

"Now disembarking at Richmond, ladies and gentlemen! Fifteen minutes until departure!"

Sara Lyttle stepped from the passenger car. Her trembling fingers clasped tight to a worn valise and the black shawl draped across her shoulders. The conductor tipped his cap toward her.

"You take care, miss, and remember what I said. If you be needing a place...."

"Thank you, sir." Her English lilt drew glances from other disembarking passengers. "In his letter, Mr. Lake said someone would meet me here."

"Very good, miss, but I'll keep watch just the same." The conductor tipped his cap again and stepped away.

Sara smiled after him. A kind soul. He had taken it upon himself to watch over her the entire journey from New York. One blessing of many on her present adventure. Voyages from one continent to another and train rides from state to state were novelties. Her travel experiences before involved only short jaunts to the market, or to the dressmaker's shop for supplies. Even a coveted outing to the park for a moment of peace and sketching seemed to happen only once every great while. She lifted her shoulders in a happy shrug and stepped with care along the icy station platform. Men doffed their hats, offering smiles and pleasantries. One gentleman even held the door open. She thanked him and entered the crowded station. It was a pleasant change from the winter's breeze.

She expected a liveried stable-boy or footman to call her name, but the clack of luggage dollies and the shouts of porters drowned out all else. She spied an oak bench in the corner of the station nearest the door and settled herself for a wait. She studied the people bustling to and fro and pulled a sheaf of tattered papers from her valise. If not for the fact she was in Virginia, America, she wouldn't have seen a difference between the stations in England. Sara searched out a half-used pencil from her reticule and began to draw, her worn portfolio serving as an admirable lap desk. Only a scarce few pages remained for scenes such as this, and Sara hadn't

decided yet if she dared sacrifice her last coins for another handful. But why not? Mrs. Lake wrote of an opportunity. What would a couple measly coins mean when she that waited?

But not knowing details of the position made it hard to be impulsive.

Her brows furrowed and her fingers tightened on the pencil. Be reckless for once! Sara's gaze flicked from the developing sketch to her valise and the letters. 'My husband and I will fully support you as you choose your new path.' Those words resonated in her heart.

"Miss Sara Lyttle?"

An attractive gentleman at the station entrance drew her attention. He wore a tailored charcoal suit, the cut complimenting his height while the color accented his hazel eyes. His brown curls and straight nose bore an uncanny resemblance to the lady who started her journey in the first place. Sara tucked the portfolio into her valise and stood. "I'm Sara Lyttle."

"Ah." He stepped toward her, navigating through the crowd with comparative ease. She accepted his offered hand. "Miss Lyttle, Christopher Lake. I wrote in response to your last letter?"

"Oh, Mr. Lake!" Sara curtsied. "I didn't mean to be a trouble for you, sir."

"Nonsense. No trouble. I apologize for being tardy. If it wasn't one thing, it was another." He motioned to the bench just vacated. "Please."

"Thank you, sir." Sara's heart skipped a beat at the thoughtful expression that furrowed his brow. Perhaps the position was already filled? She crossed herself.

"Miss Lyttle, I confess some bewilderment. My late wife didn't mention the expectation of your arrival; at least, not that I recall."

Late wife? Every hope shattered around her like a broken paned window.

"When I received your letter requesting travel arrangements I was glad to help, of course. Challenges are key to building character."

Sara wrung her hands, instructing herself to trust the kindness in his voice. "Yes, sir."

"Now then, who was it that put you in contact with us?"

"Ms. Donovan."

"Ah. My sister. Did she not mention any type of expectation?"

"No, sir. She slipped a piece of paper into my hand while I served her meal, whispered at me to write soon. That... your wife could offer a better position."

"Dix.... She inflames drama at a moment's notice." Mr. Lake regarded her. "What do you do?"

"What do I do, sir? I was a maid."

"No, no. What do you do, not how are you employed. My mistake."

"I... I can sew well. I sold some gowns to pay for my passage."

"Ah. That sounds promising." He motioned to her valise and the corners of paper peeking out. "Do you have a portfolio of the designs?"

"No, sir." She tucked the papers deeper inside. "They were lost."

"Too bad. Well, no matter. Considering you're in America, I believe I will take you at your word. Have you tried your hand at any other type of craft?"

"I can sketch a bit." This is America! Follow your dreams, you goose! "My mum said I have quite a way with it...."

"Now we come to something I understand. Carla and I made it a point to set artists on a path of success. My sister and her husband have referred many a lady and gentleman." He stood and took up her valise. She blinked up at him. "Come along. Let us talk more about your sketching."

'Set artists on a path of success.' Sara tightened the shawl around her shoulders. They stepped outside the station and an enclosed carriage pulled up to the platform. The driver scrambled down and opened the door, offering her a smile and nod. She gaped at the golden letters The Richmond Gallery of Art.

"Did my sister not tell you of the gallery?"

"N-no, sir."

"Does it create a problem?"

"N-no, sir. I never...." She never considered herself appropriate staff for a gallery. She was a lady's maid. A chamber maid. A scullery maid. A seamstress....

"I can see you have questions. You can ask as many as you like once we get out of this chill wind. Much longer and we'll catch our death." Mr. Lake handed her up into the carriage and

sat across from her. He tapped the roof and the carriage lurched forward. "Carla and I have always been eager to take someone under our wing. It added excitement to our own lives, the adventure of creating an artist's opportunity." A shadow passed over his face while he spoke. Then he cleared his throat and forced a smile. "Now, a question of the letter you wrote inquiring on travel instructions. It was dated last summer. How many letters did you and Carla exchange before that last one?"

"Only one, sir, by way of introduction... and that the previous December."

"So long? What kept you?"

"S-sir?" Her whisper grated in her ears.

"With the extensive time between letters, and since my wife never mentioned you, I wonder if she thought you had a change of heart. I don't mean impertinence by the question."

"O-of course not, sir, I only don't wish to...."

"If there was a difficulty with family or an employer, of course I understand. Would you need me to contact them and set them at ease? Or perhaps let them know that your situation is assured? They shouldn't believe we take advantage. It would be my pleasure, regardless of whether Carla said anything to me or not."

She gaped at him, baffled. "Y-you would do that, sir?"

"Do what? Contact your family? If there was a need for such a thing it would be my responsibility as your sponsor. Now, tell me what happened to keep you. If there is a lingering doubt I will put it to rest."

"B-but.... But there was nothing, sir. I only didn't have enough to pay for my passage. That's why...." Her gaze fell to her white-knuckled hands. They began to throb. "That's why I stitched the gowns."

"An entire wardrobe must have taken weeks."

"Y-yes, sir, but I had the time."

"Ah. Well, we're glad to have you." She sent him a tremulous smile. He sat back and drew a gold pocket-watch from his vest pocket. He toyed with it in his palm. "My first course of action will be to have you sketch my daughter. She had the misfortune of being unceremoniously deposited into her most favorite room at the gallery. Teddy was to have her

under his care while I fetched you, but he forgot." His countenance soured before the carriage drew up in front of a massive, single-story brick building. "Ah! Here we are."

Mr. Lake stepped down and turned to retrieve first Sara's valise and then steady her descent. Flushing, she whispered her thanks. Then she followed Mr. Lake up the gallery's marble steps. Inside, the lights of the wall sconces twinkled off the marble flooring. The warmth of the heated air elicited comfort and safety.

"It's a grand building, sir!"

"Thank you. I have always thought so." He motioned down the wide main hall. "This way, Miss Lyttle."

Once again she followed, her mind settling into wary contemplation. 'Set artists on a path of success.' She bit her lip.

At the end of the main hall Mr. Lake halted outside a picture window and a pair of overstuffed chairs. Inside the room his daughter lay sprawled upon the floor looking through a large book of pictures.

"Such a dear, sir!"

"That she is. Five years young, precocious, and full of questions." Mr. Lake presented her with a pencil and sketchbook. "Take as much time as you need. When engrossed in a storybook, she forgets there is a world outside this room. I will wait in the office. It's the first door on the left, just before the exit."

"Yes, sir."

Sara stared after him in silence. Mr. Lake bore a striking contrast to Mr. Brockle, for compassion resonated from his persona. Her gaze lowered to the blank page. She sat and took up the pencil, the first strokes onto the page deft and natural. Sara felt certain that her presence in America served as the prize at the end of a grueling race.

It certainly is the furthest I could get from him, isn't it? She giggled, her pencil flying over the page. Now Mr. Lake said his wife intended her as an artist of their gallery? Sara wasn't certain she grasped that change to her future. She couldn't even persuade her heart that she had heard right! So, she wouldn't dwell. She would lift it to her Maker and leave it to His guidance.

He had done right by her so far. She only needed to draw her heart onto the page as she had done her entire life.

Sara set the pencil aside and held her sketch out for a review which elicited a grimace and a shrug. She gathered her things. Outside Mr. Lake's office, Sara paused for a quick adjustment to her skirts and hair before giving a hesitant knock. No answer came. Her gaze drifted to the polished brass of the knob, but the thought of opening the door without invitation— She rapped once more, and this time the door opened. When she raised her gaze to meet Mr. Lake's, her breath caught in her throat at his haunted expression.

"Ah. Miss Lyttle." His voice echoed with an odd weariness. "I apologize for making you wait. Please, come in."

Sara offered a slight curtsy and stepped forward, halting at the wingback chairs across from his simple oak desk. Bookcases covered the left wall filled with leather-bound books and child-made pottery. Hand-woven rag rugs covered dark wood flooring, and an easel stood in the right corner of the office near a large window, the blank canvas stoic.

"I suppose I should have taken more time, sir, only my mind ran away with me." She perched on the chair before presenting the sketch with trembling fingers.

Mr. Lake accepted the page and studied the scene in distracted silence. He leaned against his desk. "This is quite good. The strokes are sure and steady, and the shading is exceptional."

Sara's cheeks flushed.

"Is this the only media you use? Have you done much with oils, or watercolor?"

"I only ever learned how to sketch with pencils and charcoal. My mum and I didn't have the means to purchase oils or any of that, sir."

Nodding, he set the paper aside and met her gaze. "Lunch?"

"What would you like, sir?"

Mr. Lake opened his mouth to answer. Then his brows dipped in confusion. "Pardon?"

"Oh... N-No, thank you, sir."

"Ah." He motioned to the office door. "I have often been told not to make decisions on an empty stomach, so let us gather Gwin and make our way to the Manor for a bite." She didn't stand. "Is there a problem?"

"You needn't bother with me, sir. I need to find a place to stay, so I can get something there." She didn't believe her nerves would tolerate eating in front of a prospective employer.

"Miss Lyttle, you're a guest of... you're my guest. What type of host would I be if I allowed a visitor to our country and my gallery to fend for herself? Come along. I can assure you there's enough for all."

"Of c-course, sir." She made her way out to the hall with a quick step.

"How long have you been an active artist?"

"I've tinkered with charcoals and pencils since before I could write." She cast him a glance from under her lashes. The interest in his gaze offset the previous warnings that rang in her ears of seen and not heard.

"Why?"

"Why what, sir?"

"Why did you pick up those first pencils and charcoals? What motivates you?"

Nonplussed, she blinked up at him.

"Your talent has gone unnoticed? Gads! Are you certain you haven't a collection of sketches? A portfolio or journal of any kind?"

"I lost my journal the last time I..." The thought of the portfolio in her valise caused her to lower her gaze, guilt nagging at her conscience.

"Ah. Well, I suppose it doesn't matter. If you're a fraction the artist I believe, you will fit right in."

But how did a body 'fit right in' any place? Sara hadn't done much more than walk passed a gallery in all her years in London.

Mr. Lake opened the door to the sitting room and ducked his head inside. "Gwin? We're off to The Manor for lunch." There came a slight shuffle as he gathered his daughter onto his hip. Mr. Lake greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. Gwin squirmed and giggled before returning his kiss. "No monsters coming from the art, I hope?"

"Nope."

"That's always good to hear." He set the girl down and gathered up her hand in his. "Gwin, this is Sara Lyttle. She will take lunch with us."

She cast Sara an uncertain glance.

“Who is this shy little girl?” Mr. Lake tousled the girl’s blond hair. “Mamma invited Sara all the way from England. Certainly you can offer a ‘hello’.”

Gwin’s eyes widened. She looked at Sara. “Truly?”

“Yes, miss. I’ve come an awful long way from home.”

“Now, Gwinnie, could you be responsible for making her feel welcome? It would help me a great deal.”

Gwin nodded, the expression in her green eyes serious for a five-year-old. Then she sent Sara a bright smile. “I’ll be ‘sponsible.”

“Thank you, miss.”

“Excellent.” Mr. Lake smiled at Sara. “Welcome to Richmond.”

Sara’s cheeks flushed at Mr. Lake’s offering, and the welcome tingled from her toes to her fingertips. She never knew the name of a place to sound so wonderful.