days until she could finish high

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school and take her singing somewhere exciting—Nashville or New York or Chicago. Anywhere but Greer.

One summer Sam returned home for an entire month. Four years had passed since Sam left for college, and he no longer figured into Sarah's dreams. Sarah would never forget the first time she saw him that July day. That morning at the Lindeman house, she was on her way up the stairs to find Mary when she heard a man's voice call to her from the dining room.

She turned and there he was. Sam Lindeman, twenty-two years old, taller, more filled out and more handsome than she had remembered. Sarah's breath caught in her throat and she froze near the bottom of the stairs. Visions of Spain and France and the Bahamas flashed in her mind.

"Sarah, look at you." He crossed the parlor to the place where she stood. His voice fell a notch and his eyes seemed to find her for the first time. "What happened to the little girl down the street?"

"Uh . . ." Heat rushed into Sarah's cheeks and she remembered to smile. "I grew up." She batted her eyelashes, willing herself to exhale.

"I guess so." He leaned against the wall, watching her. "You must be, what, seventeen now?"

"Yes." She was breathing again, but her racing heart threatened to give her away. "I'll be a senior in the fall."

AUTHOR'S NOTE



THE FIRST BOOK I wrote in the Red Gloves series was *Gideon's Gift*. In that book, I shared with you the miracle of a sick little girl and an angry homeless man, and the gift that changed both their lives forever. And in honor of Gideon's precious gift, at the back of that book I suggested several Red Gloves Projects for you and your friends and families.

In the hundreds of letters you wrote me after that book published, I've heard one theme resonate loudly: You love the idea of the red gloves. Red for Christmas, red for a heart full of love and hope and Christmas miracles.

Red, the color of giving.

And because of that, I decided to let the red gloves of *Gideon's Gift* play a cameo role in each of my Christmas

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stories. Each book in the Red Gloves Series has a new list of Red Glove Projects. The second book I gave you was *Maggie's Miracle*. The Red Gloves Projects in that book dealt with helping orphaned or foster children.

As one of you told me, "I bought fifty copies of *Gideon's Gift* to give to everyone I know. My prayer is that we'd see red gloves all around us in the coming years, that they'd grace the hands of the homeless and widowed, the children without parents and parents without hope. So that red gloves would forever be the symbol of Christ's love at Christmas."

Sarah's Song is the third in my series of Red Gloves books, and it has become especially dear to me. The reason is simple: It deals with an old woman whose message literally brings about a miracle. A Christmas miracle.

There's something special about older people, people who've talked the talk and walked the walk. Take a trip through a retirement center some time, or visit a nursing hospital. What you'll see are frail, white-haired folks whose words don't come easily or quickly.

But don't let that fool you.

Every one of them, people in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, has a story to tell. A tale of God's faithfulness, of love won and lost, or of a truth that took years to come to life.

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But here's the tragedy.

Too often older people have no one to share their stories with. They sit in retirement homes playing their bingo and shuffling their way to their twice-daily meals, counting the days until heaven. And no one thinks to ask the questions.

In *Sarah's Song*, Beth Baldwin hears Sarah singing and asks, "What song is it? What does it mean?"

And because she asked, God cracked open heaven and gave Beth a miracle that changed her life. All she had to do was listen.

In that light, I bring you these Red Gloves Projects.

RED GLOVES PROJECTS

- ✦ Take a trip to a retirement center. Most cities have these facilities now, and the residents are often well enough to realize their loneliness. Call the facility and set a date. Then gather your friends and family, and ask everyone to bring a pair of red gloves. Go as dinner is just ending, and fan out through the dining room. Have each person in your group find a resident, introduce themselves, and ask a few questions. Why is Christmas special, for instance, or in all your life what year was most special to you? Ask

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God to teach you something in the course of the conversation. Then give your set of red gloves to that resident.

❖ Go caroling. If you and your family, or you and your group of friends can't sing well, don't let that stop you. Older people make a very forgiving audience. Simply locate a nursing home or retirement center, contact the facility, and set up a date. Then put together a few Christmas carols, wear Santa hats, and bring a box of red gloves to pass out. The hardest part will be trying to make it through "Silent Night" with twenty teary-eyed seniors soaking in every word. A note of caution: Don't bring baked goods. Most people in assisted living can't have sugar. The red gloves and your song will be gift enough.

❖ Adopt an older person. Contact your local nursing home or retirement center and ask if they have a resident who doesn't receive visits very often. Maybe never. Then make it a point to visit that person at least once a week throughout the Christmas season. Bring that person a pair of red gloves, and get to know him or her. Your life just might be changed in the process.

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✿ Invite a lonely older person to dinner. This should be done with contacts through your church. Check if there are former members who are now residing in assisted living facilities. If they have no family in the area, offer to arrange a time when he or she can join you for dinner or a Christmas party. In the process, give that person a pair of red gloves and ask them to share their favorite story. It might be one you decide to keep in your family for decades to come.

I pray this finds you and your family doing well this Christmas, determined to seek the riches our seniors can offer. In doing so, I pray you make time to mend broken relationships and let fall the walls that have come between you and those you love. In Jesus, God gave us the greatest gift of all that first Christmas Day. How much richer we—like Beth Baldwin—are when we seek all He has to offer us, even now.

Please check out my website at www.KarenKingsbury.com for more information about the Red Gloves Projects. And leave me a note in my guestbook. As always, I'd love to hear from you, and if you have a Red Gloves Project idea you'd like to share with me, please do.

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Until next time, may God's light and life be yours in the coming year.

In His love,
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