

## Three - Memories of a Lost Passion

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"I don't suppose you know what Angel Gwin has planned for you tomorrow?"

Sara flushed as she followed Mr. Lake to the front hall. "I've been so excited at being here that I haven't listened well."

"Understandable. I am certain Gwin won't hold anything against you. But be warned: My daughter enjoys reading aloud. That is, she'll want you to read aloud to her. During which time she'll ask you unceasing questions."

Sara cast him a timid smile. "That's fine, sir."

"All right then." He motioned down the hall. Sara fell into step beside him. "As you can see, I modernized the building a bit. Originally built in '56, the old house had a rough life. Fire damage. Looters. Soldiers. Things of that sort from the Civil War. When I saw it, I knew I had to have it. So, I did my best to contact the owners. They had relocated to the California coast and were excited to know the old girl would have a chance at life again."

Sara looked around her with interest at the bright halls, the paintings and colorful rugs. "I don't doubt that a bit. She's a charming home."

"I agree."

She felt a light touch on her elbow and twitched without intention. Sara-Ann! This isn't Mr. Brockle's household! Mr. Lake made no comment. Instead, he gestured to the hall.

"The more formal dining hall is beyond here." They progressed down the hall toward the dining room. "We haven't hosted a party sizable enough to warrant using it, but I'm certain one of these days I will be persuaded to open the doors and plan one." Mr. Lake shuddered. Then he sent her a wink.

Cheeks flushed, she lowered her gaze. At a flutter in her stomach she uttered a silent prayer.

He opened the double doors to the dining hall and pushed a switch on the left side of the entry. Two crystal chandeliers twinkled with reflections from the lights, bits of rainbows and

stars glowing upon the walls and hardwood floors. A grand piano stood in the far corner of the hall, offset by a harp and a stack of folded chairs intended for a chamber orchestra. Oils, watercolors and charcoal sketches hung along the walls, giving an added artistic flair and sophistication that drew Sara's gaze to each in turn.

"So beautiful!"

His lips twitched upward. His expression changed, however, as he focused on the dual glass doors toward the back of the hall. The way he stared made her tremble.

"Beyond there," he said in an odd voice, "is the conservatory." He guided her forward, clearing his throat before reaching out to open the glass entry. "My wife loved this garden. Each aspect of the garden represented another facet of who she was. Uncanny, really." With a glance toward Sara, he seemed to draw himself back from someplace else. "Any time you need a quiet place to relax and gather yourself, I recommend it."

Sara nodded, her eyes wide as he pulled the doors closed and then motioned back toward the hall. "There is also a kitchen and staff quarters on this floor, and there," he said, pointing toward a thick door of cedar within the narrower wall of the formal dining room, "There you have the entry to our spring garden. It happens to be Gwin's favorite place to escape in the spring and summer months, and I am afraid once school starts in the next year or so, she won't be able to concentrate on schoolwork unless classes are held there. Let us make our way upstairs. You will want to see the library. The room is Gwin's favorite of the house, besides her play room, and you will likely spend most of your time there."

"You..." Sara's step halted as she gawked at him "You'd let me read your books?"

"Of course."

She couldn't stop the rush of her heart at the possibility. "But... but aren't they very expensive? M-Mightn't I spoil them?"

His scrutiny didn't waver. "I didn't buy them to gather dust." Mr. Lake crossed his arms. "Which of your employers reprimanded you for reading their books?"

Sara lowered her eyes, remembering a shining bald head and a pinched expression. Hard, cold green eyes behind glasses that heightened accusations—Sara bit her lip a little too hard and

flinched. "I-I've never been allowed to read the books in the library. They said they weren't for the help."

"I see."

"I... I wouldn't have taken it from the room," she whispered.

"No. I don't believe you would have."

She glanced toward him under her lashes, unable to read his expression. "I... I wanted to learn."

"Good for you." He continued to regard her. "Let us strike a bargain, shall we?"

"Y-Yes, sir?"

"Here at Lake Manor you can read any and all books at any time. No permissions are needed and no explanations demanded. You've but to promise to read as many as you can every day."

Her breath caught in her throat. Then she smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Lake."

"You're welcome." He closed the formal hall doors behind them. "Will your parents be joining you once you're settled?"

Sara's heart faltered in her chest, her breath failing as she looked up at Mr. Lake with wide eyes. "W-What?"

"Although I am assuming you want them to know you're safe, it is my pleasure to help pay for their passage."

"My mum and pop...." Her eyes burned as she choked down the grief. "I... I never knew my pop, sir, and my mum passed when I was eleven."

He paled. "My God, Sara. I apologize. Please forgive the slip."

"Of course, sir. You didn't know, and I didn't intend to put you on the spot."

Mr. Lake offered a brief smile and then ascended the second-story stairs. Sara followed behind him, noticing the absent way he tapped the balustrade. Nervousness settled in her stomach like a stone.

They crested the stairs, Mr. Lake pausing there for the briefest moment before motioning to the right. "The library." He opened the door and stepped inside. "You're bound to find a book or four here to keep you and Gwin busy. She never tires of hearing them. I may have a picture-

book interpretation for almost half the books here." He withdrew a leather-bound volume.

"Hm. Which should you read...?"

Caution flared as she reached out a hand to touch a leather binding. When she opened the cover, her countenance fell at the inscription. 'To Carla: my passion and inspiration, the woman who has always persuaded me to be the man I am. Love forever, Christopher.' Sara closed the book and tucked it away again.

Mr. Lake gave a brusque nod and turned to present his selection. "You should start with this one."

"The Brothers' Grimm Fairy Tales. Oh! I love fairy tales!"

"I thought you might. Gwin will want you to read those aloud more than any of the others, so be forewarned."

She nodded and hugged the leather-bound book to her chest.

"Let me show you where you will be staying, although I'm certain Gwin has already done it with more enthusiasm than I can muster."

Sara followed Mr. Lake to the room adjacent to the library.

"This will be home."

The door opened without creak or groan to reveal the loveliest room she could imagine. It held a four-poster bed between two large windows overlooking the streets of Richmond. On the opposite wall stood an oak vanity with a matching chair and a gilded mirror, and an inset marble fireplace crackling with a blazing fire. The iron grill reminded Sara of a bright smile.

Sara choked back a sob, tears escaping before she could brush them aside. "It's more lovely than anything I've had before.... Than anything I've ever dreamed. I can't..." She shook her head, overwhelmed by the delicate simplicity of the room. "I can't hardly believe it."

He considered her with thoughtful regard. "No, I don't suppose you would." He crossed his arms, the action drawing her eyes. "Did Carla know of your situation? With your mother and father, I mean."

"I... I don't think I mentioned it, sir."

"Why?"

Sara lowered her gaze to her clasped hands. "Orphans... Orphans don't often find a position like this."

"What? But if anyone needed employment it would be an orphan."

"Yes, sir, but they've also a more desperate situation, which sometimes makes them do... desperate things." She cast him a glance from under her lashes. Please Lord, don't let him think I was one of those poor souls.

Mr. Lake tapped his lips with a single finger. Then he waved his hand in dismissal. "Well, I'm of the mind that Carla wanted to bring you into a circle of people that would allow you new choices. What do you think?"

"What choice is there when I haven't anywhere else to go—" Sara-Ann! "I mean...."

"Hm. Yes. I suppose you have a point. Why did you come to America, then?"

She blinked at him. "S-sir?"

"What did you want? Not 'what did you expect'. What did you want?"

All her dreams, expectations, and memories clashed together to taint everything, making it almost impossible to separate one from the other. But one desire burned through it all.... "I came to America for a second chance at life. A second chance at... at myself."

Mr. Lake nodded. "Go on."

Sara wrung her hands, unable to look away from his attentive expression. "In... in England I was no better than a slave because they saw me only as an orphan. Your wife made me feel more in her one letter. So here I am. I only have two dresses to my name, not money enough to do anything by way of supporting myself, and... I'm twenty-four, Mr. Lake, and I've been taking care of myself with the good Lord's blessing since I was eleven. I've never held a position longer than three months, and no man will marry me because I'm nothing more than a servant girl scared of her own shadow. Your wife offered me a place to call home and—" Tears overflowed and her voice faded. She lowered her eyes.

He remained quiet for a long moment of silence before Sara heard his gentle prompt. "And?"

“And I don’t want to lose that.” She drew a kerchief from her cuff and dabbed away her tears. “I’ll work in the gallery, or here at the Manor, or... or anything but to stay.” The request sounded more desperate than she intended.

He said nothing for a long while. That intense scrutiny made Sara want to slink into a hole. “You will stay, Sara Lyttle.”

Her heart leapt in her chest. She raised her gaze to meet his.

“You will stay,” he said again, “but as a resident, just as my wife intended. You’re free to wander. Free to come and go as you please. Free to do whatever you wish. Free to ask for anything you need. Free to view everyone within Lake Manor as friends and family. Lake Manor is to be viewed as your home. Understood?”

Sara gave an imperceptible nod.

Mr. Lake’s lips tilted upward. “I will leave you to your new surroundings now. It will take you some time to get acclimated.” He paused at the door. “Let me know if you need anything, Sara. Anything at all. Agreed?”

Again, she could only nod. Then the door closed and she blinked, a single tear running down her cheek to drip onto the rug at her feet.



Christopher stared out of his office window, a blank expression shadowing his hazel eyes. Instead, he saw Sara Lyttle’s tears in the library. He saw, again, the fear in her eyes at the station. She has such a desperate desire to belong somewhere, Carla. Yet she has no family. No home. He shook his head. “She is right. She has no choices.”

Trust would be the most important aspect of Sara’s character to cultivate. That would take patience. He crossed his arms and returned his focus to the winter landscape. I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me about her. I don’t want to provide less than what you intended, and the last thing I want is to rob her of hope. Though he wasn’t certain he understood the meaning of that word any longer.

He cleared his throat and exited his office, each step on the stairs taking more energy than the previous. The eighteen months since Carla’s death were a painful blur of forced laughter.

With Sara's arrival, the memories of Carla helping others beat at him with visions of her love for those less fortunate; of her laughter and her touch—

“Stop!” he hissed. Gripping the doorknob of the bedroom, he jerked it open and stepped inside. He kept his gaze averted from the bed. The sound of voices from Gwin's room drew his attention.

“Didn't you want to?”

“Yes, Miss, but I worked for an evil tyrant of a man named Mr. Brockle. He said that if I tried to leave, he'd tell all the people that I was a horrible and lazy person.”

He crept to the connecting door between his room and his daughter's. Sara tucked Gwin into bed, the covers up to her chin. The sight of a woman soothing his sleepless child served as a fist in the stomach and stole his breath away.

“What did you do?”

“I was scared, so I thought if I stayed for a bit he'd be nice and let me come away.” Sara searched out a chair and drew it close. Gwin watched with wide eyes.

“He didn't?”

“No, though I suppose it foolish of me to hope for that.”

“Papa woulda bust him in the nose.”

Christopher leaned against the door jamb, his arms crossed. That's more Teddy's style, Gwin.

Sara laughed. “I wanted to do that, too, Miss Gwin, truth be told.”

“Then what happened?”

“I kept asking if I could go, and if he'd say nice things to your mamma about me, but he said 'no' again and again.”

Christopher frowned. It's no wonder she twitches and cringes away from me at times. To have endured such an environment, I commend that she arrived at all!

“You 'scaped?”

“Yes'm. I snuck out the back and went to stay at a church.”

“A church? Did Mr. Bockle find you?”

“No. The priest wouldn’t tell him I was there.” Sara leaned in after casting a secretive glance behind her. “The priest was a friend of my mother.”

Christopher watched with interest the interaction between his daughter and Sara. For the first time since meeting her she seemed at ease; comfortable. Perhaps Gwin is the key? Christopher smirked. I may not have you here to help me set this woman on her new life path, but I have our daughter.

His smile drifted as he continued to watch the ease with which Sara soothed his daughter to sleep. Then she placed a kiss on Gwin’s forehead and turned to leave the room. When she paused outside the door to peek in one last time, Christopher met her in the hall. Fear glittered in her eyes at first, as before, until she recognized him. Her cheeks flushed and she wrung her hands. Christopher wasn’t certain if she did so out of fright, apprehension, or timidity.

“I know it’s late, sir, and I didn’t mean to bother you.” Her words rushed together. “The little miss couldn’t sleep and asked if I would tell her tale.”

“It is all right.” He tried to offer her an encouraging smile. “Curfew only applies to Gwin.”

Sara blinked as if she hadn’t expected him to joke with her. Then she smiled, albeit a timid one. Carla, she’s a lovely woman when she doesn’t cower. I see why Paul and Dix sent her on. There is potential here that her previous situation squelched. Now he would need to find the best way to draw her out beyond the fear to trust.

He hoped he was up to the task.