

The carriage pulled away from the gallery. Gwin sat to the left, the girl's face bright with her smile. Mr. Lake sat across from the two watching with an expression of reluctant amusement. Sara's excitement jostled her heart, and she could feel a slight burn of tears.

"Tell us more of your trip. You were able to secure passage with Captain Cowell?"

Sara gawked at him. She never engaged in lengthy conversations with would-be employers, so she didn't know what to consider appropriate, presumptuous, or good manners.

"Yes, sir."

"What did you think of the trip?"

"I..." She wrung her hands. "It was fine."

"How was the weather?" Mr. Lake asked after an expectant pause.

"We had a storm one day." She cast him an uncertain glance from beneath her lashes.

"Not too strong, I hope?"

"Oh no, Mr. Lake." A smile blossomed at the memories. "Though a few of the others didn't take so well to the rough weather. Poor dears."

"And you?"

"It... it was an adventure."

"That's the best way of looking at it."

"What was the bestest, Sara?" Gwin asked, her eyes wide.

"Well, I would truly have to say it was when—" Sara's brows lowered in consideration.

"No. Perhaps not. Truly I don't know which was best, miss. I'm but a simple girl who found a collection of adventures through your mum."

"Papa, is Sara gonna be a drawer?"

"Artists, Gwin. We don't hold clothes like a piece of bedroom furniture. But yes, I believe that is what Mamma had in mind. Miss Lyttle and I will talk on that later." Mr. Lake caught

Sara's gaze as she smiled at his daughter. "What have you thought of America and your adventure to date?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I feel a bit like I'm playing along with a fantasy that will stop when the clock strikes. I'd pinch myself, only I've bruises from yesterday and the day before, and the day before that even."

"So, it's safe to assume you're enjoying yourself?"

"Oh yes, sir! America has such a different charm to it. There's such an air of expectation. I haven't ever had that, sir. There's always been a duty I knew I had. But since leaving England, the only bit I know about tomorrow is that the sun will rise and set." Mr. Lake chuckled, and the sound brought Sara back to herself with a jolt. "I-I'm sorry, sir. I'm singing like a teapot at full steam."

"Indeed you are, Sara, but don't be 'sorry.' And, please, call me Chris or Christopher. Even 'Mr. Lake' is preferable to 'sir'."

"Y-yes, s— Mr. Lake."

"Now, we will talk more about what Carla and I offer young artists over lunch. Then I will show you the Manor and we will give you time to settle yourself in your room before dinner. Today has been an accumulation of the unexpected, and I doubt it will stop any time soon."

Sara's stomach already churned with the notion of speaking to him about her art.

"I can show her the house, papa!"

"Let me check in with Harold, Gwinnie. But I think something like that might be arranged."

Gwin clapped her mitten-covered hands and Sara hid a smile.

The carriage arrived at Mr. Lake's home with a lurch and creak. He disembarked first, helped Gwin down, and then directed her to tell Harold of their arrival. The girl nodded and scampered into a three-story brick house with two gargantuan white pillars on each side of the front porch. Sara gazed at the house with wide eyes, not noticing when Mr. Lake retrieved her valise from the carriage and then offered a hand in order to steady her own descent.

Lake Manor looked much like a storybook cottage set on a country estate. "Oh, Mr. Lake, it's lovely!"

Mr. Lake cast a glance over his shoulder to the Manor. "Thank you. I have always been fond of it myself. Come along. Off we go."

"I-I'm sorry."

He took up her valise, his expression calm and a bit amused. "No need to apologize. Your adventure allows you several days of wonder." Offering his arm, he motioned toward the house. "The porch steps can sometimes be slick, so exercise caution."

Indecision prevented her acceptance of his arm at first. She berated herself for acting like a frightened child and reached out, keeping her eyes downcast. He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and then stepped forward with careful confidence. Before they reached the top step, the door opened and a butler with a soft, wrinkled face stepped forward.

Gwin dashed from around the butler's legs, her expression alight with excitement. "Harold, this is Sara. Papa said she's gonna stay with us. All right?"

"Of course, Miss Gwin." His bass voice rang with kindness. "The lady's room is prepared and ready for her." He met Sara's uncertain gaze and offered a smile. "Welcome to Lake Manor, Miss. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

Sara curtsied, and relief began to settle her heart much like a cup of broth soothed a weary soul.

"Mister Christopher, I'm afraid Mister Theodore is on the telephone needing to speak with you." Harold smirked. "He said it was 'a matter of life or death.' "

"I don't doubt it. He likely realized he was to have Gwin with him while I rescued Sara from the station." He presented Sara's valise to Harold. "I am sorry, but Gwinnie will need to handle your tour after all. Harold, can you make certain these ladies have some lunch? With Teddy there's no telling how long I will be."

"Of course, Mister Christopher." Harold stepped aside as Mr. Lake made his way through the second door on the right of the hall.

Gwin clasped Sara's hand and pulled her forward. "Come on, Sara!"

From room to room Gwin led Sara through the house. Her excited descriptions encouraged laughter and put Sara at ease. The girl's pace didn't lessen until they reached the nursery on the second floor.

The nursery held the expected assortment of tables, chairs, tea sets, toy chests, hobbyhorses, and a multitude of other things Sara didn't have a chance to scrutinize. White papered walls and light wood flooring gave it a brightness and whisper of fun and excitement, as did the child-art decorating the walls and the stuffed animals and dolls on shelves at just the right height. It was an adorable room, and typical of a five-year-old girl.

"You like it?"

"Indeed, Miss."

Silence fell as the little girl released Sara's hand and slumped at a nearby table. "Now what?"

"What about the third floor?"

The little girl released a breath as she began to trace a pattern on the tabletop. "Papa keeps all his old stuff up there. Stuff from when he were little, like me. I don't wanna break nothing, so I stays down here."

"That's grown-up of you, Miss."

"Sometimes Papa'll take me up there and show me pictures, or he'll let me play with his toys."

"You like that, don't you?"

Gwin nodded. "He even gave me some of his toys once." The girl turned in her seat to point at the tall bookshelf behind her. It held an old wooden dog on wheels with a pull-string, a toy soldier, and a wooden music box. "I had Papa put them there so I won't axdently break one." The girl stared up at them for a long, silent moment before turning. Her eyes sparkled.

"Do you know how to make a picture book?"

"Yes, Miss." Sara sat across from the girl. Have you ever seen such an expressive face, Lord?

"I gots this idea for a story, but I don't know how to draw all the pictures."

"May I help?"

Nodding, Gwin's smile brightened as she stood and moved about the room looking into different cubbies and nooks. As she outlined the story, Sara planned the sketches. The girl

regaled her with surprising detail for someone so young. Then Gwin assigned a specific picture and the two went to work, Sara always eager to take on the next image.

They laughed over mistakes and unexpected plot twists, the inspiration sometimes coming before they finished a picture. Lunchtime came and went. Harold brought a tray of simple sandwiches with the explanation that Mr. Lake needed to step out for a meeting and sent his apologies.

The change in plans didn't seem to bother Gwin, preoccupied with the sudden decision to use her colored chalk. So she scampered off to search after assigning Sara the duty of finding the craft box and the bright pink thread received from "Gammy" the previous Christmas.

Sara didn't remember ever having such fun.

Once they completed the storybook, Sara and Gwin sat back in their chairs with an exaggerated sigh. "That was quite the adventure, Miss Gwin, but now we've dust all over ourselves! We should wash up. What would your papa think if he were to come and see us like this?"

"That fun once again came of chaos, of course."

Sara spun to find Mr. Lake leaning against the doorframe of the nursery, a lop-sided smirk on his face.

Gwin ran forward. "Papa, you was spying!"

"Guilty as charged, Gwinnie." He lifted her up into his arms. "What have you been up to while your papa was trapped at the gallery?"

"We made a book and need a cover!" the girl cried.

"Ah-hah! A cover that has those big words you so adore." Gwin nodded. "This person will need to be a good speller."

"Very good speller!"

"And," Mr. Lake stated finally, "this person will need to know how to do those oh-so-wonderful fancy letters your heart so desires."

Giving a final nod, the girl prompted, "You know one?"

His expression grew solemn and serious. "Not a single soul."

Sara stifled a quiet laugh as Gwin wailed in protest. "Papa, you're a good speller! You could do it! Oh Papa, please!"

Mr. Lake lowered Gwin to the floor and knelt to take her hands in his. "I would be honored, Angel Girl."

The girl threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "Oh thank you thank you, Papa. It'll be the bestest ever storybook now."

"Now that the case of the missing cover is settled, I have come to escort you ladies to dinner. Though I believe you should take your cohort's wise advice and wash the dust from your faces and hands." He nudged Gwin toward Sara. "I will wait for you downstairs."

"Come on, Sara. It's over here."

Dinner consisted of sliced roast, freshly steamed chard, and a type of potato dish that smelled wonderfully of melted cheese. To drink was a choice of milk or wine, both of which Sara refused for a glass of water. As they ate, Gwin chatted of the hundreds of other picture books Sara would draw, promising to put words to them when she had learned to "print more better." Sara watched the girl with a wistful smile as Mr. Lake encouraged her imagination. Gwin took her father's advice to heart with a solemn nod.

The staff cleared the remains of dinner and escorted Gwin upstairs to stories and games. A heavy silence descended. Sara wrung her napkin in her hands, her eyes downcast.

"Thank you for the distraction of the storybook."

When she looked up, a blank look shadowed his expression. "It was the least I could do, sir—Mr. Lake."

"Carla would often do projects such as that." He set his napkin onto the table. "Gwin has always been a creative spirit. Carla said she inherited it from me."

"You draw, sir?"

"Oils. Though I worked with watercolor for several years and, as most people do, I began my artistry career with pencils and charcoals." He lowered his focus to the duty of straightening a wrinkle in the tablecloth. "Life has been too busy for artistry the last year." He cleared his throat and met her gaze. "So, should we talk possibilities? Or should I let you get settled before asking uncomfortable questions?"

"I..." She already seemed to be trapped in a fairytale. What other possibility could she think of to talk about?

Mr. Lake regarded her for a moment. His expression altered to one of mild amusement and understanding. "I believe I will give you a day to yourself. America can be overwhelming, if you're not familiar with how we do things." He stood and motioned toward the dining room's entrance. "In the meantime, I will give you the less-exciting tour of Lake Manor."

Sara stood, smoothing her trembling hands over the thin fabric of her black traveling habit. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't 'thank you' me yet. After being entertained and enlightened by my daughter's perception of the house, my tour isn't as.... Well, you can judge for yourself."

Considering Sara hadn't been given a tour of any portion but the servant's quarters she felt certain it would be more than adequate.