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PARADOX, PENNSYLVANIA
SEPTEMBER 1918

Gwendolyn Armstrong's heart beat a staccato rhythm as she approached the principal's office. She'd waited until Friday afternoon, when she was certain all the children had gone and even the school secretary had left for the day. By the time she raised her hand to knock on Herman Sapp's door, her throat had gone dry, and her heart had all but stopped beating.

"Come." The voice beyond the door sounded all business. But then Herman's eyes lit as they often did when falling upon Gwen. He quickly stood from behind his desk and donned his jacket, adjusting his eyeglasses and tie, smoothing his hair. "Miss Armstrong—Gwen! A most pleasant surprise." His smile stopped when she did not return his greeting. "Am I mistaken?"

Gathering her courage, she handed him her folded letter. "A surprise, certainly. I'm not sure you'll find it pleasant."

His eyes swept her letter of resignation. "No." She watched the protrusion in his throat rise and fall, the line of his mouth straighten as he dropped the letter on his desk. "Not pleasant at all. Why?" The word held recrimination, anguish—anguish she'd predetermined to ignore.

"I've received a letter from my sister, in New York. You remember Marion."

"The sister who deserted you for fame and fortune."

She ignored his dig. "Marion needs me. She suffers from tuberculosis."

He stepped around his desk. "I'm sorry. As did your mother. You see, I recall."

Gwen determined to ignore that too. "Now that Father no longer needs me, I'm free to go. I'm sorry to leave so early into the school year. I know it's not an ideal time—not convenient—but the letter came recently, since Father's funeral. I really must go." She stopped, breathless.

"Surely there is someone there to care for her. She has a husband . . . or did." Was there accusation in his voice?

"A husband, and two children—children she now needs my help with."

"For whom she could hire a nanny."

"She's asked me to tutor them at home. She doesn't want them in school, exposed to the epidemic. It's raging in New York. Much too dangerous—for her, and for them. They've not closed the schools there as so many big cities have—as we might soon. With Father gone, I've no reason to refuse." *Not that that is any of your business. And who are you to speak into my family's affairs?* But she knew who he presumed to be.

"I'd expected, after your father passed, that you'd reconsider my proposal—that you'd consider *us* a reason to stay. Gwen"—his voice softened—"I've asked you . . . more than once." There it was again, the anguish in his voice.

She didn't want to insult him or hurt him, but she didn't love him, had told him so and tried in a dozen ways to ward him off. "Herman, you know I've never given you reason to expect that. In any case, Marion needs me now."

"I need you, Gwendolyn. The children here need you. What about your class?"

Gwen looked away. She'd known he'd play on her sympathies; the children were the one thing that gave her pause.

Herman went on. "The school year is well underway and there's been no decision made to close—even temporarily. With the uncertain outcome of the war and so many children's fathers away, with the imminent danger to every household from the Spanish flu . . . These children have formed strong attachments to you. You're their anchor, a mainstay in their formative years. A mainstay for me. You must understand why I cannot accept your resignation."

Before she'd gathered her wits, he stepped closer, reaching for her hands.

Gwen turned away, wishing she'd left the door open, a clear means of escape. *Duty, guilt, the privilege of sacrificing for those less fortunate—those considered worthy.* She knew every nuance, had lived her entire life caring for those who needed her.

But laced into this need of her sister's was also, at last, a chance to escape provincial Paradox, and to escape her employer's cloying advances. She would not allow Herman Sapp or anyone else to drive one more nail into the coffin of her soul.

"I'm giving two weeks' notice. That should be sufficient time to hire a substitute—until you find a full-time teacher. You may not even need someone soon if the mayor decides to close schools until the epidemic passes. In any case, I'll leave detailed notes concerning each student, and of course, my curriculum guides."

She made for the door, but he was faster and leaned against it, crossing his arms.

"You're blocking my path."

He didn't move. Her heart's thrumming became louder, but she spoke softly, firmly. "Please. Step aside, Mr. Sapp."

"Can you look me in the eye and tell me you feel nothing for me, for the school, for the children here?"

She cared mightily about the school and the children she'd taught and mentored through the years. They were the only children she might ever claim. But they weren't her children, weren't her family.

Gwen lifted her chin, determined to stare him down. “What I feel has little to do with this. My sister needs me.”

“Ah, yes.” He smiled, now resorting to condescension. “The sister whose needs you supplied for years after your mother’s death. The sister who deserted you.” He seemed determined to drive the point home. “You want to see the world, as I recall. But you won’t do that by tutoring youngsters in your sister’s home, now will you? Do you not see history repeating itself?”

Gwen winced. She wished she’d never revealed that corner of her heart to Herman, to anyone, but what he said was true. *What I want—what I’ve always wanted—is to escape, to travel. I want to find love—to be loved. To see and experience the world, not just read about it, not just teach the details of its existence.*

For years she’d felt betrayed by Marion, had struggled with that betrayal. But Marion was her sister, and she needed Gwen now, as their mother had before. Besides, going to New York provided the first opportunity Gwen had seen in twelve years to change the trajectory of her life. She would take it, would grasp it with both hands.

“Open the door, Mr. Sapp. Consider your reputation, and mine.” She spoke quietly, firmly, but it was a gamble. His reputation would not suffer from being behind a closed door with a spinster teacher. She refused to look him in the eye, refused to give him the power of any reaction he craved.

“You deserve a family of your own, Gwen. We could—”

“Open the door. Now.” Her voice grew louder, her jaw hard. She waited, fists clenched at her sides, pressure building behind her eyes and in her temples. A shred of doubt in his decency ran through her brain, but she stood her ground.

He took one step closer. “Consider carefully what you are doing, Miss Armstrong. My offer of marriage stands. You have these two weeks to reconsider. Know that if you abandon your post, you cannot expect to return. No other school will have you . . . I promise. My offer won’t be repeated.”

It seemed forever, but at last the door opened, and Gwen, head held high and legs trembling, walked through it.



Gwen bought her train ticket and wrote to her sister of her travel plans the following morning, knowing she might not receive a reply. *Marion can be unresponsive, but at least she'll know I'm coming.*

She waited to tell her students of her leaving until her last afternoon. She'd never been good with goodbyes. Prolonging the experience would not help them or her. There were pleas not to go. Gwen told them truthfully that her sick sister needed her. She assured them that Mr. Sapp, whom she'd done her best to avoid for two weeks, would find them a good teacher, a kind teacher, and that all would be well. She hoped her promises proved true.

Gwen had arranged to let her cottage out to a second-grade teacher for the remainder of the semester, a young woman in her first year of teaching. In January they would review terms with the hope that their arrangement might continue indefinitely.

While she believed she would not return to Paradox, especially knowing Herman would make certain she could never teach in the town again, Gwen dared not sell her small house. It was the only thing left to her by her father, the only thing standing between herself and poverty. She'd learned the hard way not to count her chickens before they hatched, and not to burn her bridges. Her younger sister had taught her that in spades. Gwen could only hope, as Herman predicted, that history would not repeat itself.