

Chapter Seven



Sara Payson Willis Eldredge, Boston, Friday, December 22nd, 1848

Isn't a "seedy" hat, a threadbare coat, or a patched dress, an effectual shower-bath on old friendships? Haven't people a mortal horror of a sad face and a pitiful story? Don't they on hearing it, instinctively poke their purses into the farthest, most remote corner of their pockets? . . . Ain't they always "engaged" ever after, when you call to see 'em? Ain't they near-sighted when you meet 'em in the street?—and don't they turn short corners to get out of your way?

—Fanny Fern, *Olive Branch*, March 18th, 1852

Sara pulled the warped door closed behind her, shook her freezing fingers, and climbed the boardinghouse's steep side stairs, the very stairs she'd recently agreed to wash for five cents off the three-dollar-a-week room and board she paid the landlady, Mrs. Haufen. Deep within the folds of her pocket, the only one left without a hole, was a whole dollar and the other guilty lump—peppermint. Peppermint she'd *stolen*. She'd sewed practically round the clock for old man Schueller this week, hoping to make more than the usual seventy-five cents for the week's labor. She'd delivered one extra shirt and figured that since she was usually paid seventy-five cents for two shirts, that she'd make an extra thirty-seven, or maybe thirty-eight cents (it was the Christmas season after all). But Schueller had given her only the dollar, which made Sara tear up, as she so often did these days. When he'd asked her what she was upset about, and

she'd told him, he'd smiled in that way that froze Sara's insides and had said that she could get the extra thirteen cents for as many kisses. The extra money suddenly didn't matter. Sara pulled the extended bill from Schueller's clenched grip and stumbled away from his leering grin. Later, she would blame him for her thievery.

She wished she could find other employment. After Charly's funeral, Hezekiah and her father had each agreed to give her a dollar and a quarter a week. Both devout church goers, they felt congregational eyes flutter from wretched, vocal Sara to their ample purses and knew nobody would understand their mutually agreed-upon assertion that headstrong Sara deserved to reap the hardship she'd sown. Hers was God's lesson of humility and she wasn't acquiescing a bit. Given that they knew she'd be able to earn at least fifty cents a week taking in sewing, as her sister Julia did, her room and board would be covered. Never mind the fact that the children needed shoes and clothes and the occasional book or paper toy. We understand about the needs of children, Charly's mother, Mary Eldredge often told Sara, in her many attempts to coerce Sara into giving up Grace and Ellen to Hezekiah and herself. All the more reason to allow grandparents with means to have a fuller hand in the girls' upbringing.

Sara knew what a fuller hand meant. It meant total control. It meant allowing the girls to live with the Eldredges and quite possibly giving up all her maternal rights forever. Well, she wouldn't do it. Not as long as she had strength and a steel needle. She'd get faster at sewing, better. And she'd find more moral employers than the disgusting Schueller. And she'd never steal again. In fact, she'd just applied for a teaching position at quite a nice little school in downtown Boston. Sara felt hopeful because her sister Lucy's husband, Josiah, was on the school's board. He'd been in the drafty committee room when she'd had her little interview and had steered the committee away from dwelling too long on her lack of experience with algebra at Catharine Beecher's seminary. Surely, if he had any say, the board would hire Sara. They would have to.

Sara reached the top of the three-story staircase and tapped at Widow Perkins' door.

The door opened on the hunch-shouldered, flitty-eyed old woman. "The girls went off with your sister," Widow Perkins said. "In your room."

Sara knew Julia was the only one of her sisters brave enough to visit her anymore. What a nice surprise. After her miserable day, Sara was more starved than usual for comfort.

The widow glanced down the dim hall at the closed door of Sara's room. "I've just finished," she said with a little grin and pulled Sara into the cool, dank room toward the one small window where she'd set her rickety chair to work by the light. On the chair were two pairs of small gray socks made of drab, cheap wool, but unmistakably brand new.

"Oh, thank you!" Sara said, nearly crying at the sight. Just last week, she'd had to cut the toes off of Grace's shoes because her feet had grown so. Little Ellen's shoes had been cut for a month. The worst part was not the cutting of the shoes, but looking at the raggedy, oft-mended dingy socks poking through the travesty. Another pair of new, warm socks would make the shoes seem tolerable.

Sara gave the widow her dollar and waited for her to count out change from a tattered purse she pulled from under her pillow, mostly in half-dimes. The widow was two cents short, which alarmed Sara—she wouldn't have enough for the week's board, as she'd spent her stair-washing half-dime on two extra scoops of coal. It had been so cold lately and Grace had started the week with a cough. Widow Perkins blinked and went back to search under the pillow. Sara inhaled sharply. Gently, she laid her hand on the widow's frazzled iron-gray head and proclaimed the socks to be so well made that she wanted to pay a little extra for them, after all. The widow turned from the bed, wrinkled her brow as if in pain, then rested her forehead on Sara's shoulder and cried, whether in relief, gratitude, or embarrassment, Sara didn't know. Sara, at least, could borrow the two cents from Julia.

"Merry Christmas," Sara said to the widow and kissed her good-bye. "I'll bring you a little something from father's house on Monday."

"Bless your heart," the widow said, and waved Sara off.

Sara tucked the socks into her pocket and felt, once again, the stick of stolen peppermint candy. She swallowed hard at the bile rising from her stomach. The stick had been partly crushed and was, apparently, pulled from the display jar and left on a dusty little "half-price" shelf on the grocer's back wall. Sara had slipped it into her pocket with such grace it frightened her. Other things sometimes appeared on that shelf and Sara had seen other, poorer, people quietly slip these things into their pockets: bruised apples, nearly rancid butter wrapped in paper, or sometimes, small rough pouches containing a handful or so of molding beans. But, she'd never done it before—stolen. Until that day. After enduring the nauseating leers of Schueller and the disappointment of her pay, Sara had wandered to the little shelf and spied the sad peppermint stick, which had been ignored by the shuffles of drab poverty floating past. Only Sara had pocketed the crumbling sweet. Only Sara would ruin her soul stealing candy.

Sara walked to the room at the end of the hall, the absolute cheapest room in the house, worse than even Widow Perkins' room, smaller, colder, but with a similar little window overlooking the clapboard side of the next boarding house. She poked her key through the lock and gave the skeletal door a hard push.

Julia *was* there! She was balanced on Sara's three-legged sewing stool near the window, had a girl on each knee, and was reading a book.

"Mother!" the girls cried, jumping from Julia's lap to embrace Sara.

Sara hugged her darlings close and smiled full at Julia.

"I've just come from Lucy's," Julia said, indicating the book. "She said I could borrow this to read to the girls."

"By all means, continue, then," Sara said. "I'll listen, too!"

Sara untied her bonnet and hung it on the nail, then reclined on the room's lumpy horsehair bed, still wrapped in her shawl, to listen to Julia finish a story about princesses and pudding and glittering crowns and roast beef. Decadent food. Brimming tables of crockery and wine. Lace tablecloths and bowls of flowers. Genteel manners reigning supreme. Nobody forgotten. Nobody suffering. No hunger or cold or fear. Sara's eyes fluttered, her breathing slowed, and then Sara suddenly saw Mother in the tale, sitting at the royal banquet next to sister Ellen. Oh, how radiant they looked, pink-cheeked and happy! Mother wore a turban made of ferns and she plucked one and blew it across the room to Sara, who caught it and tucked it into her bodice front. Beaming sister Ellen just ate and ate and ate.

Mary Stace was there, too, and the babies, and Lucy's boys, but where, oh where? Sara whirled in dream circles, looked madly around and around and then she saw them, Charly, magnificent in black velvet, wearing his white satin wedding vest and holding little Mary's hand. Little Mary was hopping up and down in the most exquisite shining silver shoes, pointing at Grace and Ellen sitting on Julia's knee in the corner of the palace. Little Mary had a basketful of sweets she wanted to share with her sisters and so Charly let her run before folding the then-sobbing Sara into his hearty arms and whispering to her, "All is well, all is well, all is well . . ."

"Sara!" Julia cried as she roughly shook her sister's shoulder. "Wake up! Your cries are frightening the children."

Sara shook her head at the quivering faces of Grace and little Ellen, at the pale, plain face of Julia, at the pounding at the door.

A voice boomed through the pounding. "You're loud enough to wake the dead. Are you committing murder in there?" Sara recognized the voice of the boardinghouse mistress and scrambled to her feet to open the door.

"We heard screams," the buxom woman said, narrowing her watery gray eyes. "Besides you're late with the payment, so I figured I'd have to come up."

"I've got it," Sara said. She left the landlady in the doorway while she pulled a little jar from underneath the bed and dumped the entire contents of it into the woman's palm. She rummaged in her pocket and added the forty-eight cents.

Mrs. Haufen eyed the mound in her hand. "You're two cents short."

"No she's not," Julia said, pulling a little purse from her pocket and fishing in it for two cents.

"Julia," Sara whispered.

"I owe you this from last week," Julia said evenly.

The landlady accepted the coins from Julia, then looked Sara up and down. "Schueller says you've been given to shoddy work," she said.

Sara gasped. "But, I've done more this week than usual."

"Useless rags, he says," the woman said, tapping her toe. Her quick eyes rested on Grace and Ellen's cut-away shoes. She cleared her throat, then looked toward the window. "Anyway, come down to supper. The soup's on the table."

Sara's head was suddenly throbbing. She pressed her fingers to her temples. "Do you think I could have it up here? Just this once. I'm not feeling well."

The woman shook her head at Sara, at Julia, at the girls. "Only if you fetch it up these stairs yourself. I'm not about to serve you like a princess. And you've got to wash up your own dishes before bed."

Sara nodded. She steered Grace and little Ellen to the window and pulled a small slate and a stick of chalk from a drawer in the bureau. "You girls must be good now and draw Aunt Julia a picture. We're going to go down and bring some supper up."

The girls sat on the floor under the drafty window and accepted the slate and chalk from their mother.

"What shall we draw?" little Ellen asked.

"I know," Grace said. "We'll draw the feast from the story. I'll draw the table, then you draw something on it. Then I'll draw something else, then you'll take a turn."

Grace coughed, then smiled at her mother and little Ellen smiled, too.

Sara kissed the top of each curly head and beckoned Julia to follow her and the boardinghouse mistress down the stairs. "I need you to help me carry the soup, Julia."

"And you'll have no more than usual," the woman said, casting a sharp eye on Julia.

"Don't worry about me, Ma'am," Julia said. "I've already eaten."

They descended the stairs, with the landlady twice stopping to point out mysterious stains to Sara, who promised to scrub extra hard in those spots the next morning.

When they reached the dining room, the rest of the boarders were already dunking their rye rolls into the steaming pea soup. There were eight boarders altogether; four men, Widow Perkins, and Sara and her girls. Three of the men were the rough sorts Charly had always steered Sara clear of when they'd leave the theater or some late-night gathering at one of their friends' houses. These men were dressed in saggy, thin garments that added nothing to their uncombed, unwashed presentation. Sara usually sat at the table's end, near the door with Widow Perkins and the kind-voiced, vacant-eyed William. The other three men sprawled at the table's other end, the end near the kitchen, and stabbed their choices from the platters and swiped extra bread into their

pockets before passing the dishes down. Sara had felt their bright eyes on her person many times and averted her notice from their pointed comments and bold stares by busying herself cutting tough meat for the girls or chatting low with the widow and William. One of the men, Abe, whistled crudely as Sara and Julia entered the dining room.

“Behave yourself,” Mrs. Haufen said. “Let these two at the soup now.”

The pot had been set in the middle of the table and Sara ladled a portion into each of three bowls. She handed two of the bowls to Julia, carrying the third bowl in one hand and awkwardly holding three rolls with her other hand.

Widow Perkins flashed a bird-like smile at Sara as she was making to leave and William cleared his throat. “Miss Sara,” he said, holding out a small, wrinkled apple. “I found this for you and the girls. I wish you’d take it.”

Sara knew the apple had been on some or another grocer’s back shelf, yet she wanted it as much as she’d wanted the broken peppermint stick. Her face reddened as she indicated her pocket to William. “Thank you, William,” she said. “My hands are full, so if you wouldn’t mind slipping it into my pocket.”

William’s eyes fluttered at the low-throated chuckles coming from the men’s end of the table.

“Why I never,” Mrs. Haufen said, snatching the apple from William and dropping it into Sara’s pocket. “You haven’t the sense of a June bug,” she said to Sara.

“He’s harmless,” Sara said. “And my fingers are burning. Seems like it was a very practical suggestion.”

“It was a suggestion all right,” the landlady huffed. “I won’t pity you again.”

“Come, Sara,” Julia said quietly. “My fingers are burning, too.”

Upstairs, after the four of them had shared the three portions and the sorry apple, and Julia helped Sara tuck the girls into one end of the bed (Sara usually squeezed into the other end after sewing until the candle blurred), the two sisters sat upon the matted little rug near the dying fire, leaning back on their hands, stretching their numb toes near the paltry embers. Mrs. Haufen allowed two portions of coal or wood per day, delivered each morning by William, who then got ten cents off of his weekly bill. Sara’s fire was usually cold by morning, so she had gotten good at blowing and fanning scraps of everything. Her pocket, when it wasn’t weighed down with stolen candy, usually brimmed with bits of paper she and the girls found on their daily walk through the city, to the park, or down to the wharf. She only allowed the fire to blaze in the morning and after dinner because she firmly believed the girls should start and end their days in relative warmth. The rest of the time, though, the wind swept through the little room’s cracks and settled in their bones.

Julia couldn’t believe her sister now lived like this, like a pauper. What’s more, Julia could expect the same herself anytime, should she cross her father.

That she was here now, visiting Sara, was only permitted because it was the Christmas season. Henry would be around soon to collect her in the carriage and take her back to her little room off the parlor in Father and Susan's house—her room that, though tiny, was warm and comfortably furnished. And although it was true that Julia spent a good deal of her days and most of her evenings plying her needle through muslin and silk, at least she did so with a satisfied stomach, by the warmth of a decent fire and in the light of enough candles. And, if she was careful, her weekly earnings of nearly fifty cents stretched to allow her one dress, one pair of shoes, one set of undergarments, and either a pair of gloves or a hat each year.

Julia pulled two candles from her pocket and presented them to Sara. "I took them from the pantry," Julia said. "Susan was in a tizzy for two days, but finally decided she'd been shorted and is now as watchful with the shop girls as she is with Cook. She counts every teaspoon of sugar, you know. So unlike Mother."

"Who could ever be like Mother, I'd like to know," Sara replied, fingering the candles. The dream image of her mother flashed before her—pink-cheeked, smiling, blessed. She absently smoothed the wrinkled ribbon on her bodice, where the invisible fern leaf was tucked. "Thank you, Julia," she said, her voice catching. "Now I've got you stealing, too."

In the next moment Sara teared up again and Julia sat close, patting her sister's shoulder and listening with amazement to Sara's story about the shirts, and Schueller, and the grocer's shelf, and the stick of peppermint candy. She heard about the socks and the widow and the cents and about poor William. She listened about Grace's cough and the stair washings and the scrounging for bits of paper in the streets. She saw Sara's stained and hanging dress, her rumpled, faded bonnet, her threadbare shawl. Earlier, of course, she couldn't help but notice the girls' shoes and their horrid socks, not to mention their embarrassed joy at being able to listen to her read a borrowed book.

Sara saw the pity in Julia's eyes and sat up straight. No no no Sara scolded. You mustn't pity *us*. At least there *was* a bonnet and, now, *new* socks, and a sister who would kindly lend a few cents. At least there were books to be borrowed and a back strong enough to wash stairs for extra coal. At least there was a window for some sewing light and a street that provided paper scraps. At least their supper, though often meager, was hot. At least there was the kind idiocy of dear William and the sweet widow, who would watch the girls when Sara dealt with Schueller. There was hope, too—the teaching job. The teaching job would come through very soon.

"Oh, Sara," Julia said. "Your spirit is amazing."

"I *will* keep my children," Sara said.

"Sara," Julia said gently. "I brought more than the book from Lucy's. I have news."

The way Julia said the word *news*, as if someone else had died, stabbed Sara's hope. "The teaching job?" Sara whispered.

"Gone to Agnes White," Julia said.

"Why, she hasn't half my education!"

"But she has no children to sit in on classes for free and, according to Josiah, a more . . . malleable temperament."

Sara's face burned. That her own brother-in-law hadn't spoke out for her, hadn't seen her strengths, her need.

Just then, the wind rattled through the window pane and swept through Sara, extinguishing the warm little flame of hope she had quietly been fanning.

"Samuel Farrington is coming for Christmas dinner," Julia said.

Sara shuddered. He was old and mottled and smelled like spirits. He was also newly widowed, with two mousy little girls, and was great friends with her father. Sara knew why he had been invited to spend Christmas with the Willis family. She knew what was expected of her.

"I can't," Sara said. "Charly . . ."

"Is dead," Julia said. "And you were very lucky to have had love with him. Don't you see? Samuel Farrington isn't so bad. He's well off and you'd have food and a home."

"*You* wouldn't have Simon Petudalbore!"

"I," Julia said, "didn't have two children."