



The Wayward Lady (The Wayward Widows of Willoughby Hall #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: Kendrick has been hiding from his past for a dozen years, writing about love even though he has long since stopped believing in it. But when Lavender unexpectedly tumbles into his garden, he can't deny the warmth and light she brings into his life.

Unfortunately, his secrets prohibit him from pursuing what might be the best thing that ever happened to him. Can Lavender break through the walls around his heart the same way she did the ones around his garden?

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London – March 1891

As moonlight filtered through Lady Lavender Cavendish's bedroom window and illuminated her husband's vacant pillow, dread pooled within her. Geoffrey hadn't come home last night, and she feared something terrible had happened to him.

The witching hour had come and gone without any sign of him, which was unusual. He often went out with his friends in the evenings but almost always returned before midnight.

As the hours dragged on, she could not shake the hollowness in her chest. A terrible sense of dread had replaced her initial anger at his thoughtlessness. Where was he? Why hadn't he returned home?

Every instinct urged her to go look for him, but what was she to do? She couldn't roam London's dark streets by herself, and she had no idea where he spent his evenings. At his club, she assumed, but he had certainly never felt the need to inform her of his nighttime activities.

The sun had only been up for a quarter of an hour, and she was still trying to decide what to do next when someone pounded on her bedroom door loudly enough to shake the glass of water on her bedside table. Her trepidation intensified as she threw off the blankets and slipped on her dressing gown.

No one would wake her this early unless it were an emergency.

"Who is it?" she called in a shaking voice. Every instinct told her not to open the

door. Until she did, she could still pretend that everything was all right. She could still be the person she had been when she'd gone to bed last night.

"It's Brooks, my lady."

Her husband's usually unflappable valet sounded rattled, and her eyes filled with tears before she even reached for the door handle. This isn't happening. This cannot be happening. Geoffrey, where are you?

Black marks smudged Brooks's face, and a strong odor of smoke surrounded him. His once tidy clothes were now disheveled, and he appeared to be in a state of shock. He avoided making eye contact with her, focusing instead on his hat, which he twisted in his hands. "I apologize for waking you, my lady, but there has been a terrible incident involving Lord Crestwood..."

Geoffrey is dead . The news hit her like a sledgehammer. The rest of what Brooks said blurred together, something about a fire at the social club where Geoffrey and his friends had been for the night. A tragedy, with several casualties, including some other well-known figures from high society. But the only thing that she really heard was that her husband was gone.

Overwhelmed by grief, she crumpled to the floor and wept uncontrollably. Her lady's maid eventually helped her back to bed while Brooks stood helplessly by, still wringing his hat in distress.

The next week passed in a blur. Lavender was fairly certain they'd given her something to make her sleep that first day, something that had sucked her into nightmares and spit her out the next morning with a terrible headache. The servants all tiptoed around her as though she had lost not just her husband but her mind as well. She had no one to turn to, no one to console her. Her mother had died when she was a child. Her father had passed shortly after she had married, and her stepmother

and young half-brother had cut her out of their lives the moment he had.

Geoffrey had been her everything.

She should have had a close friend to lean on in the face of such a tragic loss, at least one person who cared about her well-being. But when a knock finally came on her door, it was only Geoffrey's distant cousin, who would now inherit his title as Viscount of Crestwood. The butler informed her that he had arrived, but apparently, he had no desire to speak with her just yet.

She spent the night staring at the ceiling, wondering what this meant for her and fearing the worst. Could she count on this stranger to provide for her?

The next morning, Geoffrey's cousin called her into the study. His name was... Peter, perhaps? Peter Cavendish. But now he was Lord Crestwood, of course. He sat at Geoffrey's desk, staring at her with the same awful pity as everyone else she had interacted with in the last few days. His eyes were pale blue, like Geoffrey's, yet lacking her husband's warmth.

"Geoffrey made no provisions for you in the event of his death." He seemed to take a measure of glee in informing her that she was penniless. "You'll have to vacate the house by the end of the week, as I intend to bring my family here." He paused for a moment. "Unless you're currently expecting?" But something in his tone told her that he knew how unlikely that was.

Lavender and Geoffrey had been married for twelve years, but they had never been able to conceive a child. This meant she had no claim to her husband's assets, including the London townhouse that had been their home for all these years. She could only stay there if she were pregnant with Geoffrey's child, but she knew that was impossible after so much time had passed without managing it, even though doing so had been her entire focus for the last decade. Besides, she did not think

Geoffrey had touched her for at least a month.

She stared at him blankly, trying to absorb this new blow, when he gave her yet another.

“You’ll probably want to leave the city for a while, stay with a friend or relative out in the country, until the scandal dies down.”

“What scandal?” she asked warily, trying to focus on what he had said and not give into the sobs that seemed to be constantly clawing at the back of her throat. It seemed pointless to tell him she had no friends or family in the country.

Those pale eyes grew even colder. “Hasn’t anyone told you?”

“Told me what?” she asked tremulously, wondering just how much more she could take before she broke irrevocably.

“Crestwood was at a brothel when he died. A brothel that catered to very... particular tastes. The Duke of Ashbourne, the Earl of Wyndham, and the younger son of the Duke of Radcliffe died as well. Everyone is talking about it.”

“Excuse me,” she managed, bile rising at the back of her throat. She surged to her feet and fled back to the bedroom she had just been informed would only be hers for a few more days. Perhaps it was rude, but he’d made it clear that he didn’t intend to help her, so why should she stay and be treated in such a manner?

She curled up in a chair in front of the fire, staring blankly into the flames, surprisingly dry-eyed. Perhaps she’d simply cried all the tears she’d been allotted for her lifetime. It certainly felt that way. Her eyes burned, and her head throbbed, but all she could think of was the fact that the entire city knew that her husband had been unfaithful to her.

A brothel? Why would Geoffrey have gone to a brothel?

She had always enjoyed the physical side of their marriage, and she'd assumed he did, too. In the early years, he had come to her bed nearly every night, but as month after month had passed without her conceiving, he'd made love to her less and less. She had come to understand that he thought her a failure and believed he had made a bad bargain when he'd married her.

It all made sense now. Why he had gone out several times a week and always refused to talk about where he went or what he did. He had said he loved her and continued to hold her close at night, but he had obviously been getting his needs met elsewhere.

"A brothel that catered to very... particular tastes."

Peter's words echoed repeatedly in her mind, and she struggled to make sense of them. What sort of perversions had her husband been engaged in on the night of his death? Something so horrible that Peter couldn't tell her, but she was certain that nearly everyone else in London knew. She feared many people were laughing at her this evening, or worse... pitying her.

A fancy cream-colored envelope on the nearby table caught her attention, and she reached for it with a trembling hand, desperately needing to take her mind off what she had just learned. Had someone finally reached out to offer their condolences?

To her great surprise, the missive was from the Duchess of Ashbourne, inviting her to tea tomorrow afternoon. She stared at the elegant script for a few minutes, trying to place the name, wondering why someone so grand would invite someone like her to anything, especially during her mourning period. And then she suddenly remembered...

The Duke of Ashbourne had also died in the fire.

The very strict rules of mourning said that she should decline the invitation. For the next year, she was not allowed to socialize with anyone other than her immediate family. However, since her only family was a stepmother she hated and a younger half-brother she was certain had been turned against her, who did she have left to shock and disappoint?

The duchess was one of the only people alive who could possibly understand what she was going through. And she was desperate for someone to talk to, someone who might understand how devastating it had been to lose Geoffrey in such a way.

She stared at the invitation for several minutes longer, her mind racing, then quickly penned her acceptance. She sent a footman to deliver it, and then, for the first time in a week, she fell asleep without the aid of a sleeping draught.

The next day, she dressed in a morning gown of black bombazine, then hired a hack to take her to the duchess's Mayfair townhome. When she arrived in front of the palatial residence, the duchess's butler showed her to a spacious sitting room adorned with cream and gold furnishings. The walls were lined with breathtaking paintings in ornate frames, catching the light that filtered through the tall windows. A grand crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, and she was surprised to realize it was electrified, shedding light even in the middle of the day, an extravagance Lavender could hardly fathom. Near the window, a marble table held a delicate porcelain tea set, surrounded by plush furniture upholstered in rich, velvety cream fabric.

Lady Eden Pemberley, a statuesque redhead she had met a time or two, and whom she suddenly remembered had been married to the Duke of Radcliff's younger son, already sat on one of the sofas. Lavender paused at the door, panic skittering across her frayed nerves. She wasn't certain what she'd expected when the duchess invited her to tea, but it hadn't been this—not a meeting of the women whose husbands had perished in the fire.

However, the butler announced her before she could turn around and flee.

“Lady Crestwood,” the duchess exclaimed, rising to greet her. “Come in.”

The duchess was lovely, far younger than Lavender had expected. Though her auburn hair was streaked with strands of gray, her face was unlined. She probably hadn’t yet reached fifty. She drew Lavender into a hug, and this little bit of physical contact, after all the cold, lonely days since Geoffrey’s death, brought tears to her eyes. She clung to the duchess for far longer than she probably should have, soaking in the unexpected gesture of comfort.

“Thank you for having me,” she murmured as the duchess finally pulled away, her gaze falling on Lady Eden, who looked just as uncomfortable and miserable as she did.

“We’re just waiting on one more,” the duchess told them, motioning for Lavender to take the seat next to Lady Eden.

It had to be the Countess of Wyndham because, really, who else could it be? The four of them only had one thing in common.

As expected, Daphne Fitzroy, the Countess of Wyndham, entered the duchess’s drawing room moments later. Unlike Lavender and Eden, however, the gorgeous brunette was extremely confident, as though an audience with a duchess was an everyday occurrence—as though her husband hadn’t died a week ago and utterly humiliated her.

Once they were all seated and the tea had been served, the duchess looked around the room, making eye contact with each of them. “I’m certain you’re all wondering why I invited you here today.”

The countess scoffed. "I think that's rather obvious. We are all part of a rather exclusive club."

The duchess's green eyes sparked, but it seemed amusement rather than anger. "We are," she conceded. "And I, for one, am feeling rather lonely."

"I am feeling free," the countess replied, an edge to her voice. "For the first time in years, I feel like I can breathe."

Lavender gasped, shocked to hear her admit she did not mourn her husband's passing. But as she looked around the room, she realized she was probably the only one here who'd been surprised that her husband had met his end in a brothel. None of the others looked as though they were truly grieving. Were they actually relieved to have been widowed?

"One does not necessarily preclude the other," the duchess stated. "Since we have all been forced into mourning, we have a long stretch ahead of us with no social interaction whatsoever. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't believe any of you have a lot of people in your lives who you can turn to for comfort."

Lavender burst into tears, the magnitude of her situation overwhelming her. "I don't have anyone," she managed, so grateful to finally be able to voice her fears aloud. "I will be allowed to stay in my home until it is determined that I am not with child... which I am not... and then I have no idea where I will go."

Lady Eden scooted over inelegantly and pulled Lavender into a tight embrace, patting her comfortingly on the back, murmuring soothing words as Lavender sobbed inconsolably. It embarrassed her, but she could not control the emotional storm washing over her.

To her vast surprise, the countess reached out and squeezed Lavender's hand, her

earlier bravado gone. “Charles didn’t leave me and my sons penniless, but I had no idea of the extent of his gambling debts until the creditors came calling. My oldest son had to leave Cambridge to deal with the mess, and when all is said and done, he won’t have much left to provide for me. I will end up having to depend on him for everything.”

“My father made sure that I would be provided for no matter what happened to Richard,” Lady Eden said hollowly. “So, I will be alright financially, but I’m alone too. You can stay with me if you like, Lady Lavender. I have plenty of room.”

“That is very kind, but you don’t even know me!” Lavender exclaimed tearfully, absolutely shocked that this woman, this stranger, was being so kind. All three of them had been so kind.

“We wayward widows have to stick together,” Lady Eden said with a laugh, disentangling herself from Lavender’s damp embrace. “Her Grace is right. The next year is going to be miserably lonely. Why shouldn’t we spend it together?”

“Why don’t all three of you come and stay with me instead?” the duchess interjected. “My son will be very generous with me, and I have already claimed Willoughby Hall in Kent for myself. It is a beautiful place overlooking the sea. I hate the city and cannot bear the thought of weathering all the gossip our husbands’ disgusting actions will bring down on us. So, if you would like to live a more rustic, relaxed life out of the public eye, you’re free to join me. After everything that has happened, I would really love the company of others who know what I’m going through.”

A weight Lavender hadn’t realized she’d been carrying lifted from her shoulders. She would be a fool to reject the lifeline she’d been thrown.

It wasn’t as if she’d stay there forever. Eventually, she would have to find a way to survive on her own, but it might be nice to make a few female friends and rusticate at

the seaside until the scandal of their husbands' deaths died down.

"I'd love to," Lavender breathed.

"I would as well," Lady Eden seconded.

"It sounds wonderful to me," the countess agreed.

"Then the Wayward Widows of Weatherby Hall we shall be," the duchess declared.

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Willoughby Hall – May 1892

I can do this.

Lavender Cavendish stood outside Willoughby Hall, staring longingly at an ancient brick wall. She had lived here with Genevieve, the Duchess of Ashbourne, for a little over a year now, and she had been desperate to get a look at the walled garden next door this entire time, especially since she'd found out it had been designed by the famous landscape architect Humphry Repton.

She had sent numerous requests to Kendrick Wycliffe, the house's owner, asking that he allow her to visit, but he had ignored them. He was a writer and known to be something of a recluse. Accordingly, her desire to see it had grown with each passing day.

Willoughby Hall had been built to the duchess's specifications less than a decade ago, and although it had gardens of its own, they were still rather new and sparse. Genevieve knew Lavender was looking for a project, something to throw her whole heart and soul into, and had suggested that she redesign the gardens and manage the project once it was underway.

Lavender had never overseen anything other than the running of Geoffrey's household, and the thought of undertaking such an immense project both thrilled and terrified her. But Genevieve had been so good to her, and she wanted so badly to make her proud.

She leaned forward, running her hands across her trouser-clad thighs with a smile.

She couldn't believe how much her life had changed since she'd moved to Kent with the three strangers who had quickly become her dearest friends. Genevieve, Eden, and Daphne were all so worldly and accomplished. They had taught her so much; with them, she had found herself daringly going against polite society's rules and expectations.

For instance, since her days mostly consisted of roaming the rocky cliffs and sandy beaches encompassed by the estate, why should she be weighed down by the ridiculous clothing that most women of their class were encumbered by? She had been absolutely shocked when Daphne had made them all trousers, but the moment she had slipped them on, she had known a freedom of movement she'd never experienced.

It wasn't as though she'd ever go out in public dressed this way, but why shouldn't she be comfortable in her own home? She and her friends had created an environment where they were all free to be themselves, to speak their minds, to pursue their interests, and to always know that even on the hardest days, they had people who cared about them. It had made all the difference for a group of women who had spent a lifetime feeling very isolated and alone.

Lavender still missed Geoffrey—of course, she did—but in hindsight, she could see how unhappy she had been those last few years. He had stopped making her a priority when it had become obvious that she wasn't ever going to bear him a child. He had treated her like such a failure. She had thought something was terribly wrong with her, that God was somehow punishing her.

But Eden, the smartest person that Lavender had ever known, had told her that it could have been Geoffrey's fault they hadn't been able to conceive and not hers at all! Whether that was true or not, it had made her feel indescribably better. No matter who had been at fault, Geoffrey should not have treated her as he had.

With a sigh, she forced away all thoughts of the past. No matter how she had gotten to this point, she was very grateful to be here. She didn't think she'd ever been happier.

Gathering her courage, she strode purposefully toward an ancient oak on the edge of Genevieve's property. One mighty branch of the old tree hung far over the other side of the wall. If she could shimmy her way out on to it, she should have a really good view of at least some of Repton's garden.

Reaching for the branch above her head, she pulled herself up, grateful for all the physical activity she had undertaken since she arrived here. A year ago, she would not have been able to do such a thing.

Once she had gotten high up into the tree, she inched her way out onto the branch that hung over the wall.

If the garden's grouchy old owner wouldn't even bother to respond to her, she'd simply have to take manners into her own hands.

Kendrick Wycliffe sat in a peaceful corner of his lush garden, sipping his morning tea as the sun's golden rays spilled through the trees. The soft chirping of birds provided a soothing accompaniment to his solitude. Lost in his thoughts, Kendrick absently twirled the delicate china teacup between his fingers, staring across his perfectly cultivated flowerbeds. As the fragrant steam curled upward, a sense of melancholy settled over him like a shroud.

For so long, he had thought that if he could find enough solitude, he would somehow find happiness, but it remained elusive. Being alone wasn't everything he'd thought it would be. In fact, some days, he thought he would go mad with only his thoughts to keep him company. Even the fictional characters who usually spoke to him had grown quiet as of late.

A small whine captured his attention, reminding him he wasn't completely friendless. Reaching down, he scratched his spaniel, Daisy, between the ears, only to have her suddenly sit at attention and stare at the garden wall.

He leaned forward, furrowing his brow in confusion as he observed someone carefully making their way across the thick branch of a towering oak tree that draped over his vibrant rhododendron bushes.

The dense canopy of leaves cast a veil over the figure, obscuring their features from view. At first glance, it appeared to be a man, as they were clad in trousers, but upon closer inspection, the curvature of their body betrayed a decidedly feminine shape. The fabric stretched enticingly over full hips and thighs. In fact, through a break in the leaves, he was suddenly treated to the sight of an exceptionally round and lovely derriere.

The trunk of the tree resided on the estate next door, which belonged to the notorious Dowager Duchess of Ashbourne. She and three other widows had taken up permanent residence at Willoughby Hall around a year ago. Despite his best attempts to stay completely disengaged from the village gossip, he occasionally had to go into town to resupply. For a while, the townsfolk had talked of nothing else. All four women had lost their husbands in the same accident.

A fire in a bordello, if memory served.

And now one of them was blatantly trespassing, though he could not fathom for what purpose.

“What the hell are you doing up there?” he growled, his initial shock and interest turning to anger. That wall existed for the express purpose of keeping people out.

The woman startled with a little yelp, whipping her head in his direction. He caught a

fleeting glimpse of blond hair plaited in a thick French braid and wide, crystal blue eyes before her sharp movement caused her to lose her balance. She toppled from the tree, landing in the rhododendrons at the base of the wall with a loud thud.

Muttering beneath his breath, he lunged from his chair, hoping she hadn't broken her foolish neck. The last thing he needed was to deal with that first thing in the morning.

"Are you all right?" he snapped as he reached her side and stared down at her, trying to determine the extent of her injuries.

She lay so topsy-turvy in the bush that he'd have gotten quite an eyeful if she hadn't been wearing trousers. Even with the trousers, she was sprawled in such an ungainly manner that he had more of an idea of the shape of her body than was proper.

"I'm fine. You just startled me," she said breathily, accepting his outstretched hand and allowing him to pull her to her feet. She was not wearing gloves, and the feel of her smooth, bare hand in his made him flinch and hurriedly let go.

Standing, she barely came to his shoulder. At first, he had thought her no more than a girl, but up close, the fine lines around her eyes marked her as at least thirty. The short, curvy little thing looked adorably rumpled after her fall, twigs and leaves sticking out of her braid and a smudge of dirt on her chin, but he refused to be charmed.

"What were you doing in my tree?" he asked impatiently.

"Well, technically, it is not your tree. It is ours," she said reasonably, gesturing toward the imposing walls of Willoughby Hall in the distance.

He supposed he could not argue with that, though he badly wanted to.

“What were you doing dangling over my property then?” It took all the willpower he had not to snarl at her. He wanted nothing more than to get back to his tea and morose thoughts. He most definitely did not want to get another look at her lovely bottom clad in these form-fitting trousers. Didn’t she realize how absolutely scandalous her behavior was?

She bit her lip and shuffled her feet, looking rightfully embarrassed. “I heard that Humphry Repton designed your garden. I have sent several notes asking if I could take a look around, but they all went unanswered. Your gardener has proven elusive as well. So...” She gave him a wry smile. “I was quite desperate to see it. I thought I could get a glimpse from up there, which wouldn’t actually be trespassing, but the foliage thwarted me.”

He sighed. He had tossed the multitude of missives he’d received from Willoughby Hall into the rubbish bin, imagining them to be invitations to some silly thing or another. Perhaps if he’d opened one, he’d have allowed her to come. His garden was his biggest source of pride, and it was a shame no one else ever got to see it. He wanted to be angry with her for trespassing, but he found himself reluctant to squash her enthusiasm for some reason. She was simply too... adorable. “I don’t have a gardener. I take care of it myself.”

“You do?” She met his gaze again, and he was struck anew by how lovely she was. She had probably been a great beauty in her youth, but he found that he liked the earthy softness of her features and the laugh lines around her lush lips that maturity had brought. “Oh, I have so many questions for you.”

He grunted, unwilling to enter into any discussion she might want to have about his garden, though it was the main reason he’d purchased this house. He did have one question for her, though, despite it going against his desire to keep everyone he met at arm’s length. “I suppose you’re one of those widows.” He somehow stopped short of directly asking her name.

She blinked. “Yes, I am.”

Good God. She’s going to make me ask.

“Well, which one are you?” Exasperation tinged his tone. He couldn’t help it.

“Lavender Cavendish,” she replied with a little curtsy that looked ridiculous, given that she was wearing trousers. “Formerly the Viscountess of Crestwood.”

A bloody viscountess. Named for my favorite plant. Wearing trousers. He wondered suddenly if he was the one who had fallen out of a tree. Had he hit his head? None of this made any sense.

He must have stared at her for an awkwardly long moment because she cleared her throat, dropping her gaze. “Well, may I see it now? The garden, I mean? Since I’m already here?”

Tell her no.

But his mind and his mouth seemed to be working independently of each other. Because instead of denying her request, he gestured toward the path ahead. “That’s rather like a burglar asking if he can steal your family jewels now that he’s already in your house, but I suppose you can take a peek.”

She laughed at his rusty joke, and her blue eyes lit up with excitement. “Oh, thank you. You have no idea what this means to me!”

She fairly skipped ahead of him, and his gaze was drawn once again to the way her buff trousers hugged her ample behind. Had she borrowed them from one of the stableboys? Or had they been made just for her? In all his thirty-nine years, he had never seen a woman in trousers and found the sight more than a little erotic.

In fact, he found it a lot erotic.

“Why are you wearing trousers?” he found himself asking, determined to get to the bottom of this.

She glanced over her shoulder, her cheeks flushing. “It is very difficult to climb a tree in a skirt. I did not expect to encounter you, obviously.”

“Obviously,” he said drily.

“You’re the writer, aren’t you? Kendrick Wycliffe?” she asked as they walked along a gravel path past an expanse of brilliant green lawn and various flowerbeds at the back of the house.

“You know I am,” he fired back.

“Well, you knew I was one of the widows,” she retorted.

The smallest hint of a smile curved his lips. He had to admit that he was almost... enjoying this exchange. “Yes, but I didn’t know which one.”

She gave him a beaming smile, which made her even more lovely.

“And who is your faithful companion?” she asked, leaning down to scratch Daisy, who followed loyally behind him, between the ears.

“This is Daisy,” he answered a bit reluctantly. He wasn’t used to anyone being in his little sanctuary, let alone meeting his dog. It seemed the height of intimacy, somehow.

“Well, hello, Daisy!” she said brightly, making Daisy wag her whole body.

“Traitor,” he muttered.

The gravel pathway crunched beneath her sensible boots as she reached the fountain at the center of the rose garden. “It’s beautiful,” she breathed, turning in a slow circle to take in the varied array of roses, a palette of colors from yellow to red, then from pink to purple.

“I’m certain the duchess’s gardens are even lovelier,” he said, although he knew they were not. His gardens were by far the best in the county. They were his pride and joy, the only thing he had worth getting up for in the morning besides his writing.

“The gardens at Willoughby Hall are very nice, but they are nothing like this,” she answered, reaching down to once again scratch between Daisy’s ears as she gazed around at the roses. “I have always loved roses. They are so bright and vivid, even when everything else is dreary and gray. They remind me of... well, of possibilities.”

“Ah,” Kendrick replied, his gaze lingering on the scarlet blooms of a nearby rose bush. “I feel a certain camaraderie with them as well. They flourish despite the thorns, reminding me to persevere through the challenges life throws me.” The moment the words were out of his mouth, he regretted saying them. This woman seemed to have all the substance of a butterfly and didn’t need to hear his deep thoughts about anything. He wasn’t even certain where the poetic words had come from. Though he might write such a sentiment, he wasn’t one to actually say such a silly thing.

“Endurance,” she said softly, her eyes meeting his with an intensity that made him rethink his initial assessment of her character. “I know a bit about that.”

The pain in her voice made him realize he wasn’t the only one who’d gone through tough times. She had recently lost her husband, after all. And in a most embarrassing and public way. “Do you?” he asked, his voice barely audible above the nearby

fountain's gentle murmurs.

"Perhaps it is not merely endurance that roses teach us," Lavender mused thoughtfully, "but hope. The hope to blossom anew, regardless of the thorns."

"Hope," Kendrick repeated, considering the word as if it were a rare bloom he had never dared cultivate. In the shared silence that followed, there was a sense of kinship that he had not felt with anyone in a very long time.

"Your roses," Lavender said, her soft voice pulling him from his reverie, "remind me of a painting I once saw. Vivid and full of life, yet somehow... yearning."

A muscle twitched in his jaw as he considered the notion. Yearning implied a desire for something more, an aching for a connection that had been severed. He allowed himself a glance at Lavender, her cheeks flushed, eyes alight with unrestrained enthusiasm. She was warmth to his coldness, light to his shadows. How perilous it felt, this pull toward her—the very antithesis of everything he had become.

"Yearning for the sun, perhaps," he offered, his tone carefully neutral. "Or maybe just reaching out for anything willing to come close enough."

"Like me," she quipped, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "So desperate to see your gardens that I climbed a tree to do so."

A chuckle rumbled deep within Kendrick's chest, surprising even himself. He didn't think he'd truly laughed in years, and the sound seemed foreign yet intrinsically a part of him. Her wit sparked something in him that had been dormant for far too long.

Kendrick felt the rigid armor around his heart creak and groan. There was danger in this, in allowing someone to see beyond the brambles he had cultivated so carefully around his heart. Yet, as he watched Lavender laugh, head thrown back in genuine

delight, he couldn't deny the allure of companionship. It had been so long since he'd had a genuine conversation with anyone, let alone a woman.

"Come with me." Without looking to see if she followed, he made his way toward the gazebo on the cliff, which framed a spectacular view of the ocean crashing forty feet below. He spent much of his time there, either writing or waiting for the words to come, but he had never shared it with anyone. Yet, for some reason, he wanted to show it to her. He told himself it was because she was a true fan of Repton's work.

As they crested the hill, she gasped and froze, taking in the view of the blanket of blue stretching out before them. "Repton is known for framing the natural views of a property, but this is breathtaking. I'm surprised you don't sit here all day."

"Sometimes I do," he admitted.

She turned her gaze from the ocean to him, her face lit with delight. A charming trio of freckles were sprinkled across her nose, and he desperately wanted to lean forward and brush them with his lips. "Thank you for sharing this with me, Mr. Wycliffe. Truly. The duchess has given me permission to make some changes to the gardens at Willoughby Hall, and it would have been a crime not to see what Repton had done right next door."

He cleared his throat. "Well, next time you want to visit, use the gate, for God's sake."

A bubbling little laugh escaped her. "Does that mean I can come back?"

"If you want," he said, snapping his fingers for Daisy and turning away before he completely ruined his reputation as an ogre. "Just don't bother me when you do."

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

Lavender stared after Mr. Wycliffe and his adorable tan spaniel, a smile still curving her lips. She had heard stories of the reclusive writer who lived next door since she'd moved into Willoughby Hall, but this was the first time she'd caught even a glimpse of him.

He was nothing like she had expected him to be.

She had thought he was far older, a doddering old hermit who holed up in the storybook cottage of his lovely seaside estate and wrote beautiful stories of love and redemption. But she doubted he was over half a dozen years older than her own thirty-two with dark hair only slightly gray at the temples, piercing brown eyes, and a powerful body that was a symphony of toned muscle. She'd had no idea that he took care of his own garden. No wonder he was so fit.

Still smiling, she meandered back down the path, absolutely thrilled that she had been invited to return, even if he had done so begrudgingly. Though he had said not to bother him, surely if she ran into him accidentally, he might be willing to answer some of her questions about the history and design of Seacrest's gardens.

Letting herself out the garden gate, she hurried back toward Willoughby Hall, dying to tell her friends what had happened. Mr. Wycliffe had often been the subject of speculation between them. However, when she entered the house, only Genevieve was in the drawing room, and she remembered that Daphne and Eden had gone to town.

"I met Kendrick Wycliffe," she told Genevieve dramatically, taking the chair at her friend's side.

Genevieve had been working on some embroidery, but she immediately put it aside, her green eyes widening. “How on earth did that happen? I’ve never met him in all the time I’ve owned this house.”

“I was trying to see the gardens,” Lavender admitted. “I climbed a tree and scooted along a branch that hung over his property. But he saw me and asked what I was doing.” She grinned, reliving the moment that had spurred her conversation with him. She should be embarrassed but found that she wasn’t. “It startled me so much that I fell into some bushes right in front of him.”

Genevieve burst into laughter. “Oh, Lavender! Truly? And you went over there like this? In your trousers?”

Lavender nodded, fighting back laughter of her own. “He was so shocked! I could tell he wanted to be angry about it, but he didn’t know quite what to make of me.”

“I imagine he has never met anyone like you, my dear,” Genevieve said fondly, reaching over to pat her hand. “What’s he like?”

Heat crept up Lavender’s throat. “Surprisingly young and handsome. I doubt he’s yet turned forty. I thought he was going to be much older.”

Genevieve gave her a knowing look but didn’t ask more about his attractiveness. “Did he show you the gardens?”

“A bit of them,” Lavender replied. “And he told me I could come back, as long as I didn’t bother him.”

“How unexpected,” Genevieve said, looking at Lavender speculatively. “He has quite a reputation in town as being absolutely unapproachable. He never lets anyone come around. I am shocked that you managed to charm him.”

Lavender felt suddenly uncomfortable. “I would not go that far. I would say he was more horrified than charmed.” But her heart warmed at the memory of the conversation they had shared. She suspected that he had been a little charmed by her. There had been a moment when they had been talking about the roses....

Genevieve laughed and then gazed out the window toward Mr. Wycliffe’s house. “Did you know that Seacrest used to be part of Willoughby Hall?”

“I didn’t.” Lavender’s eyes widened. “Does that mean the walled gardens were once yours?”

“No,” Genevieve replied. “That was a very long time ago. The original property was gifted to Gabrielle Valoy, the mistress of the Duke of Tarleton. She lived here until her death about fifty years ago, and the estate fell into disrepair for many years. Tarleton’s great-grandson sold the gardener’s cottage and the gardens to Wycliffe, who has done a remarkable job of restoring them. He didn’t want the original house, which was already falling apart by then. I bought the rest of the estate soon after, tore down the original house, and built Willoughby Hall.” She smiled fondly. “Willoughby was my maiden name. I was determined to have at least one thing that was entirely mine.”

“I’m very glad that you did,” Lavender said gratefully. “I don’t know what would have become of us all if you hadn’t asked us to come here.”

“It was meant to be,” Genevieve said kindly. “I am so glad to have good friends to share it with. The three of you have made my life so much brighter.”

“You’ve all made mine brighter as well.” Lavender pushed to her feet, giving her friend a fond smile. Sometimes, Lavender suspected Genevieve was her fairy godmother who had swooped in to save her just in the nick of time. “I’m going upstairs to sketch what I remember of the garden before I forget it completely.”

“Come down for tea,” Genevieve coaxed. “The others will be back by then, and I’m sure they will want to hear about your visit with our neighbor.”

“I will,” Lavender agreed. She left the drawing room and strode up the grand staircase to the second floor, letting herself into her large, airy bedroom at the back of the house. She drifted to the window, which framed a gorgeous view of the ocean. The waves crashing against the rocks below never ceased to bring a smile to her lips.

When she had first arrived here a little more than a year ago, she had lost the ability to smile. She’d been so brokenhearted, so lost. She had truly loved Geoffrey. The pain of losing him combined with the pain of finding out that he had not been faithful—that he’d frequented houses of ill repute where he’d engaged in all manners of disgusting behaviors—had crushed her in a soul-deep way.

She had been so incredibly grateful for Genevieve’s gracious offer. Still, she had been nervous to pack up and move to Kent with three women she barely knew. But the moment she had walked into this room and saw this view, she’d sensed it would all work out.

At Willoughby Hall, she had found a sense of peace and safety that had always been missing from her life.

Living with Genevieve, Eden, and Phoebe had ended up being the best thing that had ever happened to her. Over the past year, their friendship had grown until Lavender couldn’t imagine being without them. Together, they had felt free to put all the constraints of high society far behind them. Hence, the trousers.

She grinned as she thought about the look on Mr. Wycliffe’s face when he realized what she was wearing. Genevieve was right. He probably had no idea what to make of her.

As she stood there, lost in thought, her gaze drifted to the quaint cottage next door. It sat nestled among the tall trees and colorful flowers, its thatched roof sloping down to meet the neatly trimmed garden wall. It looked straight out of a storybook, with pointed gables and small windows. She could almost picture a witch beckoning unsuspecting children inside to partake in all manner of sweets....

Her smile faded. Kendrick Wycliffe was far from Prince Charming. She shouldn't obsess about what he thought of her. Her position at Willoughby Hall was perfect, and the last thing she needed was to be captivated by his haunted, dark eyes.

After his forced interaction with his exasperating neighbor, Kendrick spent another half hour sipping at his now cold tea and staring absently at the tree she had so unceremoniously fallen from. His mind raced as he relived the moments he had spent with her.

For so long, it had just been him and Daisy rambling around his quirky seaside estate. If you had asked him an hour ago, he'd have said he preferred it that way. But he had to admit it had been rather... nice to have a conversation with someone other than his dog.

With a sigh, he stood, picked up his teacup, and headed back toward the house.

"Come on, Daisy," he called, smiling when she scrambled to her feet and then ambled after him, wagging her bushy tail in excitement.

He had learned long ago that she was the only one in the world he could depend on. He'd do well to remember that painful lesson.

Once back inside his whimsical thatched-roof cottage, he went to his large, wood-paneled study and sat at his desk. Daisy plopped down on a braided wool rug at his feet, and he slid a piece of paper into his newfangled typewriter. The words started

flowing for the first time in months, his fingers flying over the keys.

He'd written six successful novels since publishing his first eight years ago. Unfortunately, for the last few months, he'd lost the desire to write. It had once burned so brightly within him that it blocked out everything else, but lately, he had been struggling to find anything worth saying.

He'd made enough money to buy this cottage and live comfortably for the rest of his life if he chose, so the passion and desperation he'd once felt had deserted him.

In the beginning, he had thought that if he provided a beautiful home for his family, they might return to him. His wife Isabella had run away seven years ago, taking their six-year-old daughter Miranda. She hadn't wanted to be the wife of a gardener who claimed he would someday change their lives with his writing. Even though he had sold his first book before she left, he hadn't made that much money off it, and she'd never believed he had any talent, never even read a page of what he'd written.

Apparently, being a soldier's whore had been more to her liking.

He'd long since stopped caring whether she ever came back, but not a day went by that he didn't think about Miranda. She would be nearly a woman herself now. He wondered whether she even remembered him.

When he finally sat back in his chair, he realized he had written more today than he had all month. He could not deny that perhaps it had done him good to talk to Lady Lavender. Maybe he'd isolated himself here for far too long.

As he stacked his pages into a neat pile, feeling a sense of accomplishment for the first time in forever, he found himself hoping she would stop by again.

Lavender managed to wait three whole days before returning to Seacrest, not

wanting to seem too eager, though, of course, she was. When she stepped lightly through the wrought-iron gate into Mr. Wycliffe's garden, she made sure to latch it behind her. Her gaze drifted across the sea of blooms that swayed gently in the mild spring breeze. The air was heavy with the scent of roses and lavender, a fragrant tapestry that seemed to weave around her.

Her skirts brushed gently against the gravel path as she moved farther into the garden, and she smiled to herself as she remembered how flabbergasted he'd been to find her wearing trousers. Would he find her more acceptable dressed like a proper lady, or had he been pleasantly surprised by her unconventional wardrobe choices? She hoped she ran into him again so she could try to decipher his reaction.

She paused beside a bed of lilies, their purple hues vibrant against the green canvas of a wide lawn, while the symphony of birdsong threaded through the quiet afternoon.

The garden was even more enchanting than she remembered. Lavender wandered the winding paths, marveling at the riot of colors and scents surrounding her. Finally, she sat on a secluded bench, took out a sketchbook, and began to capture the beauty on paper, her pencil flying across the page.

She had always had a gift for drawing what she saw and had whiled away many an afternoon lost in a sketchbook. She would not say she was an artist by any means, but she enjoyed sketching more than just about anything else other than reading.

Lost in her work, she didn't notice Mr. Wycliffe approach until his shadow fell across the page. Startled, she looked up and found him staring down at her work with a furrowed brow. She was again struck by his good looks, the rugged features of his handsome face, and haunted dark eyes. He wore a pair of brown trousers and a white lawn shirt, the sleeves rolled up and the top few buttons open to show a slice of his broad, tanned chest and even a thatch of dark hair. She swallowed dryly, then lifted her gaze to his, hoping he'd meant it when he'd said she could visit whenever she

wanted.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice gruff but not unkind.

Lavender quickly closed the sketchbook, feeling embarrassed and worried she had overstepped. “I-I was just trying to capture the beauty of your garden. It’s stunning.”

He studied her for a moment, his dark eyes inscrutable. Then, to her surprise, he sat down beside her. “Show me,” he said simply.

Heart pounding, Lavender hesitated momentarily before opening her sketchbook again. “Willoughby Hall’s gardens are very simple. The house is only a few years old, and the gardens haven’t had a chance to mature. They still need a lot of work in order to become truly lovely. I’ve been looking for something to be passionate about, and Genevieve... um, the duchess... has graciously allowed me to tackle the project. I’m supposed to develop a design and hire people to see it done.”

He leaned forward so he could better see her sketch of one of his flowerbeds. “Your drawings are lovely, but passion doesn’t come from copying something that already exists,” he chided softly. “Passion comes from finding ways to create your own beauty.”

She bit her lip, lifting her gaze to his, glad he didn’t seem angry. The loveliness of what he had created here and the wonderful worlds of his books—all of which she’d read—made her certain he knew what he was talking about. “I’m afraid I’ve never really created anything. The women I live with all have things they are passionate about, a purpose in life, and I’ve been struggling to find one of my own. I love gardening, but I know so little about it. I thought that if I could see the works of a master and learn from his brilliance, your brilliance, then perhaps I might eventually start to find my own path.”

He tilted his head, studying her intently. “I don’t think landscape design can be learned on a whim,” he said, his voice gentle. “It will take you years to gain the knowledge you’ll need to design a garden like this.”

She flushed with embarrassment. “I know it must sound silly to someone like you, who has accomplished so much.”

He frowned, his dark eyes searching hers. “I suppose I don’t really understand why someone like you feels the need to muck about in the dirt is all.”

“Someone like me?” Her embarrassment burned away in a flash of anger. “A spoiled aristocrat, you mean? A silly woman?”

He held her gaze but did not rise to her bait. “I was born a gardener’s son. I kicked and scratched to lift myself to where I am now, but in the eyes of society, I am still not fit to lick your polished little boots. The duchess could hire an established landscape architect and an army of men to work on Willoughby Hall’s gardens. Why would you want to take on such a demanding project?”

“So, I should just be content with my needlework?” Her anger continued to build, and she realized suddenly how tired she was of men telling her what she should and should not do. First, it had been her father. Then Geoffrey. Now, this perfect stranger felt he had a right to do it.

He threw his hands up in mock surrender, which enraged her even more. “You can do whatever you like. I just think you might be biting off a little more than you can chew, is all.”

She snapped her sketchbook closed, her embarrassment returning. Of course, he didn’t think she could do it. Nobody had ever expected anything of her in her entire sheltered life other than to look pretty and smile.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion,” she said tightly. “I should probably go now. Don’t worry. I won’t be back.”

She surged to her feet, but he grabbed her hand. “Wait,” he said sharply.

Tugging her hand free, she glared at him.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” he said with a sigh, running his hand through his dark hair. The streaks of gray at his temples shimmered like threads of silver in the sunlight, not detracting from his good looks at all. He stood up and once again took her hand. “I’m sorry. Will you let me show you something before you go?”

She wanted to refuse him, but a part of her agreed with everything he had said. Was gardening really her passion? She wasn’t sure. And shouldn’t she be? If it really was the thing that would finally give her life some purpose, then she absolutely should be. Besides, his hand felt warm and solid in hers, and it had been so long since she had been touched....

“All right,” she said grudgingly.

He gave her a small smile and tugged her down a path to their right and out the far gate of the walled part of the garden.

After a few minutes, they crested a small rise, and to her surprised delight, a dozen varieties of lavender plants spread out before her. The heady, soothing scent overwhelmed her senses. “Lavender,” she breathed.

“It’s my favorite,” he admitted.

She turned to him, a soft smile playing on her lips as she realized he had meant this as an olive branch of sorts. “Thank you for showing me this, Mr. Wycliffe. It is truly

beautiful.”

He met her gaze with a rare warmth in his eyes. “I am sorry if I upset you earlier. That wasn’t my intention. Please do not let my stupidity dissuade you from whatever you want to do. I cannot wait to see what you create. Plenty of people told me that a gardener’s son could never be a writer, but I somehow managed to prove them wrong.”

She ducked her head, unable to meet his gaze. She appreciated his attempt to make her feel better, but she had to admit that his words had given her food for thought. She would never learn all that he’d probably already known before he even came of age, let alone enough to design something that would live up to Genevieve’s expectations. “Thank you for saying that, but I’m afraid you see the reality of things far more clearly than I do.”

He sighed. “I wish I was less of a realist if you want to know the truth. I’ve always envied people who see things as they want them to be and not how they actually are.”

She didn’t know quite how to take that comment, so she said nothing as they turned away and headed back to where she had entered the garden. As they reached the wrought-iron gate that led back to Willoughby Hall, Lavender attempted a smile. “Thank you so much for all that you showed me today. You have given me a lot to think about.”

“You’ve given me much to think about as well,” he told her unexpectedly, a rare smile curving his gorgeous lips. “Will you come again?”

“Of course,” she told him breathlessly, knowing their conversations, no matter how frustrating, were too interesting to resist. “I’ll see you soon.”

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The following day, Lavender sat with Daphne and Eden in the conservatory, one of their favorite rooms. The glass walls, tile floors, and various potted flowers and fruit trees gave the impression of being outdoors but kept them warm and dry on days like today when a spring squall was churning the sea in the distance.

She absentmindedly flipped through the pages of her sketchbook, replaying the conversation she'd had yesterday with Mr. Wycliffe in her mind. All her excitement about creating something meaningful and contributing to Willoughby Hall's gardens had disappeared. However, she could not find it in herself to be mad at him. He had been straightforward with her, a rarity that she appreciated.

She knew how she appeared to others—delicate and easily broken. Her gentle nature often led people to believe that she could not handle difficult truths, but she knew deep down that she was stronger than that. After all, she had survived Geoffrey's death and the subsequent humiliation of being talked about and mocked.

He had never explicitly said she couldn't do it; he'd simply warned her that it would require years of dedication and effort. She finally understood what he meant by passion. Without a strong drive and determination, she would not have the motivation or perseverance to see the project through to the end.

She could admit now that she did not feel that way about gardening. She had a passing interest at best. And even if she threw herself into it wholeheartedly, she knew she would falter and ultimately fail. The problem was that she could not for the life of her come up with something she might enjoy more. She liked to sketch and read, spend time with her friends, and walk along the beach hunting sea glass. But none of those pastimes were something she could really describe as a purpose .

Daphne and Eden sat across the room, completely absorbed in their own activities. None of her friends ever seemed to struggle with finding things to keep them occupied.

Eden was obsessed with history. She read everything she could get her hands on and had been planning to lead an archeological expedition ever since her husband had died. Genevieve was involved in half a dozen charitable organizations. She truly cared about making a difference in the world. Daphne had an eye for fashion and a rare talent for designing clothes. She was even thinking about opening a dress shop of her own.

A sharp pang of jealousy shot through Lavender, catching her off guard. She couldn't help but envy how confident her friends were about their passions. How did they discover them so effortlessly? It felt like an odd question to ask, but she couldn't shake the desire to know their secrets.

When Lavender closed her sketchbook with a heavy sigh, the sound drew Daphne and Eden's attention. They exchanged knowing glances, silently communicating their concern. Daphne set aside her embroidery and moved closer to Lavender while Eden abandoned her book on the table to join them.

"Lavender, dear, is everything alright?" Daphne's voice was laced with genuine worry as she reached out to place a comforting hand on Lavender's arm.

Lavender mustered a weak smile, trying to push away the feelings of inadequacy that clouded her thoughts. "I'm fine, truly. Just... contemplating things."

Eden perched on the arm of a nearby chair, her keen gaze fixed on Lavender. "Contemplating what, exactly? You know you can share anything with us."

Fiddling with a loose thread on her skirt, Lavender hesitated before speaking. "It's

about the garden project,” she began, her voice soft but tinged with uncertainty. “I thought it was what I wanted to do, but now... I am not so sure. Mr. Wycliffe made me realize how much dedication and passion it requires, and I don’t think I have that for gardening.”

Daphne smiled, obviously relieved to find out that was all that was bothering her. To her, it probably seemed inconsequential. “Darling, it is perfectly alright to have doubts. Finding your true calling takes time and exploration. Do not be disheartened if this particular path doesn’t turn out to be the one meant for you. You have a whole world of possibilities waiting.”

Eden nodded in agreement. “Remember, Lavender, you are more than just your hobbies or interests. Your worth is not defined by how well you design a garden or any other project. Your kindness, compassion, and strength are what truly shine through. That is why we all love you so much.”

Lavender felt a rush of gratitude for her friends’ understanding and support. Their words offered her a sense of comfort she desperately needed after having beat herself up all night over the issue.

“How did the two of you find out what you were good at?” she asked eagerly, hoping for some insight.

Eden shrugged, her dark eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as she pushed her red braid over her shoulder. “I’ve always been interested in the past. Even as a child, I roamed the halls of my father’s estate, wondering about all the people who lived there before us. What were their lives like? How did they spend their time? And then I learned about Egypt, which was even more ancient, and I wanted nothing more than to go there and find out for myself.”

Lavender was glad her friend had such passion for the subject, but she had never

cared much for anything she'd learned in the schoolroom. "What about you, Daphne?"

Daphne smiled, her blue eyes dancing. "After I'd been married for a few years and produced the requisite heir and spare, I was looking for something to fill my time. I imagine I was feeling much as you are now, but I had always had a knack for sewing, for coming up with my own designs. I made a few dresses for myself and wore them out in society, and I was surprised when people started asking who my modiste was." She laughed. "Of course, at the time, I didn't have the courage to admit they were my own."

Lavender listened intently to her friends, but unfortunately, they did not help. They both seemed to have always been passionate about something. It may have taken them some time to develop their passions into something meaningful, but they had not conjured them out of thin air.

As the storm outside intensified and a crack of thunder split the air, Lavender felt a sense of clarity wash over her. No one else could help her find her passion, and her friends' stories were bound to be different from her own. She needed to quit looking to others for inspiration and look deeper inside herself.

"I suppose finding one's passion is not always a straightforward journey," Lavender mused aloud, her voice gaining a hint of conviction. "Perhaps it's about trying new things, stepping out of one's comfort zone, and being open to unexpected opportunities."

Daphne smiled encouragingly. "Exactly, my dear. Life has a way of leading us down different paths, and sometimes the destination is completely unexpected." She gestured around at their lovely surroundings. "I don't think any of us could have imagined that life would bring us here, but I'm very glad it did."

After a moment of contemplative silence, Lavender let out a soft sigh. “Thank you, both of you. Your words mean more to me than you know. I may not have it all figured out right now, but I won’t give up trying to find what truly speaks to my heart.”

As they all three returned to their own pursuits, Lavender’s thoughts drifted back to Mr. Wycliffe. Despite his gruff exterior, there was a vulnerability in his eyes that she could not ignore. His passion for gardening was evident in every plant and bloom under his care. And while she may not share that same fervor for horticulture, she couldn’t deny the pull she felt toward him.

Was it just because he was the only man she had spent time with since Geoffrey died? It troubled her to think that her entire existence had revolved around a man. Before she’d become a widow, she’d been nothing more than a wife. She didn’t want to depend on anyone else for her happiness in the future now that she knew how risky loving someone could be.

Lovely as his gardens were, and no matter how much she enjoyed spending time with him, perhaps it was best if she stayed away from him. He was simply too much of a distraction.

After almost a week passed without any sign of Lavender invading his garden, Kendrick tried to convince himself that he was relieved. Perhaps she had lost interest in it after all. But deep down, he couldn’t deny that he still found himself wandering the paths several times a day, hoping to see her again.

His heart raced with excitement when he finally caught a glimpse of her on the beach from his lookout in the cliffside gazebo. Without hesitation, he descended the rocky path leading to the shore with Daisy close behind him.

Seacrest and Willoughby Hall shared a narrow isthmus that jutted out toward the sea.

On his side, the terrain rose steeply, and rocky cliffs overlooked the water below. Willoughby Hall's portion consisted of a long expanse of sand. He had often observed the Willoughby Hall widows frolicking on their private beach, but he usually paid them little mind. However, today, his gaze was drawn to Lavender, who strolled gracefully along the edge of the frothing waves. The ocean breeze tousled her golden hair, and she again wore buff trousers and a white blouse. The sight of her against the backdrop of crashing waves and rugged cliffs took his breath away.

She looked a little lost, and he hoped it wasn't because of the sharp words he'd spoken to her the other day. Had he hurt her feelings? He hoped not. She was perhaps the brightest, sweetest person he'd ever met. He would hate to be the one who dimmed her light even a little bit.

He had never been one to apologize easily, but seeing Lavender standing alone on the shore, looking lost and vulnerable, made him realize that it was probably his own damned fault that she hadn't come back to Seacrest. Why would she? He had pretty much told her that she didn't have what it took to complete the task she'd set for herself. Whether that was true or not, he should have kept his opinions to himself.

Why hadn't he just kept his mouth shut?

Approaching her cautiously, he took in her appearance. Her long hair was pulled back into a loose braid, allowing a few strands to frame her face. He couldn't help but notice how her features softened, and a smile curved her lips when she noticed him. It made his heart leap in an unfamiliar way.

Perhaps she didn't hate him.

She'd been about to head back to Willoughby Hall, but when she saw him, she hurried toward him, meeting him where the path met the sand. "Hello," she said brightly, with no sign of the melancholy he'd thought he had seen from a distance.

”Sorry if I was trespassing again. I guess I was lost in my thoughts.”

“It’s fine,” he told her, a bit surprised by her pleasant greeting. “I see you’re wearing your trousers again.”

Her smile slipped a bit. “Does it offend you?”

“Hell no,” he said with a laugh. In fact, he’d done little in the past few days other than think of how the soft fabric had stretched over the lovely curves of her bottom when she’d fallen into his garden. He’d like nothing more than to drop something right now just so he could watch her bend over to pick it up. “It makes perfect sense for you to wear them. I can’t imagine trying to do most forms of physical activity in the fifteen layers of clothing most women wear.”

She laughed and, as if she’d read his mind, squatted down to pet Daisy, who was so pleased by the attention that her whole body quivered. “What a good girl,” she murmured.

“Do you like dogs?” he asked inanely, wanting to keep the conversation going.

“I love them,” she replied, her eyes sparkling. “I’ve always wanted one of my own, but Geoffrey hated them, and I don’t feel right asking Genevieve if I can have one now.” She petted Daisy one last time and stood, glancing down the beach. “Would you two like to walk with me awhile?”

“We’d love to,” Kendrick said, relief washing through him. Perhaps he hadn’t ruined things between them after all. He wanted to apologize again but thought it might be better not to bring it up if she had already forgiven him.

A few yards down the sand, she let out a happy little cry and bent down, picking something up and brushing it off on her trousers. “Sea glass,” she proclaimed happily.

“I have a little collection. It’s always a good day when I find a piece.”

She held it up for him to see. The sea glass was milky white adorned with swirls of ocean blue. Its edges were worn and rounded as if the waves had caressed it for centuries.

“It’s beautiful,” he told her, but he wasn’t just talking about the little piece of broken glass. The way she looked at the world was beautiful, so hopeful and able to see the best in everything. Perhaps that’s why he had sought her out. His outlook was usually considerably darker.

“It is,” she agreed, slipping it into her pocket with a grin.

For a few minutes more, they continued walking in companionable silence. He found a stick and threw it ahead for Daisy to chase, and she laughed when the dog brought it back to him.

“Can I throw it?” she asked.

He nodded and handed it to her, impressed that she didn’t seem to mind the slobber. She certainly wasn’t like any lady he’d ever met, and he meant that in the very best way. She pulled back her arm and hurled it as far as she could, which actually wasn’t that far. Daisy barked and tore after it, obviously happy to have someone else to play with.

She threw it several times, obviously having a grand time, then finally handed it back to Kendrick. “Thank you, Mr. Wycliffe.”

He shook his head. “I think we’re beyond that, don’t you? Please, call me Kendrick.”

“Kendrick,” she said, and he absolutely adored the way his name sounded on her lips.

“And you must call me Lavender.”

“Of course,” he murmured, glad to have her permission to do what he had been doing in his mind since the day they’d met. “Lavender.”

“Well, now that we’ve settled that,” she said with a smile, “I’d like to thank you for what you said the other day.”

“What did I say?” he asked, confused. He couldn’t think of anything that she should be thanking him for. Quite the contrary.

“For talking to me about how difficult it would be to design a garden for Willoughby Hall.”

He cleared his throat, discomfort streaking through him. “Don’t thank me. It was a stupid thing to say. I have completely forgotten how to speak to people.”

“No,” she said, stopping and turning to look at him. “So few people are ever honest with me. My friends try to be, but they don’t want to hurt me.”

“That wasn’t my intention either,” he hastened to assure her, though he wasn’t actually certain. He had lashed out at her for no reason. What would it have mattered to him if she’d tried to design Willoughby Hall’s garden? In that moment, he’d just wanted her out of his own. Because, if he were truly being honest, he had to admit that she frightened him a little. Or, perhaps more truthfully still, he feared the way she made him feel.

As if he might have finally found something worth caring for again.

She shook her head, her sky-blue eyes gentle. “No, I needed to hear it. And I have spent the last week really thinking about my life and what I want from it.”

Daisy saw a seagull down the beach and took off after it, barking her fool head off. Momentarily distracted, he clapped for her to return. When she finally gave up the chase and headed back, Lavender began walking again.

“I know that sounds silly, that I should reach such a mature age without knowing that already, but until recently, I never really had any choices. I was married off when I was but nineteen, and from then on, I was nothing more than the Viscount of Crestwood’s wife. I wanted to be a mother... wanted it desperately... but that never happened.” She stared down at the sand as she spoke, her face flushing in obvious embarrassment. “But since I’ve been at Willoughby Hall, the whole world has opened up to me. Perhaps there are too many choices. I don’t seem to know how to move forward.”

He laughed darkly. “Well, moving forward definitely isn’t a strong suit of mine, either.”

She cast him a curious glance but didn’t press the issue, which he appreciated. How far should he let this friendship go before telling her about Isabella and Miranda?

They’d probably already passed that milestone. But didn’t he deserve this? After so many years of loneliness, he just wanted to savor a few sunny afternoons spent in the company of someone who seemed truly sweet and good. Was that too much to ask?

“Perhaps, but I don’t believe you wake up every morning wondering what to do with your time. You have many interests. And I’ve read your books. They’re wonderful.”

Pleasure swelled inside him. He rarely spoke to anyone who actually had an interest in what he did. Even Isabella hadn’t read his work. “Thank you,” he replied simply. “And you’re right. If anything, I have too many things I would like to accomplish. I rarely go to bed without wishing I had done more.”

She nodded. "I would do anything for that problem. I spend my days searching for something to hold my attention."

"The sketches you made of the roses were wonderful," he told her. "Is that something you enjoy?"

She bit her lip, that sweet flush rising in her cheeks again. "I suppose. Ever since I was a girl, I have been filling sketchbooks in an attempt to capture the beauty around me. But I wouldn't say I'm any good at it."

"Don't tell me I can't spot talent," he chided gently. "Perhaps you could do something with that. Have you ever tried painting?"

"Not really," she admitted. "I dabbled a bit when I was younger, but nothing serious."

They had reached the farthest point of land and walked out to the skinny little finger of sand that shot out into the ocean until they could no longer walk side by side. To his surprise, she reached out and squeezed his hand. "You're very easy to talk to. You've given me a lot to think about once again. I truly appreciate it. "

He squeezed back and then reluctantly let her fingers slide through his. "You can still come to my garden whenever you want," he found himself offering. "I enjoy talking to you, too."

"Thank you," she murmured. "Maybe I will."

She smiled and reached down to pet Daisy one last time before giving him a little wave and heading back toward Willoughby Hall.

Daisy whined and looked up at him, obviously sad to see her new playmate leave. "I know," he murmured, scratching between Daisy's ears. "I like her too."

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Over the next few weeks, Lavender spent more and more time with Kendrick. Despite her initial hesitation, he had done nothing untoward, nothing to make her think he thought of her as anything more than a friend. On the one hand, that was a relief because it made all her fears about falling for him moot. However, she couldn't help wishing she was elegant and graceful like Genevieve, smart and witty like Eden, or drop-dead gorgeous like Daphne. It would be a great boost to her self-esteem—which Geoffrey had completely destroyed—if Kendrick acted as though he were the least little bit attracted to her.

Sometimes, when she was with him, she still felt like the girl she had once been instead of a matronly old widow who had let herself get a little too round. It was no wonder he had no interest in her in that way.

But she greatly enjoyed their time together, either walking along the beach or working in his garden. Though she had given up all thoughts of trying to design the one at Willoughby Hall, she still liked being amongst the lovely blooms and scents of his. And there was always weeding to be done. She found it invigorating and loved the way it made her feel to have actually accomplished something tangible at the end of the day.

He even occasionally talked through some of the issues he was having moving forward in his latest book, and he seemed to like her suggestions. If nothing else, it meant a lot to her that he trusted her enough to have such discussions with her. She had never been around a man who treated her as though her thoughts had merit and might actually be worth listening to.

All in all, she felt like they were becoming true friends, and she was grateful to have

him in her life, though their deepening friendship was something she kept to herself. Her friends had no idea how much time she was spending with him. Not because she didn't think they would understand but because it still seemed fragile. As though if she tried to put a name to it, she might ruin it.

One afternoon, as she was once again sketching in his garden, he peered over her shoulder. "That truly is very good."

Heat rose in her cheeks, and she quickly snapped her sketchbook closed, very aware that a couple of pages back, she had made a sketch of him. In fact, she had spent a very enjoyable evening trying to capture his image on paper. What would he think of that if he knew? Would he read more into it than she had intended? And what had she intended? All she knew was that she liked to draw beautiful things, and he was beautiful to her.

"I like drawing flowers," she said, trying to accept the praise instead of immediately denying it. "They're actually more challenging than you might think."

"I was thinking..." He hesitated, then sat down on the bench beside her. "A while back, I started a nonfiction book on flowers. I thought of calling it *A Gardener's Compendium of Blossoms and Blooms: The Floral Treasures of Southeast England*. Isn't that a mouthful?" He gave a rough laugh and shook his head. "I stopped writing it because I can't draw for shite, and it needed some illustrations."

She caught her breath. Was he asking what she thought he was asking?

"What do you think?" he asked when she remained silent. "Would you like to work together on it? I would write the text, and you'd do the drawings?"

"Oh, Kendrick," she breathed. "I would love to."

He gave her a rare smile. “I think we could make something really incredible together.”

“I think so, too,” she agreed, so overwhelmed she could hardly gather her thoughts. “What do you need me to do?”

“I will make a list of illustrations that need to be completed. If we sell it, I will split the profits with you.”

The thought of having some money of her own, even if it was just a small amount, made her a little giddy. What would it be like to actually earn her own money? And by doing something that she loved, no less?

“I will have my solicitor draw up some legal papers,” he assured her. “I want to do this right.”

She nodded, a smile stretching from ear to ear. “Thank you. For giving me a purpose. For trusting me to do something like this. You can’t imagine how much I appreciate it.”

“I should have thought of it sooner,” he said ruefully. “The first time I saw your sketches.”

She didn’t even try to rein in her enthusiasm. “What should I sketch first? I would like to get started right away.”

He didn’t try to dissuade her or tell her to settle down the way Geoffrey would have. Instead, he gestured around the garden. “We need dozens of illustrations. Start with your favorites. You like the calla lilies, don’t you?”

“I do. That’s a wonderful idea.” The fact that he had noticed her interest in them

warmed her heart even more. She didn't think Geoffrey had ever noticed anything about her, even after all their years together. He had never cared about her interests. In his mind, she had been nothing but an extension of him.

Kendrick made her feel seen in a way she had never experienced before.

Picking up her sketchbook, she moved to the calla lilies, which encircled the base of an ancient oak in a rainbow of colors. She sat down in a patch of grass, the sun warming her skin, completely focused on the task at hand. Was this what Eden felt like while poring over her ancient texts?

After she had finished, she finally looked up to see where Kendrick had gone. To her surprise, she found him stretched out on the stone bench behind her, fast asleep. For a long moment, she simply gazed at him, lost in the intimacy of the moment. For it was a very intimate thing to watch someone slumber. No one was ever as vulnerable as when they slept. It touched her that he felt comfortable enough around her to do so.

Getting to her feet, she moved toward him, taking in the sweep of his dark lashes against his cheeks and the fall of his russet hair over his forehead. Standing over him, she wanted nothing more than to brush a kiss against those full lips.

No matter how many times she told herself to stay away from him, she was repeatedly drawn back to his side. If only he would give her the slightest indication that he felt even a fraction of what she felt for him...

Shaking herself, she stifled a laugh. What was wrong with her? He had just given her a way to fill her time and even a possible way to make some money. The last thing she wanted was to ruin their budding friendship with her silly longings for more.

Tiptoeing away, she made her way back to Willoughby Hall, leaving him sleeping in the sun.

When Kendrick awoke, Lavender was nowhere to be found. It embarrassed him a bit to have fallen asleep while she sketched, but it also surprised him. He had trouble sleeping under the best of circumstances, tossing and turning for hours before dreams finally claimed him.

But he'd stretched out on the bench, gazing at the way Lavender's blond braid fell across her shoulder, the way she'd focused so intently on the calla lily in front of her, and sleep had found him almost instantly.

He smiled faintly as he swung to a sitting position, glad that he had been able to help her find something that truly interested her.

He really had started writing a book on flowers last year, but he'd had no intention of following through with it until he'd seen her latest sketch this afternoon. He thought the book would sell well with such gorgeous illustrations, but he didn't care if it made a penny as long as it made her happy. Plus, it gave him an excuse to spend more time with her.

He glanced around for Daisy and found his loyal companion sleeping near where Lavender had been sitting when he'd last seen her. It seemed that he wasn't the only one who was enamored with his neighbor and felt comfortable enough to sleep in her presence.

"Come, Daisy," he called, and she startled awake. She looked around as though also searching for Lavender, then lumbered to her feet and took her sweet time ambling over to him. He shook his head and returned to the house, eager to begin working with Lavender tomorrow.

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As spring turned to summer, Kendrick and Lavender met several times a week in his garden, weather permitting, and worked on their book. He usually took his typewriter outside, working from the table where he'd been sitting when Lavender had first fallen into his life. He wrote while Lavender sketched, and they fell into a comfortable rhythm, a partnership unlike anything he had ever known.

The contract had returned from his solicitor, ensuring she received her fair share, and he hadn't missed the tentative pride shining on her face when she signed her name. He had gleaned enough to know that her husband had left her destitute. She had told him that until the duchess had offered her a place at Willoughby Hall, she had feared she would find herself out on the street. He hoped that the book did well enough that she would have a little nest egg of her own. He never again wanted her to know what it felt like to have nothing to fall back on. He felt a strange protectiveness over her that he couldn't explain. She was just so sweet, so innately good, and he wanted her to be happy.

At last, they sent the finished product to his publisher, and he realized in dismay that their reason for getting together so often had disappeared.

She must have decided the same because several days went by without her dropping by to visit. He found himself pacing his estate, looking for her around every corner, forced to admit how much he missed her. It frightened him how much she had come to mean to him, how his days had started to revolve around her.

It wasn't until the fifth day, which was gray and dreary, that he once again glimpsed her walking down on the beach. He and Daisy raced down the trail worn into the side of the cliff, eager to see her.

She'd bent down to pick something up from the sand when they approached her, and once again, his gaze was drawn to the delectable sight of her wearing those trousers that hugged her bottom and thighs, leaving little to the imagination. She'd rarely worn them when they were working on the book, and it had been hard to refrain from asking her to do so. He often dreamed about her wearing them, dreams that left him hot and aching.

"Lavender," he called, not wanting to startle her. "How are you?"

She looked up at him, and he didn't think he imagined the look of pleasure in her eyes. "I'm fine. How are you?"

Better, now that I've seen you . But he couldn't say that. So he merely shrugged. "Bored now that we're no longer working on our book."

"As am I," she agreed, holding up another piece of sea glass. It glistened in the sunlight, reflecting shades of blue and green like a miniature ocean captured in glass. Its edges were smooth and worn from its journey but retained a hint of the original shape. "I'm back to looking for sea glass."

"I like this one," he told her, peering down at it.

"So do I," she murmured, slipping it into her pocket.

A crack of lightning split the air, and the resulting boom of thunder made them both jump. Storm clouds gathered on the horizon, moving in over the ocean and casting an ominous shadow over the beach. He had been so focused on finding her that he hadn't even noticed them until now.

Lavender's eyes widened with surprise and awe at the sudden change in the weather. The air crackled with static electricity, mirroring the charged emotions suddenly

swirling between them. “It was good to see you, but I’d better head back. It looks like things are about to get nasty.”

Returning to Willoughby Hall the way she had come would involve a long, circuitous route along the beach. He gestured to the pathway up the cliff. “You can go this way and then cut across my garden. It’s shorter.”

She gave him a grateful look, obviously having already calculated that the odds of making it home before the storm hit were not good. “Lead the way.”

“No,” he insisted, very interested in having a rear view of her glorious curves in those trousers as she made the climb. “Ladies first.”

She held his gaze, seeming to guess his reasoning, then grinned and started climbing agilely up the path. It wasn’t the easiest climb, even under good conditions. About halfway up, the storm caught them, rain pouring down and quickly making the ground beneath them slick and hard to navigate.

They were about a dozen yards from the top when she lost her footing and slid back toward him. He did his best to plant his feet and catch her, but they both went down hard. He knew a moment of sheer terror at the thought that she would roll over the edge, but she landed on top of him with a soft cry, sprawled inelegantly across his body. She was so soft and sweet against him, a comfortable blanket of femininity.

She looked down at him, raindrops catching on her long eyelashes, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “Oops,” she said with a laugh. “This might not come as a surprise to you, but I’m terribly clumsy. Thank you for catching me.”

“Anytime,” he assured her hoarsely, clutching her tightly to him, his heart still racing at the thought that she could have tumbled off the edge of the cliff. He didn’t know what he’d have done if he’d lost her. “Are you all right?” he asked, gently tucking a

few wet strands of hair behind her ear as the rain continued to pour down around them, getting them more drenched by the second.

“I’m fine.” She shifted, the trousers she wore allowing her to straddle him, braced her hands on either side of his head, and looked down at him, rain catching off her eyelashes.

Awareness surged through him, causing every nerve to tingle and his heart to thump erratically. The urge to press his lips to hers was overpowering, a primal need he couldn’t resist any longer. He had wanted her... needed her... since the moment they’d met. He wrapped one hand around the back of her neck, pulled her head down to his, and captured her surprised cry with a deep, passionate moan of his own. She hesitated only briefly before allowing her tongue to meld hotly with his. They kissed hungrily, pressing deeper into the soft mud beneath them.

It had been seven years since he’d last held a woman this way, and the intensity of his reaction to having Lavender in his embrace was both inevitable and agonizing. She was like pure heaven, fitting perfectly against him. His cock swelled painfully, and he knew she must feel it because she ground her core against him, trying to get closer even through the layers of clothing that separated them. This indication that she might welcome him between those lovely thighs almost made him come on the spot.

He slid his hands down her back, at last resting them upon her glorious bottom that he’d fantasized about so often. He clasped the lovely round curves tightly, feeling as though he’d died and gone to heaven.

Daisy whined softly, pushing her wet nose against his arm, breaking the spell. Bloody hell, what was he doing? As much as he wanted to lose himself in her kiss, he knew he needed to stop this before things went too far.

He still hadn’t told her about Isabella.

Reluctantly breaking the connection, he pushed himself up from the slippery ground and helped her to her feet. Her blue eyes were wide with confusion and desire, and a smear of mud adorned her otherwise flawless cheek.

“Kendrick...” she breathed, her voice raw.

“I know,” he murmured helplessly. “But I need to get you out of the rain.”

He pressed one more quick kiss to her forehead before taking her muddy hand and pulling her the rest of the way up the trail, being very careful of his footing. Once they reached the top, they dashed through the garden to his cottage. His heart was still racing, and his body buzzed with energy from their passionate exchange.

By the time he shut the door behind them, they were both drenched, as was Daisy, who immediately shook herself in front of the fireplace, spraying Lavender with even more water.

“I probably look like a drowned rat,” she said with a rueful smile, not seeming to mind Daisy’s antics.

“You look lovely,” he hurried to assure her. Had he ever seen anything as adorable as this woman in her bedraggled state? She made the dark, angry beast inside him lay down and wag its tail. She made him want to be a better man, a better person. If only he was free to show her that.

He hurried over, grabbed a heavy wool blanket from the back of the sofa, and wrapped it around her shoulders, closing his eyes for a moment as he breathed her in. She smelled of rainwater and mud but also faintly of lavender, which was so fitting it made him smile despite his rioting emotions.

Such a simple pleasure, to take care of a woman this way, but it had been so long...

He'd had no idea how much he'd missed it.

Clearing his throat, he stepped away and gestured to the sofa. "Sit down and try to get warm. I'll build a fire."

"Thank you," she breathed, and he could tell she was as lost in the moment as he was. He wondered if it was him she was thinking of right now or her late husband. Even if he were free to have a relationship with her, was she ready for that? It had only been a little over a year since she had lost her husband.

The thought sobered him, and he moved to the fireplace, messing with it until it roared, trying to rein in his racing thoughts.

He felt like the worst kind of bastard. Lavender was the sort of woman who deserved a man's whole heart. She was not someone you trifled with. And he did not have his whole heart to give. He was still technically a married man, for Christ's sake. What did he have to offer her?

Taking a deep breath, he turned to look at her, already hating himself for what he was about to do. Why couldn't he have just enjoyed his friendship with Lavender instead of trying to turn it into something more than it probably was? Why had he kissed her? She had been a friend to him, a true friend, and now he'd ruined everything.

"About earlier... on the path," he said haltingly. "I am so sorry, Lavender. I should not have done that."

She blushed scarlet and lowered her gaze to her lap, twisting the edge of the blanket as a shiver wracked her. "It's all right," she said softly. "I... quite enjoyed it."

Dear Lord. She would tempt a saint, and he was no saint. He crossed the room and sat beside her on the sofa, fighting the urge to pull her into his arms and warm her up the

way he most wanted to. "I enjoyed it too, but I think it is only fair to tell you that... I am married."

"Married?" she squeaked, her face awash with disbelief and her voice rising incredulously. "What do you mean, you're married?"

He just shook his head, knowing that nothing he said, no excuse he offered, would justify what he had done. He should never have acted upon the desire roiling within him. He had dishonored them both by doing so.

She surged to her feet, her wide blue eyes welling with tears. "I have to go," she said, her voice trembling. "I shouldn't be here."

"I am so sorry." He caught her hand, but she pulled it away, dropping the blanket on the back of the sofa. "At least let me give you an umbrella," he said weakly.

"I do not need anything from you, Mr. Wycliffe." She glared at him and turned away, squaring her shoulders.

And then she walked back out into the storm, leaving him alone with his guilt and regret.

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The rain lashed Lavender's face as she tore through Kendrick's garden toward Willoughby Hall. Her hair was plastered to her cheeks, blinding her. Sobs wracked her body, each gasp for air mingling with the cacophony of raindrops on leaves.

How could she have been so stupid? The memory of Kendrick's lips on hers, tender yet passionate, now felt like a dagger twisting in her heart.

Married. She couldn't believe he was married! They had been friends for months; how could he not mention something so important? Why had he kissed her if he had a wife? And where was his mysterious wife anyway? They obviously didn't live together. Did he have another home in London?

Her feet carried her swiftly across the muddy path, her wet clothes clinging to her uncomfortably. Willoughby Hall loomed ahead, a bastion of safety in her storm of emotions.

Lavender burst through the front door, leaving a trail of mud and rainwater in her wake as she stumbled toward the drawing room. She pushed the heavy oak door open with a trembling hand, relieved to find Genevieve, Eden, and Daphne gathered around the tea table.

"Good heavens!" Genevieve exclaimed, her green eyes widening at the sight of Lavender's disheveled state.

Eden rose swiftly, concern etched across her face. "Lavender, what's happened? We've been worried sick about you ever since the rain started. We sent some of the footmen out to look for you."

Lavender's legs gave way, and she sank to the floor, her body wracked with sobs. "I've been such a fool," she wailed, burying her face in her hands.

Daphne knelt beside her, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders, which only made her cry harder as she remembered Kendrick doing the same. "There, there, dear. Tell us what's troubling you."

Through hiccupping sobs, Lavender recounted her encounter with Kendrick. "He found me on the beach," she began, her voice quavering. "We took the shortcut along the cliffs, and I... I fell."

"Were you hurt?" Eden interjected, her brow furrowed with concern as she swept Lavender with her gaze, looking for injuries.

Lavender shook her head. "No, but then he... he kissed me. So passionately. I thought..." She trailed off, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. She had thought that he cared about her. That he was as enamored of her as she was of him. Those moments she had spent in his arms had been some of the most erotic in her life. She had never felt such a spark with Geoffrey, which made no sense. She had been married to Geoffrey for years.

Genevieve leaned forward, her silver-streaked auburn hair gleaming in the firelight, her concern obvious. "What happened next, my dear? Did he force himself on you?"

"He better not have," Daphne snarled, looking ready to go to Seacrest and murder him where he stood.

Lavender shook her head quickly, twisting her cold hands in her lap. "He took me to his home to get out of the rain. He was so sweet, so caring. But then..." Her voice broke. "Then he told me that he was sorry that he kissed me, that he shouldn't have done it because... he was married."

A collective gasp filled the room. Lavender's heart clenched, remembering the tenderness in Kendrick's dark eyes as he tended to her, the warmth of his touch as he wrapped her in the blanket. How could it all have been a lie?

"Oh, Lavender," Genevieve murmured, her tone a mixture of sympathy and restrained anger. "I'm so sorry."

"Did he offer any explanation?" Eden asked, her brow furrowed with confusion.

Lavender shook her head miserably. "I didn't give him the chance. I just... ran."

Daphne's blue eyes flashed with indignation. "I cannot believe the gall of that man! To lead you on like that, knowing he was married all along." She shook her head, even more beautiful in her anger. "And to think, none of us had any inkling he was attached. How could he have kept such a secret?"

"Perhaps his wife is abroad?" Eden suggested tentatively, but her voice held a note of doubt.

Genevieve grimaced. "Even so, behaving as he did with Lavender is unconscionable. A married man has no business kissing young ladies on cliffsides, rain or no rain."

Lavender's cheeks burned with shame. She was not a young lady. She was a widow in her thirties. She should have known better and been more cautious. But Kendrick had seemed so genuine, so caring...

Daphne's sharp voice cut through her thoughts. "Lavender, darling, I don't mean to be insensitive, but what on earth possessed you to get so involved with him in the first place?" She leaned forward, her gaze intense. "We have such a wonderful arrangement here. No men to answer to, no expectations to fulfill. Why complicate things?"

Lavender's breath caught in her throat. "I... I don't know," she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper. "I suppose I just enjoyed his company. It felt nice to have someone to talk to, to share things with."

"But you have us for that," Eden pointed out gently, sounding a bit hurt.

"You're right," Lavender said quickly, forcing a smile, even though it didn't seem the same. As much as she loved her friends, it wasn't like having a romantic partner. And even though it was ridiculous, she knew she had started to see Kendrick in that way. She had started to believe they might have a future together. "Of course, you're right. I'm fine, truly. I will be, anyway. It was a momentary lapse in judgment, nothing more."

As her friends continued to discuss the situation, Lavender's thoughts drifted, shivers still wracking her. She nodded and agreed at the appropriate moments, but inside, her heart ached. How could she explain to these strong, intelligent women that deep down, she longed for something more than the life they had built here together?

Later, when Lavender finally retired to her room, she stripped off her wet clothes and sank onto her bed, again giving in to her sorrow, tears stinging her eyes and sobs choking her. She missed it—the simple joy of having someone to love, someone who loved her in return, the comfort of shared meals, laughter, and dreams. Her time as a wife had not been perfect, far from it, but there had been moments of such sweetness. She had felt needed and cared for, at least in the beginning.

A tear slipped down her cheek as she gazed out the window at Seacrest. Daphne was right. She should be content. She should want to be strong and free like the others. But oh, how she missed being loved.

Kendrick stood at the window of his study, his eyes fixed on the rain-lashed gardens stretching out toward the cliffs. His calloused fingers drummed an agitated rhythm on

the windowsill as he replayed yesterday's disastrous encounter with Lavender in his mind.

"Bloody fool," he muttered, his voice tinged with self-loathing. "You've driven her away for good this time."

He knew it was probably for the best, but that didn't stop him from wanting to go to her, try to explain himself, and, most of all, kiss her one more time. But how could he do that to her? Isabella was an obstacle he could never overcome. When she'd left, she'd taken more than just their daughter. She had taken his future as well.

Lavender deserved so much more than he could ever give her.

A sharp knock at the front door startled him from his brooding. His heart leapt, a surge of hope coursing through him. Had she come back?

Kendrick hurried to the entryway, running a hand through his hair in a futile attempt to tame it. He swung the door open, a tentative smile on his lips—only to have it fade as he found himself face-to-face with the formidable Duchess of Ashbourne.

He had glimpsed her from a distance before, but this was the first time he'd actually met her in person. Her posture was regal and imposing, every inch the embodiment of nobility. Her silver-streaked auburn hair was scraped back in a severe bun, emphasizing her elegant features. She was probably near fifty but still lovely.

This obviously wasn't a social call, though, as her green eyes flashed with barely contained fury. "Mr. Wycliffe," she said, her refined voice as sharp as a blade, "I believe we need to have a conversation about your deplorable behavior toward Lady Crestwood."

Kendrick's shoulders slumped because he knew he deserved this. In fact, he was glad

Lavender had such a powerful friend to look after her. “Your Grace, I—”

“Save your excuses,” the duchess cut him off, sweeping past him into the house. “I demand an explanation, and it had better be a good one.”

As Kendrick closed the door, he felt a familiar ache in his chest. How could he possibly explain the tangled mess of his past?

“Your Grace,” he began again, his voice low and rough with emotion, “I never meant to hurt Laven—” He cut himself off, realizing he should not be using her given name. “Um, Lady Crestwood. I care for her deeply, more than I have cared about anyone in a very long time. You have to believe me when I say that I am furious with myself and wish I could take it all back.”

The duchess’s eyebrows arched skeptically. “Then why did you neglect to mention your marital status until after you’d thoroughly compromised her?”

Kendrick winced. “It’s... complicated. My wife, Isabella—she left me. Seven years ago.”

The duchess’s expression softened slightly, but her voice remained stern. “Go on.”

With a heavy sigh, Kendrick gestured to a nearby chair. “This might take a while. Would you like some tea?”

The duchess shook her head but settled regally into the chair, and Kendrick took the one opposite hers.

He cleared his throat, wondering how honest he should be, and then decided to tell her the entire truth. He felt as though this formidable woman would be able to see right through any lie he told. “My wife, Isabella, and I were married young. She was

very beautiful, and I thought I loved her, but we hadn't been together very long before I realized she wasn't suited to be a country wife. She was volatile, immature, and wanted far more than I could give her on a gardener's salary. She wanted to move to London. She wanted to travel. And she resented me for not making enough money to allow her to do so. After our daughter Miranda came along, she grew even more depressed. She cried all the time. I didn't know what to do..."

He trailed off, lost for a moment in those dark days. He had been so frustrated, so unprepared to deal with Isabella's rioting emotions. In hindsight, he wished he had been better equipped to offer her comfort instead of turning cold and distant.

The duchess sighed, some of her hostility fading. "I don't know that any of us are prepared for the realities of marriage when we are young."

Kendrick nodded. "I didn't know how truly miserable she was until I came home one night seven years ago, and she and Miranda were gone. She left a note, telling me how much she hated me, that she had fallen in love with someone else, and that she and Miranda were moving to Spain with him." He swallowed convulsively, surprised by how much emotion the memories of that night still stirred in him. "I've spent years trying to find them, and I believe she did go to Spain, at least initially, but it's as if they vanished into thin air. She didn't tell me the man's name, just that he was a soldier, so the trail quickly went cold."

The duchess's eyes widened in surprise. "You have a daughter? I had no idea..."

"Few do," Kendrick admitted, his heart clenching just at the mention of Miranda. "Miranda would be thirteen now, and I haven't seen her since she was six. I have kept it to myself for so long. But Lady Crestwood made me want to open up again, to trust. I know I should have told her. And I meant to, eventually. I had no intention of kissing her on the cliff yesterday. I was just trying to get her out of the weather. But then she fell right on top of me...."

The duchess regarded him silently for a long moment. Her tone was softer when she spoke, though still laced with disapproval. “While I sympathize with your situation, Mr. Wycliffe, it does not excuse your treatment of Lady Crestwood. She has been hurt before, and I will not stand idly by while she suffers again.”

Kendrick nodded, having seen evidence of that himself and hating himself even more for what he had done. “I understand. I never meant to cause her pain. I only wish I could explain...”

“Perhaps you still can,” the duchess said, rising to her feet. “She is a good person, and I am certain she’d listen to you. But first, you must sort out your own affairs. Good day, Mr. Wycliffe.”

As the door closed behind his exalted guest, Kendrick buried his face in his hands, wondering how he could possibly untangle the mess he’d made of things.

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The conservatory's glass panes wept with rivulets of rain, mirroring Lavender's inner turmoil as she listlessly arranged a bouquet of lilies. Her fingers trembled slightly, betraying the emotions she struggled to contain. It had been raining since she and Kendrick met on the beach yesterday. The inclement weather matched her mood, but she could not bear to hide in her room any longer, suffocating under the weight of her thoughts.

Her mind wandered to Kendrick as she placed a pristine yellow bloom in the crystal vase. His gruff voice, piercing dark eyes, and the way his presence filled a room—he had monopolized her thoughts constantly since they had met, and she didn't know what to do with herself now that their time together had come to an end. The ache in her chest intensified as she remembered the hurt and embarrassment of their last encounter.

"My dear, how are you faring?" Genevieve's warm voice startled her from her reverie.

She turned, forcing a smile. "I'm... fine." As she said those words, she wondered how many times she had said them before, even when they were completely untrue. It seemed she'd been claiming to be fine her entire life. Unfortunately, she rarely had been. However, no one had ever been able to see past her generally sunny facade to the darkness below.

But she had dared to believe that Kendrick might...

Genevieve's emerald gaze softened with sympathy. "I have just been to see Mr. Wycliffe."

Lavender's heart skipped a beat. "You what?" she exclaimed, a mix of anger and curiosity coloring her tone. She loved her friend, but certainly, this was overstepping. "Genevieve, you shouldn't have—"

"I know, I know," Genevieve interjected, holding up a hand. "But I couldn't stand by and watch you suffer without understanding why."

Lavender's brow furrowed, her earlier anger fading into gratitude. She badly wanted to know whatever Genevieve had found out. The not knowing was killing her. "What did you learn?"

Genevieve sighed, her usually confident demeanor faltering. "It seems our Mr. Wycliffe has endured more than we realized. His wife... She left him for another man, taking their child with her."

"A child?" The news hit Lavender like a physical blow. She sank onto a nearby settee, her mind reeling. Not only had he forgotten to tell her about his wife, but he had also omitted all mention of his child .

"Yes, a daughter named Miranda. She would be thirteen now, but he hasn't seen her for seven years."

Seven years . He had been abandoned seven years ago, and knowing him as she did now, she realized he'd probably been completely alone that entire time. Until he had finally opened up to her, letting her into his garden and perhaps even his heart...

"Oh, Kendrick," she whispered, her anger fading and heart breaking for the man she had come to care for so deeply.

As she imagined Kendrick alone in his study, pouring his pain into his beautiful stories, a wave of empathy washed over her. If anyone in the world was lonelier than

her, it was him. Perhaps that was why they'd bonded so quickly.

Genevieve, ever perceptive, reached out and squeezed Lavender's hand. "He wasn't at all what I expected, my dear. I can see why you like him, and I feel for him, too."

Lavender looked up, her eyes burning with unshed tears. "I wish there was something I could do for him."

"Well," Genevieve said, a hint of her usual determination creeping back into her voice. "With your permission, I can put my network of contacts to work. We will see if we can find out what happened to his wife and child. Perhaps then he can move on. It is not right for that woman to have left him in limbo for so long."

"Yes, please do. Thank you, Genevieve. You are such a wonderful friend," Lavender murmured, her mind already elsewhere. She stood, needing the solitude of her room to process this new information. "If you'll excuse me..."

As she retreated, Lavender's thoughts were a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Could she forgive Kendrick for not mentioning this before he made a romantic overture toward her? If he had been alone all this time, could he really consider himself married? Perhaps he'd been so overwhelmed with passion he'd temporarily forgotten... And he had told her as soon as he'd returned to his senses.

The more she thought about it, the less angry she became.

She longed to comfort him, to wrap her arms around him and ease the pain he must be feeling.

She had tried so long and so hard to have a child of her own. Her heart broke to think that he had a little girl out there, and she had been kept from him for so long.

With each step, her heart grew heavier, torn between self-preservation and the undeniable pull of a kindred, wounded soul. This new information shouldn't matter to her. Kendrick belonged to someone else and could never truly be hers. But oh, how she still wished that he could.

Later that afternoon, Kendrick sat alone at his desk with a glass of whisky. He stared at the blank page before him, unable to find the words that had been flowing so easily lately. When Lavender had gone, it seemed she'd taken all the words with her.

The duchess's visit had unsettled him more than he cared to admit.

With a heavy heart, he took another sip and closed his eyes, letting the alcohol numb his thoughts. But even in his drunken state, he could not escape the memories that haunted him.

Telling Her Grace about Isabella and Miranda had brought up so many things he had thought he'd shoved to the far corners of his mind. The rage and despair he had felt when he'd come home to that empty house and found Isabella's note seemed so fresh at this moment he felt like he was still there. He had known she was unhappy but never thought she'd leave. He had certainly never believed she'd take Miranda, who had brought him so much joy, away from him forever.

He had tried to provide for them as best as he could on his meager salary as a gardener. They'd had a comfortable if plain cottage on the estate of the earl who employed him. But it wasn't enough for Isabella. She had always wanted more, dreaming of faraway places and adventures beyond their simple life.

Kendrick blamed himself for not being able to give her what she desired and for not being able to make her happy.

As he drank more whisky, memories flooded back to him in an overwhelming rush.

Isabella's smile as they danced under the stars on their wedding night... her soft laughter as they watched Miranda take her first steps... the warmth of their little family on lazy Sundays spent in bed reading together.

But now those memories were tainted by bitterness and regret. By angry words and shouting matches. Guilt washed over Kendrick like a wave crashing against rocks, threatening to drown him in sorrow.

He knew it was useless to dwell on the past or blame himself for Isabella's actions, but it was hard not to wonder where they had gone wrong and what could have been if they had just been able to talk it all out.

At last, he pushed to his feet and stumbled upstairs to bed, collapsing atop it without undressing. Thanks to the whisky, sleep claimed him almost immediately.

The next morning, Kendrick awoke with a pounding headache and a dry mouth. It was uncharacteristic of him to drink so much, but perhaps last night's folly was exactly what he needed to overcome his inaction.

He stumbled out of bed and went downstairs, feeling more exhausted than when he had gone to sleep. His mind was still consumed with thoughts of Lavender and the pain in her eyes when he had told her he was married. He regretted hurting her and knew that it was time for him to do something about it. He should have gone after her and tried to explain or at least attempted to see her in the days since. She deserved to know the truth, and it had been cowardly of him to hope that the duchess had told her all that he had so foolishly not.

As he made his morning tea, his mind whirled with possibilities. He wasn't as helpless as he'd once been. Now, he had the money to hire someone who could help him find Isabella and Miranda. He needed some closure. He couldn't keep living in the past, constantly torturing himself with guilt and pushing others away. His time

with Lavender had taught him that, if nothing else.

Taking his tea to his study, Kendrick sat at his desk and penned a letter to his solicitor in London. He asked the man to hire someone to find Isabella so he could obtain a divorce from her. This would not only free him from his past mistakes but also allow him to finally reunite with Miranda.

With each word on the page, Kendrick felt a weight being lifted off his shoulders. It was time for him to take control of his life again and make amends for the pain he had caused others. He should have moved heaven and earth to find Miranda. He hoped that when he did, she could forgive him for giving up, for believing it was hopeless.

As soon as he finished writing, Kendrick sent off the letter and began planning for when he found Isabella. He wanted everything ready so he could act quickly once she was located.

For the first time in years, Kendrick felt hopeful about the future. He knew it wouldn't be easy, but he was determined to make things right again.

Only then would he be worthy of reaching out to Lavender.

As days turned into weeks, Kendrick anxiously awaited news from his solicitor. Each day felt like an eternity as he continued going about his daily tasks on edge, thinking of nothing but finding Isabella and Miranda. Could his daughter ever forgive him for all the lost years? He hoped so. He also hoped that when he finally extricated himself from his marriage, Lavender could forgive him, too.

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Lavender traced the curve of Kendrick's jaw on her sketchpad, the soft scratch of pencil on paper the only sound in her silent chamber. She paused, studying the intricate curves and subtle shadows she had captured. With a sigh, she set down her pencil and gazed out the window at the brilliant blue of a rare sunny sky.

Since she was a child, she had always entertained herself with her sketches, but in the weeks since Kendrick had kissed her, she'd become obsessed with drawing him. In the garden. On the beach. The way he smiled. It seemed the only way to prove to herself that those magical days had happened.

Her thoughts drifted to the afternoons spent in his garden, the air perfumed with blooms and filled with easy conversation. Now, those memories haunted her, bittersweet ghosts of what might have been.

Every morning, she was certain that he would come to call and attempt to renew their friendship, even if it never became more than that. Because they'd been great friends, hadn't they?

Lavender's brow furrowed as she recalled Genevieve's bold visit to Kendrick's home. Was he angry at her friend for overstepping? Perhaps he resented the intrusion into his private affairs. The uncertainty gnawed at her. Why hadn't he come? The fact that he hadn't seemed very telling. Perhaps she hadn't meant as much to him as she'd hoped.

She turned back to her sketches, fingertips trailing over the earlier pages filled with delicate renderings of flowers. Each petal and leaf was a testament to the beauty she had discovered in Kendrick's world. If only she could muster the courage to bridge

the chasm between them.

Even though she still wasn't certain Genevieve had done the right thing by taking it upon herself to go and confront Kendrick, what she'd learned had helped explain his behavior. Still, she wished she'd been the one he'd confided in.

When he didn't come to her, the urge to go to him grew stronger and stronger, but she still had a little pride. If he didn't care about her enough to try and mend things, then she certainly wasn't going to go groveling to him.

A knock on her door pulled her from her thoughts, and she gratefully went to answer it, happy to find Eden waiting on the other side.

"Would you like to go to town with me?" Eden asked, her sunny attitude chasing the clouds away. "I need to run to the bookstore and pick up some things I ordered. I can either have the carriage brought 'round, or we can walk if you feel like stretching your legs a bit."

"You know I always like to visit the bookstore," Lavender declared, happy for the distraction, even though she knew it was just that—a distraction. Her friends had been worried about her these last few weeks, constantly coming up with new ways to keep her spirits up. "And let's walk. I haven't been outside much lately."

She quickly changed her shoes to some sturdy walking boots, and they left the house, heading toward the village a mile away.

As they strolled along the rutted lane, the fresh air did wonders for Lavender's mood, the warmth of the sun sinking into her bones and chasing away the last of the cobwebs that had plagued her mind lately. Eden chattered away, regaling her with tales of her struggles to find a team to accompany her on her upcoming expedition to Egypt.

“I’m growing so frustrated with my attempts to find an expedition leader,” Eden lamented, shaking her head. “It takes a month or more to track down someone who might be interested. Then we send letters back and forth until they realize I am a woman. That is when they politely, or not so politely, decline.”

Lavender frowned at the thought of the men who were determined to deny Eden the chance to follow her dreams. She knew how determined and capable her friend was, and she could not imagine any man being foolish enough not to see it.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll find the perfect team eventually,” Lavender reassured her. “And if all else fails, you can always take me with you,” she added with a grin.

Eden laughed, throwing an arm around Lavender’s shoulders. “I may just take you up on that offer,” she said teasingly. “I can see it now... Two intrepid female explorers, traveling through Egypt in our trousers.”

“Well, since we can’t even get away with wearing them to the village, I doubt we’d be able to don them in Egypt,” Lavender said with a sigh. If she had her way, she would never wear anything else. “They’d probably burn us as witches.”

“You’re right,” Eden lamented. “Have you ever felt like we were just born a century too early?”

“I think you were,” Lavender replied. “I don’t have any big dreams that men are standing in the way of.”

Eden gave a little snort of laughter but did not argue, and they continued in silence for a while. Unfortunately, the talk of trousers had reminded Lavender of the long walks she and Kendrick had taken along the beach and even more so of the kiss they’d shared upon the trail, when he’d cupped her bottom with his big hands. Having nothing between them but that thin layer of material had shown her clearly what it

would have been like if they'd ever been naked together.

With a sigh, she wondered if she would ever be naked with anyone again.

As they reached the village, they headed straight for the bookstore. The bell above the door tinkled merrily as Lavender and Eden stepped into the cozy interior. The scent of leather-bound tomes and fresh ink enveloped them, a comforting embrace that brought a small smile to Lavender's lips. This was one of her favorite places in the world. And Lord knows she'd had little to smile about since that day on the cliffs.

"Hello, old friends," Lavender murmured, strolling about the towering shelves. Her fingers trailed along the spines of nearby books, relishing their textured surfaces.

Eden strode purposefully toward the archaeology section, her tall frame cutting an imposing figure. "I'll just be a moment," she called over her shoulder. "There's a new treatise on Egyptian hieroglyphs I simply must acquire, and I also ordered some maps and guidebooks of Egypt."

Left to her own devices, Lavender found herself drawn to a display of romantic novels. She picked one up, thumbing through its pages with a wistful sigh.

"Still pining for your Mr. Darcy?" Eden's voice startled her, and Lavender nearly dropped the book.

"I... well..." Lavender stammered, a blush creeping across her cheeks. "Is it so wrong to want companionship?"

Eden's brow furrowed. "But surely you relish this newfound freedom? No husband to dictate your choices, no need to conform to a man's whims." All her friends had made that argument in one way or another over the last few weeks, and she desperately wished that they could see her point of view.

Lavender set the book down, wringing her hands. “I do appreciate the independence, truly. Geoffrey never sought my opinion on anything. He would never have allowed me to illustrate a book. But a part of me misses having someone to care for, to build a life with. And for a while, I thought Kendrick might be... that person.”

“I confess, I don’t quite understand,” Eden replied, her tone softening at Lavender’s obvious distress. “But perhaps that’s because I never cared for Richard, nor he for me. We always lived very separate lives. However, I can see it means a great deal to you.”

They made their way to a secluded corner of the shop, settling into worn leather armchairs. Lavender’s gaze fell to her lap as she struggled to articulate her feelings.

“I have no desire to accomplish grand things,” she said softly. “I simply long for a family, for love. Is that terribly old-fashioned of me?”

Eden reached out, covering Lavender’s fidgeting hands with her own. “No, my dear friend. It isn’t wrong to want those things. In truth, I find myself a touch envious. You may find it hard to believe, but I was passionately in love once... And, of course, I imagined having a family with him. But that ended badly...” She trailed off, a distant look in her eyes, then cleared her throat and shrugged. “When I agreed to marry Richard, I knew I would never have love or children. We agreed that he would pursue his interests, and I would pursue mine. It seemed an acceptable bargain at the time, but I admit that the ache for a child sometimes hits me hard in the middle of the night. However, I made my peace with that long ago.”

Lavender looked up at her beautiful friend in surprise. She would never have guessed that Eden regretted not having children. And she had definitely never mentioned a lost love. “You’re envious of me? But you are so accomplished, so certain of your path.”

“Perhaps,” Eden conceded with a wry smile. “But there are moments when I wonder if I’ve missed something essential in my pursuit of knowledge.”

As they left the bookshop, arm in arm, Lavender felt a weight lift from her shoulders. She may not have found the answers she sought, but at least she no longer felt alone in her uncertainty.

With their purchases in hand, they made their way back through town. They passed by familiar faces and exchanged friendly greetings with shopkeepers before stopping for tea at a nearby café.

As they sipped their tea and nibbled on pastries, Eden began telling Lavender about some archaeological discoveries recently made in Egypt, her longing to be the one to make such discoveries palpable. The hint of vulnerability her friend had shown her at the bookstore had disappeared, and Eden was once again her confident self, obsessed with her passion for history.

Lavender listened with only half her attention as she mulled over their previous conversation. Under the table, she surreptitiously pressed her hand to her stomach. If only she had been able to have a baby with Geoffrey. Her life would be so much different if she had a child to shower all her love upon. Perhaps then she wouldn’t be looking to give it to a married man....

The sun was setting as they approached the house, casting long shadows across the manicured lawn. Genevieve stood on the front steps, her usually composed features marred by an uncharacteristic frown.

“Lavender,” she called out, her voice tight with an emotion Lavender could not quite place. “I’ve received news about Kendrick’s wife and child.”

Lavender’s heart lurched, her steps faltering. “What sort of news?” she asked, barely

able to hear her voice over the sudden roaring in her ears.

Genevieve glanced at Eden, then back to Lavender. “Come inside, dear. You’ll want to sit down for this.”

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Lavender's heart pounded as she hurried along the winding path toward Seacrest, her skirts rustling with each determined step. The setting sun painted the sky in hues of pink and gold, the gentle beauty a cruel mockery of the turmoil within her.

She hated to be the one to tell Kendrick what Genevieve had found out, but she also did not want him to hear the news from a stranger. She pushed aside her conflicted feelings and tried to rehearse what she would say to him, though really, what other way was there to impart such news than to just blurt it out?

She hesitated before the weathered oak door, raised her hand, and knocked firmly. Seconds stretched into eternity before the door swung open.

Kendrick's dark eyes widened briefly, a flicker of pleasure lighting them before he schooled his features into careful neutrality. "Lady Crestwood," he said, his deep voice sending a familiar shiver down her spine. She hated that he'd addressed her so formally. It seemed a travesty of everything that had passed between them over the last few months, but she had to admit that she certainly hadn't left things on a good note with him. After Genevieve had spoken to him, he probably didn't dare address her familiarly.

"Mr. Wycliffe," Lavender replied in kind, her voice trembling slightly. "Might we speak?"

He nodded curtly, stepping aside to allow her entry. "This way," he murmured, leading her through the house to a room she assumed was his study. It seemed strange to her that this was only the second time she had entered his home, given all the time they'd spent together, but theirs had always been an outdoor relationship, spent upon

grass and sand.

Lavender's gaze darted about the room, drinking in the details. Bookshelves lined the walls, their contents a testament to Kendrick's passion for literature. The books seemed very orderly, and she was certain they would probably be in alphabetical order if she looked closely at them. The entire space smelled of leather and old books, and she realized that scent always clung to him as well.

His typewriter sat on the polished surface of his desk. The intricate contraption was black and metallic, adorned with delicate cursive designs and ornate knobs. The clatter of the keys had always accompanied her sketches while they were working on their book, and she hoped she had a chance to one day hear that sound again. Sheets of paper were scattered around it, some in a neat pile, others crumpled and tossed aside. She wondered if he was once again having trouble finding his way forward in his story.

Daisy lay on a braided rug near his feet, sleeping soundly.

"I love this room," she breathed, settling into a chair across from his desk. "It's so warm and inviting." She imagined the rest of his home was the same way and wished she could see it all, but perhaps the time to ask for a tour had already come and gone. Today certainly wasn't the right time.

Kendrick cleared his throat, his fingers drumming an anxious rhythm on the polished wood. "Lavender, I... I owe you an explanation about what I told you last time you were here."

She held up a hand, uncomfortable with his apology given everything she knew but glad he was calling her Lavender again. "Genevieve told me everything. I'm not angry, truly."

His brow furrowed. “The duchess told you about my wife and child?”

“She meant well,” Lavender assured him quickly. “And I am grateful she did. I... I’ve missed you, Kendrick.”

Something in his expression softened. He looked relieved. “And I you,” he admitted quietly. “Those days we spent together were very special to me. I hope you know that.”

Lavender’s heart swelled with hope. She reached across the desk, her small hand covering his larger one. The physical connection soothed something inside her that had seemed raw and broken ever since she’d last seen him. She held his gaze for a long moment before clearing her throat.

“There’s more,” she said gently, knowing they still had to deal with his past before she could even think about there being anything between them in the future. She cleared her throat. “The duchess has contacts all over the world. After hearing your story, she decided she wanted to help you. She hired a private investigator in Spain to look into the matter, and today, she received news about Isabella and your daughter.”

Kendrick stiffened, his eyes searching her face, obviously willing to overlook Genevieve’s high-handed meddling for some closure on the matter that had haunted him for so long. “What news?”

Taking a deep breath, Lavender squeezed his hand, hoping to provide some small comfort to brace him for what she had to say. “Isabella and her... companion... did take your daughter to Spain. But Isabella... she passed away two years ago. From illness.”

A storm of emotions played across Kendrick’s face—shock, grief, anger—before settling into a pained resignation. “What about my daughter?” he asked hoarsely.

“She’s alive,” Lavender whispered. “In an orphanage in Barcelona.”

Kendrick’s hand trembled beneath hers, and he pulled it away, covering his face. “My God,” he breathed. “After all this time...”

Lavender’s heart ached for him, for the years of separation and uncertainty he had endured. “What will you do?” she asked softly.

He lowered his hand and met her gaze, determination blazing in his dark eyes. “I don’t understand why they didn’t let me know. Why didn’t they send Miranda home to me?”

“The investigator said that Isabella never told anyone who Miranda’s father was. The people who knew her thought it was her lover, who left her mere months after they arrived.” Lavender wanted to cry for the little girl who had been left all alone in the world when she had a father who so obviously loved her. It seemed pointless to have so much anger for a dead woman, but she couldn’t help it. How cruel and unfair Isabella Wycliffe must have been.

He pushed to his feet, raking a hand through his dark hair until it stood on end. “I must go to her. I’ve lost so much time already.”

Lavender nodded, fighting back the selfish disappointment that threatened to overwhelm her at the thought of losing him again so quickly. But she couldn’t be selfish when it came to him getting his daughter back. “Of course,” she murmured, pushing to her feet as well. “She needs her father.”

Lavender hesitated, then closed the distance between them, her fingers hovering before Kendrick’s face. The air between them was charged with so much still left unsaid. Gathering her courage, she reached out, and her fingertips grazed the rough stubble along his cheek—a whisper of a touch, yet she felt it to her soul.

Kendrick's dark eyes, still veiled by the shadows of his loss, locked onto hers. The world seemed to retreat, the study dimming around them as the intensity of their shared gaze drew everything into sharp focus. His eyes held raw honesty, a vulnerability that belied the gruff exterior he presented to the rest of the world.

In those eyes, Lavender saw the reflection of her own longing for a connection that reached beyond the bounds of mere friendship. Her breath hitched, caught on the precipice of something profound as he pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly against him. His big body was so warm and solid against hers. Unable to help herself, she closed her eyes and leaned into him, determined to enjoy every second of this momentary sense of belonging that she'd missed so much.

"Thank you for coming here to tell me this," he said at last, seeming to find some small comfort in their embrace as well. "For so long, I've been consumed with guilt and regret, but my attempts to find them never bore fruit. I have to admit that I'd given up. It wasn't until what happened between us that I decided to try again so I could divorce her." His breath hitched, and she knew he had just processed the fact that it was not necessary to divorce a dead woman. "If the duchess hadn't chosen to help, who knows how long it would have taken me to find them on my own. I don't have nearly the resources."

"You would have found out what happened to Miranda eventually," she replied fiercely. "But I'm glad no more time will be wasted." She reluctantly pulled away and reached into her reticule, pulling out the telegram Genevieve had given her. "Here are all the details. If you have any other questions, you can talk to the private investigator once you arrive in Spain."

He took the missive, holding it as if it were fragile and could shatter at any moment. She couldn't fathom the weight of finally holding all the answers he had been seeking for such a long time. She wanted to say more, to comfort him with another heartfelt hug, but she understood that he had more pressing matters to attend to. "Take care on

your journey,” she whispered softly, unable to resist giving his hand one last squeeze before leaving him to make his plans alone.

As the door closed behind Lavender, Kendrick’s carefully constructed facade crumbled. He sank into his leather armchair, guilt and grief clawing up from deep inside him. A choking sob welled within him, but he bit it back, feeling as though he didn’t deserve to grieve for Isabella, given all the anger he’d directed at her over the years.

“Damn it all,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

Daisy whined, seeming to sense that something was wrong. He petted her head distractedly, making her thump her tail slowly.

His mind reeled with the revelation of Isabella’s death and their daughter’s abandonment. How could Isabella have left their child alone in an orphanage? The thought of his little girl spending years in such a place, believing herself unwanted, tore at his heart.

Kendrick’s fists clenched as all the other emotions again defaulted to anger. Why hadn’t Isabella come home to England when she realized she was so ill? Why hadn’t she brought Miranda home to him or at least ensured someone knew to do so once she was gone? Had she truly hated him so much that she would rather their daughter make her way alone than with him?

The guilt of not mourning Isabella more deeply still gnawed at him, but it paled compared to his fury toward her actions. Years lost, memories never made—all because of Isabella’s irrational decisions.

He stood abruptly, pacing the room like a caged animal. The need to take the next boat to Calais was nearly overwhelming, but he knew he needed to think things

through. He couldn't go running off in the middle of the night. He needed to make a plan.

But doubt crept in, momentarily paralyzing him. What did he know about raising a child, let alone a young girl on the cusp of womanhood? She probably didn't even remember him.

Kendrick's gaze fell on the chair where Lavender had sat earlier, her golden hair glowing in the sunlight that had streamed in through the window. A spark of hope ignited within him.

Lavender. Would she... could he ask her to come with him? She would probably be wonderful with Miranda, providing a gentle buffer as he and his daughter grew reacquainted.

The thought of facing this journey alone was daunting, but with Lavender by his side...

He shook his head, chastising himself for even considering it. And yet...

"I'm not married anymore," he realized aloud, the words hanging in the air. For years, he had been free. He just hadn't known it. The main obstacle between him and Lavender was gone, leaving a world of possibilities in its wake, but would she be willing to give him another chance?

He knew he didn't deserve it, but he really wished she would.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

The next afternoon, a soft knock at the front door echoed through Kendrick's study. He looked up from the maps and train schedules spread across his desk. For a moment, he was annoyed at the intrusion, but then he realized there was only one person it could be, and his heart began to race.

"Come in," he called through the open window behind him, his voice rough from lack of sleep. "I'm in the study."

The front door opened, and a few moments later, Lavender entered the room, her blue eyes widening as she took in his disheveled appearance. "Kendrick," she said softly, "you look dreadful. Have you slept at all?"

He shook his head, drinking in the sight of her. She could always make him feel better just by being in his vicinity. She wore a summer dress in different shades of blue that reminded him of that piece of sea glass she'd found. "Sleep has eluded me, I'm afraid. I've been up all night planning my trip to Spain."

Lavender moved closer, concern evident in her delicate features. "I came over to ask if there is anything I can do to help."

His gaze fell upon Daisy, who lay in the corner, having no idea how much their lives were about to change. "Do you think Daisy could stay at Willoughby Hall while I'm gone?" He hated to leave her, but there wasn't any way he could take her with him.

"Of course," Lavender said quickly. "We would love to have her. We'll take good care of her."

Her easy reply gave him the courage to ask for an even bigger favor. Kendrick's heart raced even faster as he met her gaze. "Actually," he began, hesitating for a moment before plunging ahead, "I was wondering if you might consider... coming with me?"

Surprise flashed across Lavender's face, followed by a mix of emotions too complex to decipher. "You... want me to go to Spain with you?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, suddenly feeling foolish for daring to ask such a thing of her, given everything that had happened. But when she had been so sweet last night, he'd dared to hope... "I know it's a lot to ask, but I... I could use your support. And your help with my daughter." When she remained silent, he swallowed thickly. "I understand if you don't want to, especially considering how angry I'm guessing you still are with me."

Lavender's cheeks flushed prettily as she considered his request. "I told you that I'm not angry. I... I'm touched that you would ask me," she said, twisting her hands nervously. "But wouldn't it be improper? And... I'm afraid I just don't have the funds for such a journey."

Kendrick hoped those were really her only reservations. "As a widow, your reputation would remain intact. Besides, who would know except your friends? And you needn't worry about the cost. I would, of course, pay for everything." He gave her an imploring look. "I would be forever grateful for your companionship."

Lavender bit her lip, clearly torn. Kendrick held his breath, afraid to hope.

Finally, she looked up at him, a soft smile gracing her lips. "Yes," she said, her voice filled with quiet determination. "I will go with you to Spain."

Relief flooded through him. He reached out, taking Lavender's hand in his own.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. “You have no idea what this means to me.”

As their eyes met, a spark of something more passed between them, full of promise and possibility. He had no idea what the future might hold, and he knew better than to hope for too much, but for so long, Isabella's desertion had brought his life to a standstill. His anger with Isabella for taking their daughter had eclipsed everything else, but he couldn't help feeling as though she had ruined every chance of happiness he might ever have had with her selfishness. And even from the grave, she'd managed to ruin his budding relationship with Lavender.

He cleared his throat, knowing all that needed to take a backseat to this trip to Spain. But if he could possibly kill two birds with one stone... “Do you think your friends will still watch Daisy?” he asked, trying to focus on the matter at hand.

She nodded quickly. “I am certain they won't mind. Eden loves dogs, so I am sure she'll volunteer.”

“Thank you,” he said again, a huge weight lifting from his shoulders at the thought of his beloved dog being well taken care of. Even more so that Lavender would be coming with him.

“When do you want to leave?” she asked, coming around the desk and squeezing his shoulder.

He placed his hand over hers, glad for the comfort her touch provided. Bloody hell, how he would love to simply stretch out on the sofa and put his head in her lap, letting her soothe all his pain and heartache away with that gentle touch of hers. He would like to fall asleep there and wake with a clear head for the first time in weeks. “I would like to go as soon as possible. I was thinking within the next few days.”

She nodded, though her eyes widened. “I can be ready,” she assured him. “I know you don’t want to waste even one more day.”

“Whenever I think of Miranda... in a damn orphanage! She probably thinks I don’t care about her. She must be so alone...” His voice cracked, and he shook his head. “I don’t know what Isabella was thinking.”

She embraced him from behind, pressing her face against his back. “I don’t either. It was a terrible thing to do to her own daughter, especially if she did it just to spite you.”

He tamped down the rage still coiled within him, knowing it was pointless to give in to it no matter how much he might want to. It didn’t matter why she’d done it. All that mattered was getting his daughter back.

“Is there anything in particular I should bring?” she asked when he didn’t reply.

He cleared his throat. “We will probably be gone for at least a week. Longer if... there’s some trouble either in finding her or bringing her home. And I imagine it will be quite warm in Barcelona at this time of year.”

“Barcelona,” she murmured softly, her breath tickling his skin through his shirt, sending a bolt of heat straight to his cock. “I can’t believe I’ll be in Barcelona in just a few days.”

“And Paris,” he said, his anger momentarily abating at the sense of wonder in her tone and the sweet heat swelling within him.

“Paris,” she said with a soft laugh, pulling away and shaking her head. “What an adventure!”

He knew he wouldn't be able to enjoy the journey nearly as much as she would, not with all the unanswered questions and the looming thought that Miranda might hate him, but he was incredibly glad she'd be coming with him. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he wouldn't be alone.

And hopefully, by this time next week, Miranda would be back home with him where she belonged.

Lavender's heart raced as she made her way to Willoughby Hall's drawing room, her mind still reeling from her decision to accompany Kendrick to Spain. The gravity of her choice weighed heavily upon her, a mix of exhilaration and trepidation coursing through her veins.

As she entered the room, her friends' chatter ceased, and their eyes turned to her with curiosity. "You look flustered," Genevieve said, looking up from her embroidery with a frown. "Have you been over at Mr. Wycliffe's house again?"

Lavender took a deep breath, fidgeting with the lace on her sleeve. "I... I have news," she began, her voice quavering slightly. "I am going to Spain."

Genevieve's brow furrowed immediately, concern etching deep lines across her forehead. "Spain? Did that man ask you to go with him to get his daughter?" She shook her head. "I'm already regretting getting involved."

"No good deed goes unpunished," Daphne agreed flippantly, but her blue eyes were also concerned.

Lavender's cheeks flushed as she explained, "Miranda is just a child. She probably doesn't even remember him. She could use a motherly figure to look over her as they get to know each other again."

“Oh, Lavender,” Genevieve sighed, her eyes clouding with worry. “Are you certain this is wise? It is a long journey, and you barely know the man.”

Eden, always her champion, placed a comforting hand on Lavender’s arm. “Perhaps this is exactly what Lavender needs,” she offered gently. “A chance for a new adventure, to spread her wings.”

Lavender felt a surge of gratitude toward Eden, her words bolstering her resolve. “I know it seems impulsive,” she admitted, “but I feel... I feel as though this is something I must do.”

Daphne suddenly broke into a mischievous grin. She sauntered over to Lavender, giving her a conspiratorial wink. “Well, I say you should enjoy every moment of the journey, my dear,” she purred. “Who knows what... opportunities might arise?”

The heat in Lavender’s cheeks intensified. “It’s not like that,” she protested weakly, though a part of her was thrilled at the possibility of finally making their relationship physical. She had loved the few moments of passion they’d shared on the cliff that day. And he had been a widow all along, just like her. Why shouldn’t they be together in that way? If they both wanted it and no one got hurt? “Also, would it be all right if his sweet spaniel Daisy stays here while we’re gone?”

Genevieve laughed and shrugged her shoulders. “Why not?”

“Thank you,” Lavender said with relief. She knew how much it meant to him that Daisy be well cared for while they were gone.

As her friends continued to discuss the impending journey, Lavender’s thoughts drifted. Was she truly ready for such an adventure? And what did it mean for her future, for her heart? Could she separate her passion for him from her poor, wounded heart? Was she strong enough to have the sort of no-strings-attached fling with him

that Daphne was referring to? She didn't know if she was the sort of person who could take a lover and not fall madly in love with him. Truth be told, she feared she might have already fallen. How else to explain the sorrow she'd felt during the last few weeks without him?

Later that night, Lavender stood in the center of her bedroom, her gaze tracing her open portmanteau as if it were a portal to an unknown world. In a way, it was. She had never left England, never been more than a few hours outside London, if truth be told.

The soft morning light spilled through the window, casting a golden glow on the pile of clothing she had set aside for her journey. Each garment was chosen with care: modest enough not to draw unwanted attention but sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of travel. A sensible hat, a shawl for the cool Spanish evenings, and gloves lay atop the growing pile.

With each fold, a quiet determination to make the most of this opportunity she had been given settled into Lavender's bones. She packed not only clothing but also practical necessities—a small sewing kit, some writing supplies, her journal, and her sketchbook to capture everything she saw along the way. She wanted to be prepared for every eventuality.

Although she knew Genevieve wasn't too happy about her going to Spain with Kendrick, she'd pressed a hundred pounds into her hand after the other women had left the room. "Just in case something happens along the way, and you need to come back on your own."

Lavender had tried to give the money back, but Genevieve would not hear of it. In the end, Lavender had kept it, extremely grateful to have an emergency fund if she needed it. She trusted Kendrick, but she would be foolish to leave the country without a backup plan.

Biting her lip, she put the money in a small hidden pocket of her silk reticule. She'd make certain not to let it out of her sight.

She lingered over the trousers but in the end, she put them back in a drawer. As much as she wanted the comfort they would provide, she knew that she couldn't do anything to jeopardize her reputation during her travels with Kendrick. Her status as a widow could only protect her to a certain extent. Plus, she needed to set a good example for Miranda.

Miranda... She envisioned a lovely little waif with Kendrick's dark hair and eyes. Her heart was already filled with love with the girl, and she couldn't wait to meet her and shower her with affection. She hated the thought of Kendrick's child languishing in some horrid orphanage all this time when she could have been frolicking with Daisy along the beach at Seacrest.

When she'd finally finished packing, she sank into the chair near the empty fireplace, reflecting on the magnitude of what lay ahead. Spain was so far removed from the demure gardens and hushed drawing rooms she knew. Yet, even amidst the swirling apprehension, an undercurrent of excitement simmered. She had never done anything so daring. All her girlhood dreams of travel and adventure seemed to finally be coming true.

The fact that Kendrick had asked her to come with him had to mean something. She had to believe he cared for her at least a little bit.

She didn't know what the journey might bring, but once again, she dared to hope that the future might hold more for her than years of loneliness and yearning.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

The next morning, Lavender and Kendrick set forth to Dover in the duchess's grandest coach. Kendrick had been a bit reluctant to accept the woman's generosity, especially since she'd already done so much to help him find Miranda, but Lavender deserved to travel in style. Besides, he wasn't certain what sort of conveyances they'd be able to hire once they reached the Continent. They might as well be comfortable on the relatively short trip to the port.

He'd walked over to Willoughby Hall earlier this morning with Daisy and still felt guilty about leaving her behind. But the three women who would be taking care of her had seemed completely smitten with her. He was somewhat comforted by the thought of her getting spoiled rotten while he was gone.

At some point, during the half hour before they left, all three ladies had managed to corner him and threaten him with dire consequences should anything happen to Lavender during their journey. Rather than being angry, however, he had been oddly touched by their concern for her and had assured each of them that he would ensure her safety. She was incredibly lucky to have such friends.

As they settled across from each other and the driver headed down the drive, Lavender gave him a nervous smile. "Are you ready for this?"

He ran his fingers through his hair as the monumental task in front of him made nausea churn in his gut. "I want to see Miranda more than anything, but I'm haunted by the thought that she might not remember me or worse... not want to come with me."

Lavender reached across the carriage to squeeze his knee. "It might be awkward or

even difficult initially, but I'm confident you'll be able to rebuild your relationship with her."

Kendrick offered her a grateful smile, the weight of his fears momentarily lifted by Lavender's unwavering support. Her touch was a lifeline amidst the turbulent sea of emotions threatening to engulf him. "Thank you," he murmured.

The rhythmic clip-clop of the horses' hooves against the cobblestone streets of Broadstairs soon gave way to the softer sound of the dirt road toward Dover. As everything familiar to him vanished behind them, he focused on Lavender. Her eyes held a glimmer of determination, reflecting her resolve to help him even though he knew she must be as nervous as he was. She seemed to truly believe in him and his capacity to connect with his daughter despite the years of separation and uncertainty. He wasn't quite certain what he'd done to deserve such trust, but he was grateful to have her by his side.

With a deep breath, Kendrick straightened in his seat, steeling himself for the journey ahead. "I can't help thinking it was selfish to ask you to come with me," he admitted. "But I'm more grateful than I can say to have you here."

"It wasn't selfish at all. In fact, I think it was incredibly generous of you to offer." She gave him a gentle smile, her lovely blue eyes wide with excitement. Her hair was caught up in a tidy chignon, and she wore a sturdy brown traveling dress, looking every inch the respectable lady that she was. "This is the most exciting thing I have ever done. For so long, I have listened to other people talk about their adventures, but I never dreamed I'd ever get to go on one myself."

He gave a rough laugh. "There hasn't been much adventure in my life, either," he told her. "I'm looking forward to seeing Paris and Barcelona as well."

"It's rare for a woman to get to travel," Lavender said with a sigh. "Geoffrey went to

the Continent several times while we were married, but he never took me with him, even though I pleaded with him to do so.”

“From everything you’ve told me about him, I think Geoffrey was a bit of a fool,” he said, wishing the man were still alive so he could give him a thrashing for hurting Lavender’s tender heart. “If you were mine, I would never leave you behind.”

The moment the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. He had no right to say such things to her because, sadly, she wasn’t his, no matter how much he might wish she was. He shouldn’t even be thinking of such things until he settled things regarding Miranda.

To his surprise, she didn’t seem angry that he’d insulted her dead husband. Instead, she laughed and shook her head. “I’m starting to think that he was a bit of a fool, too,” she agreed, thankfully ignoring the rest of what he had said. “He was selfish, at the very least.”

“Isabella was selfish, too,” he said haltingly. It seemed disloyal to say it, but he still had so much anger churning within him that he felt if he didn’t let it out, he might explode. “But I know I bear some responsibility as well. If I’d been able to make her happy, maybe she wouldn’t have left.”

“You can’t make someone else happy,” Lavender said softly, and he could tell she was speaking from personal experience. “If someone isn’t happy within themselves, there’s very little you can do to change that.”

He sighed, shifting uncomfortably in his seat and stretching his legs out in front of him until they brushed her skirts. “I suppose you’re right. But I’ve gone over things a thousand times in my mind, trying to figure out what I could have done differently.”

“As have I,” she told him, her earlier excitement fading to sadness.

He regretted having broached the topic but couldn't resist asking, "What do you think you could have done differently? The man was frequenting brothels and ended up dying in one. That isn't your fault."

She blushed scarlet. "I can't help but wonder why he felt the need to do so. I never turned him away. Why wasn't he happy in our marriage bed?"

Kendrick cleared his throat, hating the sadness in her voice. "I'm afraid I don't know the answer, but some men are never satisfied with one woman."

She glanced up at him and then quickly dropped her gaze. "Are you one of those men?"

"No," he said fiercely. "I think the physical act is far sweeter when you actually love the person you're with. I never strayed from Isabella's bed when we were together. Not once." He wanted to tell her that the kiss they had shared in the rain was the first time he'd ever been tempted in all the years Isabella had been gone, but he wasn't certain she'd want to hear that, or if she'd even believe him.

Her mouth rounded in a perfect "O," and then, she visibly shook herself. "Oh, Kendrick! It must have been difficult to find out she had been gone for years. That you had been free all that time and never knew it."

He shrugged. "Until I met you, I never thought much of it. And my anger with her over taking Miranda far eclipses anything else. But when you fell into my life, you changed everything. I think you know that."

She turned to look out the window, trying to hide her smile. His own lips curved a bit when he saw how pleased she was to know that she had been the one to tempt him.

And for the first time, he dared to believe that things just might go his way, that their

trip would be uneventful, and they would return with Miranda, who'd forgive him for all his past sins. And then, finally, he might be able to think about the physical needs he had put to the side for so long and think about a future with the wonderful woman who sat across from him.

The midday sun was beating down when they reached the busy port of Dover early that afternoon. The carriage rolled to a stop at the bustling dock, where ships of all sizes were neatly lined up. Kendrick procured tickets for the next ferry to Calais, and the footman expertly lifted their luggage from the carriage and carried it to the boat they would be taking, its decks full of passengers eager to cross the Channel.

While Lavender waited for Kendrick to return, she let the coachman help her down from the carriage, then took a moment to stretch her legs and look around. Even though she'd lived a stone's throw from this seaport for a year now, she'd never been here. The majestic white chalk cliffs rose in the distance, and she gazed at them breathlessly.

"It's beautiful," she murmured as Kendrick rejoined her.

He looked in the direction she pointed, and they stared in awe. "It certainly is," he agreed.

The salty tang of the ocean filled the air, mingling with the fresh sea breeze. The scent of fish and seaweed wafted from the nearby fishing boats, while the aroma of freshly baked bread drifted from the dockside cafes.

"Do you want to have some tea before we set sail?" Kendrick asked, looking at his pocket watch as they finally turned away from the view. "We still have an hour or so." Her stomach gave a low grumble in answer, and she laughed. "That sounds lovely. I was too nervous to eat this morning."

“As was I,” he admitted.

They strolled to the closest cafe side by side, and Lavender couldn't control her surge of pride at being seen on the arm of such a man. He wore a gray tweed traveling suit with a subtle herringbone pattern, black trousers, and a bowler hat. Until now, she'd never seen him in anything other than simple linen shirts and comfortable trousers he wore to work in his garden. She liked the way he looked when they were roaming around the estate, but she liked seeing him a bit more dressed up as well.

She knew no one in Dover, so there was no need to worry about scandal. She was certain that anyone who observed them would assume they were married, and the thought was dangerously tempting.

She shouldn't want that. She should be like her friends and want more from her life than to simply be the property of a man, but ever since she'd gotten into the carriage with Kendrick this morning, a sense of peace had settled over her. It felt right, somehow, to be traveling with him.

As she'd told him earlier, Geoffrey had never taken her with him anywhere. Most of her married life had been spent in London. They'd only gone to their country house once because Geoffrey didn't like to rusticate and had never put much into the estate's upkeep. Even then, he had gone ahead on horseback and left her to travel alone in the carriage.

But traveling with someone was proving to be just as much fun as she'd imagined it would be. Kendrick had been very attentive, and even the silences between them had been comfortable. She just wished the reason for their journey wasn't so stressful for him. She had to keep reminding herself that they weren't supposed to be having fun, that they had a mission to accomplish.

The cafe was decorated with white and blue checkered tablecloths, and vibrant

paintings of seaside scenes hung on the walls. A large window overlooked the bustling dock, offering a glimpse of the boats and ships sailing in and out of the harbor.

The air was filled with the intoxicating scent of freshly baked pastries, making Lavender's stomach growl again. She ordered a warm scone. As she took a bite, the buttery pastry melted in her mouth, followed by a burst of sweet berry filling. She savored the flavors, feeling certain she'd never eaten anything so delicious.

Kendrick watched her, his gaze oddly intense. He seemed to be staring at her lips, and she suddenly wondered if he was thinking of the kiss they'd shared. Lord knows she had thought of little else herself in the intervening weeks.

Clearing her throat, she gestured to his own pastry. "Aren't you going to eat?"

He smiled and dropped his gaze. "Sorry, just woolgathering, I suppose."

But he reached across the table and covered her hand with his, squeezing it for a moment before letting go. "I don't think you realize how lovely you are, Lavender. I have a hard time looking at anything else when you're near."

"Thank you," she murmured, and her heart surged with affection. Geoffrey had never complimented her in such a manner, but she didn't doubt Kendrick's sincerity. For whatever reason, he seemed to like her short, curvy body.

Lavender's eyes traced the sharp angles of Kendrick's jaw and the high cheekbones of his handsome face. His dark hair swept softly over his forehead, a bit messy since he'd taken off his hat when they entered the bakery, and his deep brown eyes seemed to glow in the warm sunlight coming through the cafe window.

"Aren't you going to finish yours?" he asked teasingly, his eyes dancing.

She looked away, heat climbing in her cheeks as she realized she had been caught staring just as he had.

“You know I find you very attractive as well,” she managed.

“Actually, I wasn’t sure of that at all,” he said softly. “But it’s good to know.”

He changed the subject then, and they spent the next half hour engaged in idle chitchat, but the warm feeling lingered, and her anticipation for what lay ahead grew.

As the ferry set sail, they found a comfortable spot on deck to watch as the coast of England grew smaller and smaller in the distance. The wind whipped through their hair, and the smell of the sea filled their nostrils.

Lavender couldn’t contain her excitement, staring in wonder at the vast expanse of water before them. “This is my first time on a boat,” she exclaimed, gazing at the horizon. “I can’t believe that we’re actually doing this.”

Kendrick smiled at her enthusiasm, grateful for her lightheartedness amidst his own tumultuous thoughts. He had spent most of his days brooding over his past mistakes, but Lavender’s presence brought a welcome breath of fresh air and reminded him that there was still beauty and joy to be found in life. He wished he could look at things the way she did.

As they sailed across the Channel, they talked about their plans for when they reached France. They would take a train from Calais to Paris, which would take about three or four hours. Then, they would find a place near the railroad station to spend the night. Tomorrow, they would take another train to Barcelona. The journey consisted of several stops and transfers, but they should still reach their destination before nightfall the next day. He wasn’t certain how far the orphanage would be from the train station, whether he’d have to rent a carriage or if he could walk. But by this

time three days from now, Miranda should be with him once again. He couldn't believe he was finally so close to seeing her again.

Unfortunately, even after making all these preparations, Kendrick couldn't shake off the nagging feeling in his gut that something could still go wrong. What if Miranda refused to see him? What if she hated him? If she refused to go with him, should he force her? He couldn't imagine that would end well.

The biggest fear of all was that she wouldn't be there at all. That he'd come all this way, only to find that the duchess's information had been wrong. Perhaps he should have wired ahead, made certain that she really was at the orphanage. But the thought of waiting days more had seemed intolerable. Besides, once he was in Barcelona, he should be able to track her down. He just needed to be moving, to be making progress after all this time.

Lavender must have noticed his troubled expression because she squeezed his hand reassuringly. "Everything will work out," she said softly. "You're doing everything you can to make things right."

He nodded, grateful for her words but still unsure if he deserved such kindness.

The afternoon sun had dipped lower in the sky, casting a warm golden light over the bustling port of Calais as the ferry pulled up to the dock. Lavender's eyes widened with excitement. She eagerly scanned the busy docks, taking in the colorful sights of sailors unloading cargo and travelers rushing to and from the ferry.

They hired a porter to take their luggage to the train station but decided to walk, eager to stretch their legs after a long day of travel.

"I can't believe I'm in France," Lavender exclaimed, gazing around in awe.

The streets of Calais were alive with a vibrant energy that was a stark contrast to the calm English countryside Lavender was used to. The sound of rapid French conversations filled the air, mingling with the tantalizing scents of freshly baked bread and exotic spices wafting from the nearby cafes.

Kendrick couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation building within him as they navigated through the bustling streets toward the train station. The thought of finally reuniting with his daughter sent a surge of emotions through him—hope, fear, and a deep longing. He couldn't believe this nightmare that had begun seven years ago was nearly over.

As they approached the station, Lavender caught sight of a quaint little patisserie with colorful macarons displayed in the window. Her eyes lit up with delight as she tugged gently on Kendrick's sleeve. "Can we please stop for just a moment? I've always wanted to try authentic French pastries."

Kendrick couldn't help but smile at her infectious enthusiasm, feeling a warmth blossom in his chest at the sight of her joy. He had forgotten what it felt like to be so carefree, so unburdened by the weight of his past. With Lavender by his side, he felt like a new man, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

"Of course, we can," he told her, and they ducked into the shop. Luckily, the shop owner spoke fluent English, and they were able to order a selection of pastries, which were wrapped up and placed in a small box. He wasn't certain they'd be any better than the ones they'd had on the other side of the Channel earlier today, but he was willing to put aside his natural reticence toward new things and give them a try.

As they once again walked toward the train station, Lavender slipped her hand into his, a simple gesture that sent a jolt of electricity through him. Her touch was gentle yet reassuring, and it seemed very natural to be connected to her. He had the fanciful thought that it was her and him against the world.

The train station loomed ahead, its grand facade a testament to the bustling city of Calais. Lavender and Kendrick made their way inside, the noise of the crowd and the click-clack of baggage carts filling the air. They retrieved their luggage, purchased their tickets, found their platform, and settled onto a wooden bench, surrounded by travelers from all walks of life.

Lavender curiously watched the eclectic mix of people passing by. Families with young children, elderly couples with weathered faces, and bustling groups of friends all hurried toward their respective trains.

Kendrick sat beside her, his gaze fixed on the tracks ahead, lost in his thoughts. The weight of his mission lay heavy on his shoulders, but the warmth of Lavender's hand in his provided a sense of solace he hadn't felt in years. No matter what happened in Spain, he was no longer alone, and that was a heady feeling.

A whistle blew in the distance, signaling the imminent departure of their train. Lavender looked up at Kendrick, her expression filled with excitement. "Next stop... Paris!"

He smiled, basking in her joy. He was so glad to be able to give her these new experiences.

The sleek, black train glided into the station, its perfectly polished exterior reflecting the bustle of the crowd. Lavender and Kendrick made their way up the steps, the metallic scent of the train car filling their noses. The plush seats and clean aisles exuded a sense of luxury and comfort.

They settled in two adjacent seats toward the back of the car, where they made themselves comfortable. Kendrick stretched his long legs out in front of him and gave her a rueful smile. "I will book a private compartment from Paris to Barcelona since it will take more than twenty-four hours. But since this leg of our journey is only a

few hours, I thought traveling in coach would be all right.”

“This is fine,” Lavender hurried to reassure him. “I enjoy watching people.”

He smiled. “Do you? I have spent most of the last decade avoiding everyone. I already felt a little overwhelmed by how many people I’ve had to deal with today. If I didn’t have you by my side, I’m certain I’d be ready to pull my hair out in frustration.”

“Well, I find people endlessly interesting,” she replied. “I like to try and guess who they are and what they’re doing.”

He gestured to a couple who had just boarded. “What do you think about them?”

She frowned, taking in every detail of their appearance.

The couple appeared to be in their late fifties. The man had a distinguished air about him and a twinkle in his eye, which seemed to indicate he had a mischievous sense of humor. His wife, elegant and regal, with a strand of pearls draped around her neck, exuded warmth and grace.

Lavender observed them for a moment, noticing how the man whispered something in his wife’s ear, causing her to chuckle softly. “I think they’ve been married for many years,” Lavender began, her eyes crinkling with amusement. “He still knows how to make her laugh, even after all this time. They seem like they’ve shared a lifetime of wonderful moments.”

Kendrick glanced at the couple and then back at Lavender. “Do you think they’re happy?” he asked quietly.

Lavender pondered his question for a moment before answering. “They seem

content,” she finally replied, her gaze lingering on the couple. “In each other’s company, they find joy and comfort. It’s the kind of love that withstands the test of time, where every shared moment becomes a cherished memory.”

Kendrick watched the couple for a moment longer, feeling a bit wistful. “I would like to think that such a thing is possible, but my previous experience with married life was never like that.”

“Neither was mine,” Lavender admitted, thinking of all the tears she’d cried herself to sleep and the long evenings spent alone while Geoffrey spent his time at gaming halls and brothels.

“You haven’t told me much about the viscount,” he said softly, his dark gaze holding hers.

Lavender hesitated momentarily, memories of her past life flashing through her mind. She took a deep breath, steeling herself to share a part of her history with Kendrick.

“Geoffrey was charming and captivating when we first met,” Lavender began, her voice tinged with melancholy. “In the beginning, I truly thought I could love him. I thought he might love me too. But as time went on, and I was unable to conceive, his facade crumbled to reveal a man consumed by his desires and vices. I can see now that in the end, our marriage was more of a business arrangement than anything else, only he liked to remind me that I wasn’t living up to my part of the bargain.”

Kendrick listened intently, his eyes filled with understanding as she spoke, offering silent support.

“I tried to be the dutiful wife, to ignore the late nights and the rumors that followed him like shadows,” Lavender continued. “But I was still surprised to hear that he’d died in a brothel.” Heat crept up her cheeks. “Now I wonder if he ever really cared

for me.” She wondered if Kendrick knew what sort of “particular tastes” Geoffrey had engaged in that night. Because she still didn’t. She’d tried to get the other widows to tell her, but they all claimed not to know. She doubted that. They just thought she couldn’t handle it.

“He was obviously a fool,” Kendrick assured her. “Any man would be lucky to have a lady such as you.”

She absorbed the comfort his warm hand provided, wondering if he was right. Had the fault in her marriage been Geoffrey’s more than her own? Eden had thought so, but it was nice to hear it from a man. It was a relief to let go of some of the guilt and regret she’d been shouldering since his death.

“Thank you,” she whispered just as the train shuddered to life.

As the train started to move, Lavender pressed her face to the window, taking in the bustling station disappearing behind them. In the distance, the idyllic French countryside stretched out before her, fields of green dotted with vibrant wildflowers and quaint villages. The sun dipped low in the west, casting a warm pink glow over the landscape.

The train's rhythmic sound and gentle swaying were very comforting. Lavender turned back to Kendrick, a soft smile playing on her lips. “Thank you for listening. It means more than you know to be able to share that with someone who truly understands.”

He nodded, looking troubled. “I know what it’s like to feel like you’re all alone in a marriage. Isabella may have tried at first... Maybe not. I don’t even know anymore. I think she just wanted out of her parents’ house, and I was the first one to ask for her hand. But as soon as she realized the reality of being a wife, she stopped trying to make me happy.” He sighed ruefully. “Sometimes, I thought she was trying to make

me miserable. She certainly did her best to make me jealous. I think it actually angered her that I didn't fly into a rage over her antics. I sensed she was trying to get a reaction, and the only thing I could control was not to give her one."

"The more you shut her out, the more she tried to break down your walls," Lavender said softly. "She just went about it in all the wrong ways. She probably needed more attention than anyone could ever give her."

"I should have tried harder," he admitted. "But I had no idea how to please her."

"You aren't responsible for her choices," Lavender assured him. "And it really was deplorable of her to take your child away from you."

He scrubbed his hands over his face, looking utterly forlorn. "I hate that Miranda paid the price for both of our mistakes. I just don't know what I'm going to say or do that will make up for my inaction the last seven years."

"I think she will just be so glad to see you that she will forgive you anything," Lavender said, hoping it was true. "All you can really do is move forward."

He nodded but didn't look convinced.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

Kendrick watched Lavender's reflection in the train window, the sunlight illuminating her delicate features. He couldn't help but feel a surge of protectiveness toward her, knowing the pain she had endured in her past. Even so, she still found the courage to retain her sunny smile, and she was still trying to comfort him for his own pain. She truly was unlike anyone he had ever known.

He was so glad he'd asked her to come on this journey with him. She deserved so much more than what life had given her so far. How he wished he could be the one who showed her how much she deserved, how precious and special she truly was, but he wasn't certain he could be. What did he know of making a woman happy? He'd ruined the one chance he'd had, as evidenced by Isabella leaving him and taking their child with her.

Kendrick felt a lump form in his throat, her kindness cutting through the walls he had built around his heart. He had carried the weight of Isabella's betrayal for so long that it had become a part of him, shaping his interactions and view of the world. But Lavender's unwavering belief in him stirred something within him, a flicker of hope that had long been extinguished.

As the train continued its journey through the picturesque French countryside, Kendrick found himself opening up to Lavender in ways he never thought possible. They spoke for hours about their childhoods, families, hopes, and dreams. While they talked, she sketched things she saw out the window, and once, he even caught her sketching him. Before he knew it, the bright lights of Paris were visible in the distance.

The train pulled into the bustling station, its steam billowing out into the cool evening

air. Lavender and Kendrick gathered their belongings, preparing to disembark and begin the next leg of their journey through the enchanting Paris streets. As they stepped onto the platform, he could sense Lavender's excitement tinged with nervousness at the prospect of exploring such a vibrant and romantic place.

He gave a porter a few coins to carry their bags on a cart, and they set off into the city.

The cobblestone streets were alive with activity, the soft glow of gas lamps casting a warm light on the elegant buildings and bustling cafes.

Kendrick's usual prickly reserve softened in the presence of Lavender's infectious energy. Despite his past pain and solitude, he found himself drawn to her warmth and optimism, grateful to be sharing this new experience with her. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he didn't want to hide from the world. With Lavender by his side, he wanted to explore it.

"Let's find a hotel and store our things. Then, if you want, we can come back out and find a cafe."

Her eyes lit up, and he was immediately glad that he hadn't insisted that they just spend the evening in their room and order room service, though that would normally be his preference. "That sounds wonderful!"

Kendrick led the way through the lively streets of Paris, his tall frame towering over the bustling crowds as Lavender walked by his side, her eyes wide with wonder.

They found a charming hotel tucked away on a quaint side street, its ivy-covered facade adding to its romantic allure. The concierge welcomed them warmly, and soon, they were shown to a cozy suite with two separate bedrooms and a view of the twinkling Eiffel Tower in the distance. Lavender pressed her face to the glass, her

eyes bright as she gazed at the strange structure.

The Eiffel Tower stood tall against the night sky, its iron lattice glowing under the moonlight. He knew of it, having read about how it had been built for the 1889 World's Fair. But this was the first time he'd seen it, and it was truly majestic, soaring nearly three hundred meters above the city and easily visible from most spots. The article he'd read said most Parisians hated the tower, thinking it an eyesore, but he loved the modern look of it. They were on the cusp of a new century, and it seemed to be ushering in a time when all sorts of magnificent building projects would be possible.

Kendrick watched her from across the room, a soft smile playing on his lips as he observed the childlike wonder in her expression. She made him so much more aware of the simple joys in life, of the beauty that could still be found amidst the darkness that had clouded his life for so long.

As Lavender turned away from the window, her eyes sparkling with excitement, she caught Kendrick's gaze. "Isn't it incredible?" she breathed, her voice barely above a whisper. "I can't believe we're truly here, in Paris!"

"I can't either," Kendrick agreed, absolutely captivated by her and wishing they were sharing a bedroom tonight instead of sleeping separately. Every minute spent with her only made his attraction to her grow. But although she'd agreed to come with him, he wasn't certain she'd truly forgiven him for having kissed her when he thought he was still married. He didn't want her to feel under any obligation to him or feel pressured in any way. She'd admitted she was attracted to him earlier, but he knew that didn't equate to a willingness to share his bed. Lavender was a lady, after all.

After freshening up and storing their belongings, Kendrick and Lavender ventured back out into the night, the sounds of laughter and music guiding them to a nearby cafe. The scent of savory meats, sauces, and rich coffee filled the air as they settled at

a table outside, immersed in the lively atmosphere of Parisian nightlife. The cafe was alive with energy, the chatter of patrons mixing with the soulful notes of a nearby accordion player. Soft lights twinkled overhead, casting a warm glow on the street and the eclectic mix of people passing by.

Lavender could barely contain her delight as she perused the menu, her excitement palpable. Kendrick couldn't help but be captivated by her infectious enthusiasm, her laughter like music to his ears. As they waited for their orders to arrive, he found himself studying her features in the dim light, marveling at the way her golden hair caught the flickering glow of the candles. She was always incredibly attractive to him but looked particularly lovely by candlelight.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," he remarked, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

Lavender looked up, her gaze meeting his with joy and gratitude. "I am, Kendrick. This is truly a dream come true for me. I've always wanted to eat at a Parisian café."

The waiter placed two plates of steaming food in front of them. Kendrick's bore a juicy steak cooked to perfection, with a side of buttery mashed potatoes and vibrant green beans, and on Lavender's, a chicken breast in a gorgeous cream sauce, freshly baked croissants, and a cup of velvety hot chocolate. The presentation was stunning, each dish plated with care and precision.

"It's beautiful," she said in awe. "The food back home never looks like this."

He laughed. "Perhaps food always looks and tastes better when you're traveling."

"Well, I wouldn't know since I've never been anywhere," she said, taking her first bite. "Oh, my goodness," she breathed, her eyes practically rolling back in her head. "This is delicious."

Her sensual enjoyment in the flaky pastry twisted something deep inside him. Was this how she would look when in the throes of passion? He couldn't help but remember her sweet surrender on the cliff that day and the way she'd shyly told him she enjoyed it. What sweet torture to sit here with her and be reminded of such things when he didn't know if he'd ever be able to act on them, but he wouldn't give this moment up for anything.

They passed the meal lost in conversation, ending with a fabulous dessert. The confection was a work of art, layers of creamy chocolate mousse piled high on a delicate wafer, drizzled with glossy caramel, and topped with a fresh strawberry like a jewel on top.

"I never knew something edible could look so beautiful," she murmured as she took her first bite, and once again, he was arrested by the look of ecstasy on her face.

He took a bite of his own, and his tastebuds were overwhelmed with a burst of rich and indulgent flavors.

By the time they were done, he felt full in body as well as spirit. He tended to eat austere, just enough to fuel his body, but tonight, in Lavender's company, he had indulged in more than just the exquisite food before him.

As he settled the bill and they prepared to leave the cafe, contentment washed over him. Such a small thing, perhaps, to have dinner with a beautiful woman, but he'd been alone for so long that he couldn't imagine a life where such good company and conversation were commonplace.

The night air was cool against their faces as they strolled along, a soft breeze ruffling their hair. Lavender linked her arm through his, her presence warm and comforting against his side.

“Thank you for tonight, Kendrick,” Lavender said softly, her voice carrying a note of sincerity that tugged at his heartstrings. “I know that this trip is not about sightseeing and that you have a lot on your mind, worrying about Miranda, so it really means a lot to me that you’re making sure I enjoy it.”

“It was my pleasure,” Kendrick replied, his tone sincere. “I haven’t experienced a meal like that in my entire life. And whatever happens with Miranda will happen either way, so we might as well enjoy the journey.”

“We should,” she agreed. She stared up at him for a moment and then led him over to a nearby bench. “Can we talk for a moment?”

He thought they’d been talking all day, but something about her tone made him pause. “Of course.”

Once they were settled, she leaned forward and took his hand, staring deep into his eyes, her nervousness palpable. “Are we friends, or are we something... more?”

The soft glow of the streetlamp above cast a halo of light around her, illuminating the uncertainty in her expressive blue eyes. His breath caught in his throat as he considered his response, knowing their fragile bond was teetering on the edge of something unknown. He wanted more... so much more... but he needed to be certain that she was really asking what he hoped she was asking.

He swallowed dryly. “Lavender,” he began, his voice filled with raw honesty, “I care for you deeply, in ways I never thought possible. You’ve brought light into my life. I think about you constantly, and when we’re not together, I long for the moment we will be. Those weeks spent without you seemed endless.” His thumb brushed over the back of her hand, a gesture both tender and hesitant. “What we have is... different than anything I’ve ever experienced. It’s more than friendship, yet... less than what I desire it to be.”

Her gaze searched his intently as if trying to decipher the unspoken words lingering between them. “What do you desire it to be, Kendrick? I don’t want there to be any misunderstanding between us.”

He cleared his throat, afraid of being too blunt, afraid that he would somehow ruin this. “You’ve been married before, so I think you can hazard a guess.”

“I think I can.” A relieved smile spread across her face. “I want to make love to you, too, Kendrick.”

His heart thundered at Lavender’s words, her admission rocking him to the core. He’d never expected her to say those words, and a surge of arousal pulsed within him. His breath caught as he searched her eyes, seeing a mixture of vulnerability and determination shining within their depths. He knew that asking for what she wanted couldn’t have been easy for her. She was so fucking brave.

He lifted his free hand to gently cup her cheek, his thumb brushing against the soft skin. “I want you desperately.”

Without another word, Lavender leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed as she savored the warmth of his palm against her skin. The moment stretched between them, charged with longing and the promise of what was to come. It seemed as though it had been building for a lifetime. Kendrick’s heart swelled with desire and tenderness for this woman who had captured his heart so completely.

Leaning in slowly, giving her time to pull away if she wanted, he pressed his lips to hers.

Lavender responded with a soft sigh, wrapping one hand around the back of his neck. A surge of emotions flooded him, and he wanted to remain lost in this moment forever. He kept the kisses gentle at first, tender, but then he traced the seam of her

lips with his tongue. He caught her soft gasp as they parted and let him in, and then he plundered her mouth hungrily, passion exploding with him.

Dear God, she was so sweet. She tasted like chocolate and strawberries. He knew he was never going to be able to get enough of her.

When they finally parted, their breaths mingling in the cool night air, Lavender gazed at him with a mixture of desire and something deeper. He very much feared that he had fallen completely head over heels with her.

The realization hit Kendrick like a thunderclap—this was more than a fleeting attraction. He loved her. Perhaps he'd loved her since she first fell out of that tree at his feet.

“Lavender,” he murmured, his voice a low rasp filled with unspoken promises. “I want you to know that I...” His words faltered, emotions swirling within him like a tempest.

Her eyes searched his, understanding dawning deep within them. “I feel the same,” she whispered, though he didn't think that she truly realized the extent of what he was feeling. She couldn't possibly love him. “We can talk about the future after we've completed our journey and Miranda is with you again. But for now, let's just savor this passion between us. Tomorrow will bring what it may, but let's just enjoy each other tonight. I have no expectations of you beyond this evening.”

Kendrick nodded, a sense of peace settling over him as he drew Lavender close once more. Her words relieved some of the pressure he'd been feeling, allowing him to at least try to just enjoy the moment. They sat there on the bench, wrapped in each other's arms, the world around them fading into insignificance. He couldn't stop thinking that he didn't deserve this, didn't deserve her, but he wanted her too badly to listen to his own dark thoughts.

“Come on,” he said softly, pulling her to her feet. “Let’s go back to the hotel.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

They walked down the street together, the atmosphere between them charged with a newfound intimacy that felt both exhilarating and comforting. Lavender's hand once again found its way to Kendrick's arm, her touch anchoring him as they made their way back to the quaint inn where they were staying.

The soft glow of firelight welcomed them as they entered their room, casting a warm ambiance over the cozy space. Kendrick closed the door behind them, enveloping them in a cocoon of privacy.

Turning to face Lavender, he took her hands in his, his gaze locked with hers in silent communication. They shared an unspoken understanding of the significance of this moment and what it meant for their budding relationship. She'd said she had no expectations of him, but he had plenty for himself. He wanted to make this so good for her...

Kendrick's heart galloped in his chest as he leaned forward, his lips brushing against Lavender's in a gentle caress. The kiss was tender yet filled with the flame of passion that had long smoldered between them. Lavender's fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt, pulling him toward her as she rose on her tiptoes to better reach his mouth. He loved the way she was kissing him, as if she couldn't possibly get enough.

He felt the same about her, and when his hands moved to cup her face, his touch was reverent and filled with a tenderness born of newfound love. He wished he had the courage to tell her how much he cared for her, but she'd said that discussion could wait, and he still didn't know what would happen when they reached Barcelona. The last thing he wanted was to make promises he couldn't keep.

When they finally broke apart, their breaths coming in ragged gasps, Kendrick rested his forehead against Lavender's. Time seemed to stand still, allowing them to bask in the glow of this new chapter unfolding between them.

"Lavender," Kendrick whispered, his voice husky with emotion. "I want to do this right. Please, tell me what you like, what makes you feel good."

She took a step back, a deep flush working its way across her features. "I don't know what you mean." She looked adorably flustered, and he wondered if perhaps she had never talked about such matters before, not even with her husband.

He realized a bit ruefully that he needed to slow this down a bit, even though he was so hard he ached. He wanted nothing more than to finally—finally!—find some relief from the long years of abstinence he had endured because of Isabella's perfidy. But he didn't want to pressure her in any way.

Unfortunately, women weren't usually encouraged to express their physical desires. Because of that, he feared very few of them ever really enjoyed lovemaking, too worried about how they were "supposed" to act to let themselves give in to it. But he hoped she'd grown comfortable enough with him to understand that he wasn't trying to embarrass her. On the contrary. He was trying to make all her sensual desires come true.

He pulled her through the sitting room to the bedroom he'd chosen for himself, sat down on the bed, and patted the space beside him. "Come sit beside me and tell me what makes you..." He trailed off, not sure which word to use. Come seemed too vulgar to use with a lady, but he wasn't sure what word would be better.

She stared at him a moment, seeming poised to flee, her face still flaming, then moved to sit rigidly beside him. All the soft desire she had shown a few minutes ago had vanished like dust in the wind. He hoped he wasn't making a terrible mistake by

insisting they talk about this first.

“Makes me... what?” she asked after a long moment.

“Which positions make you orgasm?” he asked tightly, his cock aching at his restraint, at actually saying the words aloud. “Which ones do you like the most, and which ones are your least favorite?”

“There’s more than one position?” she asked, sounding utterly shocked. “And I didn’t know women were supposed to... do that.”

He turned to look at her, even more shocked than she was. “Are you telling me that you’ve never... Not ever? How about when you touch yourself?”

“I don’t... I’ve never...” She shook her head, her face so red he feared she might burst into flames. “Is there something wrong with me?”

“No,” he murmured, pulling her into his lap and cradling her close. “But apparently, there was something wrong with the viscount. Either that or he just didn’t care if you received any enjoyment from the act.”

“He probably didn’t care. But I did enjoy it,” she whispered hoarsely. “It felt so good to be touched. To feel cherished, if only for a few moments. And I like kissing very much.”

“Oh, my sweet girl, am I to understand that he simply kissed you a bit, flipped up your nightgown, rutted until he came, and then fell asleep beside you?” Once again, he had the urge to thrash the dead man.

A strained laugh escaped her. “Yes... that’s pretty accurate. Should there be more?”

He brushed a few strands of her golden hair behind her ear, then pressed his lips tenderly to her forehead. “There can be so much more to it than that. So many ways to give love and receive it. Do you trust me to show you some of those ways, or would you prefer that we do it the way you’re comfortable with?”

She drew in a deep, steady breath, then released it as though giving herself strength. “I trust you, Kendrick. I want you to... show me.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, meaning it. He knew she didn’t utter those words lightly, and he was even more determined to earn her inexplicable trust in him. He wanted her so much, yet he was overwhelmed with the fear that he would disappoint her. He had only known release by his own hand in all these long years, and the mere thought of burying himself within her...

He took a deep breath of his own, knowing that he owed her the same amount of honesty that she’d given him. “I must tell you that I haven’t been with anyone since Isabella left me,” he told her, his voice rough. “I want to make this so good for you, but I fear the moment you touch me, I will explode. So... I’m going to ensure that you find your pleasure first.”

Lavender’s eyes softened, a mixture of compassion and desire swirling in their depths. She cupped his face gently. “Kendrick, are you telling me that you were faithful to her all those years, even though she abandoned you, until the day you kissed me in the rain?”

He swallowed thickly and nodded. “At first, I thought she might come back, but even after I had given up all hope of that... I didn’t make those vows lightly, Lavender. That’s not who I am.”

Her eyes grew bright with unshed tears. “I am sorry I ran away from you. I am sorry I didn’t wait and let you explain.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his in a

kiss that was so tender it made his eyes burn. “But the last thing you have to worry about tonight is that you won’t please me. Even if we did nothing but kiss, it would please me.”

He met her gaze, seeing nothing but warmth and acceptance reflected back at him. With a deep breath, he let go of his fears. This was Lavender, and he knew she meant what she’d said. Besides, he intended to pleasure her so thoroughly that it wouldn’t matter how long he lasted. And they had all night. They could keep practicing until they got it right.

“You won’t regret this,” he whispered. “I promise you won’t.”

She bit her lip. “It’s been a long time for me as well. And I’m not as young as I used to be. I fear I won’t be pleasing to you... once you see me.”

He made a rough sound of denial. “Oh, Lavender. There is no way in hell I’m not going to be pleased by your body. I’ve been dreaming of getting to touch you since we first met. You are so beautiful to me.”

She blinked, a single tear finding its way down her cheek. “I just want to be intimate with you, be touched by you. I’ve been so lonely for so long.”

“I want that too,” he whispered, standing up and moving in front of her, tugging her to her feet. “Can I undress you? I want to see you. I’ve been dreaming of it for months.”

Lavender’s cheeks flushed a rosy hue as she met Kendrick’s gaze, her eyes filled with desire and tenderness. He reached up to unfasten the buttons of her blouse, his fingers trembling slightly with anticipation. With each button undone, he revealed more pale, delicate skin.

The fabric slipped from her shoulders, pooling at her feet, and moments later, her skirt and underthings joined it. At last, Lavender stood before Kendrick in all her vulnerable beauty. Her golden hair cascaded down her back and across her full, heavy breasts and round shoulders like a shimmering waterfall, framing her heart-shaped face with its smattering of freckles. She looked ethereal in the warm glow of the fire, like a goddess offering herself to him in some sort of ancient rite.

Kendrick's breath caught in his throat at the sight of her, his gaze tracing the curves of her body with reverence and awe. She was a vision of purity and desire, a paradoxical mix. Her short, curvy frame, with her lovely breasts and wide hips, made him swallow convulsively. "You're so perfect," he said hoarsely. "I knew you would be."

She'd been rigid with tension, but his words seemed to burn the last of her hesitance and nervousness away. She truly hadn't thought he'd find her pleasing, which amazed him. How could she not know how beautiful she was? He vowed to himself that before he was done with her, she would know she was powerful and gorgeous in her soft, feminine beauty.

"Now it's your turn," she whispered.

With trembling hands, Kendrick reached for the buttons of his shirt, his movements slow and deliberate as he allowed Lavender to witness his own raw vulnerability. He certainly wasn't as young as he'd been the last time he'd stood naked before a woman either, and time had certainly taken its toll. As each button came undone, revealing the expanse of his chest, he felt a sense of liberation wash over him. This act of baring himself to Lavender felt like shedding the weight of his past mistakes and regrets, allowing him to embrace the possibility of a new beginning with her.

His clothes were soon forgotten on the floor as he stood before her, hoping she liked what she saw as well. His cock was painfully engorged, jutting toward her and

already weeping from the tip.

“You’re perfect too,” she whispered, her blue eyes raking over every part of him and lingering on his cock as though she had never seen one before. He wondered suddenly if maybe she hadn’t, if that buffoon she’d been married to had come to her in darkness.

He kissed her again, more passionately this time, as he bent her back across the big bed, his hands cradling her face with a gentle urgency. Lavender met his kiss with equal fervor, her fingers tangling in his hair as she arched into his touch. The room seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them, finally skin to skin, the way they’d both wanted. Her softness welcomed him, easily giving way to his hard angles.

Lavender’s taste was a mixture of sweetness and fire, strawberries and chocolate, leaving him hungry for more of her. With each caress and touch, he felt himself unraveling, shedding the layers of guilt and pain that had bound his heart for so long.

As he kissed her, he let his fingertips trail lower, cupping her lovely breasts, loving the soft weight of them. He lightly pinched her nipple, and she made a soft mewl of desire.

“Do you like that?” he broke away to whisper.

She nodded, her eyes unfocused. “I love it,” she managed, and so he replaced his hands with his lips, kissing and nipping at her while she buried her hands in his hair and urged him on.

Eventually, he skated his fingertips along her soft round belly, then delved into the soft patch of pale hair at the juncture of her thighs. “Part your legs for me, my love,” he breathed.

She gave a soft, breathy sigh, allowing her thighs to fall open for his questing hands, and he was thrilled to find her wet for him. He slid his fingertips across her crease, and she cried out with unmistakable pleasure. He loved how responsive she was, her soft sounds driving him mad.

Smiling in delight, he gently entered her with one finger, using his thumb to seek out the little bud of her womanhood and swirl around it as he mimicked the act of penetration.

“Kendrick!” she cried, sounding confused. “I don’t understand what you’re doing...”

“Just relax,” he breathed, adding a second finger, so aroused he could barely stand it. “Just try to relax and enjoy it.”

She gave a soft moan, her fingers tangling in his hair until it almost hurt as he continued to make love to her with his fingers. God, she smelled so good...

Before he even realized what he was doing, he’d replaced his thumb with his mouth, swirling his tongue over the little bundle of nerves he’d been told were the source of a woman’s pleasure. The heady taste and scent blasted through his senses just as she tightened her thighs around his shoulders and gave a keening cry, clenching and coming apart around his fingertips, which were still buried deep inside her.

The sense of pride and satisfaction that pulsed through him was like nothing he’d ever known before, and he pushed himself up beside her, gathering her into his arms and pressing sweet kisses to the top of her head. “I’ve got you,” he whispered. “I’ve got you, sunshine.”

After a long moment, she buried her face against his chest, releasing a dazed-sounding laugh. “So, that’s what you meant...”

He still couldn't believe this was the first time she'd experienced an orgasm. He wanted to ask her why she'd never pleased herself, but he supposed gently bred young ladies were told that touching themselves was bad, something they would go to hell for. He'd save that conversation for another time, because he needed to be inside her so badly he feared he might die if he didn't accomplish it soon.

He tilted her chin to stare down into her lovely, flushed face. "Does that mean you enjoyed it?"

"I've never enjoyed anything more," she whispered, hugging him tightly. "Thank you so much. I never knew it could feel like that."

"You should have," he said fiercely. "You deserve to receive just as much pleasure from me as I do from you."

"But you haven't had any pleasure yet," she told him daringly.

He laughed roughly. "Trust me, sunshine. Seeing you come undone at my fingertips is more pleasure than I ever again expected to have again in this life." He brushed a few strands of golden hair from her face. "I'm so glad I got to be the first to show you."

"So am I," she told him, her heart in her eyes.

He swallowed, feeling like a king as she leaned forward and kissed him hungrily. He wondered if she liked the taste of herself on his tongue. But then all coherent thoughts fled as her soft hand trailed down his chest and across his stomach, closing around his aching length. Her touch was tentative, but he loved that she'd taken this initiative and was trying to make him feel good as well.

He broke the kiss and rolled onto his back, offering himself up to her questing hands,

knowing that he needed to give in to her touch now so that he could make it last later. “That feels so good,” he said hoarsely, closing his hand around hers and showing her how he liked it.

She was a fast learner, and within minutes, the pleasure was simply too much. His back arched off the bed, and he cried out, seeing stars as he exploded into her palm.

Much as he had done with her, she hugged him tightly, whispering soft words of endearment as he slowly came back to himself. “Thank you,” he mumbled, feeling so relaxed he thought he might melt into the bed. “I needed that so badly.”

She gave him an impish smile, then rolled away and found a washcloth to clean them both up with. He admired the sight of her moving around the room naked, so glad that she felt comfortable enough to do so. When she was done, she sank back beside him, spooning herself perfectly in his arms. For a while, he simply held her, gently rubbing her back.

Sighing, she leaned into his touch, reminding him of a kitten. The thought made him smile. She was so soft... so sweet... Dear God, how had he gotten so lucky?

He brushed his lips against the back of her neck, and she pushed her lovely round bottom back against his groin. He ran his hand down the smooth curve of her back and then learned every inch of her beautiful bum with his fingertips. “I almost came on the spot when you bent over on the beach that day to pet Daisy... I don’t think you have any idea how beautiful you were with your trousers molded to your bottom,” he breathed. “I’ve been able to think of little else ever since. And you’re even lovelier here than I imagined.”

“Am I?” she asked, sounding genuinely surprised. “I always thought my bottom was too big.”

“It’s perfect in every way,” he murmured, his cock already swelling once again. “Have you ever been taken from behind?”

She shook her head and looked over her shoulder, her eyes widening. “You mean... like horses do?”

“Sort of,” he murmured, kissing her bare shoulder as he urged her legs apart a bit and slid his fingers inside her once again. “I think you’ll like it.”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked shakily, and he absolutely loved how willing she was to try something she’d never done before.

“Get on your hands and knees,” he whispered, excitement surging within him. This was even better than his fantasies.

She did as he asked, rising so that her sweet round bottom was facing him. He got to his knees behind her, running his hands over the sweet curves again, loving the way she looked like this. She was still so wet for him, and he took himself in hand, slowly rubbing himself against her slick heat before easing himself inside her hot, tight passage.

Moaning, she pressed back against him until he was fully seated inside her. “How does that feel?” he asked. “I hope you like it. Because I feel as though I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“It feels good,” she said huskily. “So full.”

He reached around with one hand, rubbing his fingertips over her sweet spot while he began slowly rocking in and out of her. Each thrust made him see stars, and it was all he could do to maintain the two separate motions. But he wanted to feel her come around his cock. He wanted it more than he’d ever thought he could want anything.

Her movements became more erratic. She started chanting his name, and he had never heard anything sweeter. “Come for me,” he whispered, intensifying the pressure of his fingers as he pounded into her, having lost all abandon.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Oh, Kendrick, Kendrick...”

And then her internal muscles clenched around him, making his vision go black for a moment as he came as well, the feeling so incredible he wondered if perhaps he really had died and gone to heaven.

La petite mort , the French called it, and for the first time, he understood why. The little death. This woman would either be the death of him or his salvation...

She sagged beneath him, and he realized he was probably crushing her. Rolling, he pulled her with him until they were once again spooning side by side. He pulled the blankets around them, tucking her close beside him.

“Are you all right?” he breathed, pressing a sleepy kiss to her temple. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, it didn’t hurt. It was wonderful,” she told him breathlessly. “I never knew...” Lavender trailed off because words failed her. She had no idea how to explain what she was feeling.

She let out a soft sigh as Kendrick’s fingers traced delicate patterns on her skin. She could feel the tension she’d been carrying around with her for so long dissolving with each tender touch, replaced by a warm, tingling sensation that seemed to emanate from the very core of her being.

She had never known that lovemaking could be like this. The feelings Kendrick aroused in her were like nothing she’d ever felt with Geoffrey. His lovemaking had

been perfunctory even in the best of times, although he'd always been gentle. Perhaps he'd been too gentle. He'd never made her feel as though she was something he couldn't live without. And that's what Kendrick had given her.

Looking over her shoulder at him, she found him watching her with such gorgeous intensity, as though he'd never seen anything as beautiful as she was. It was a heady feeling for someone who had never felt valued in her life.

She lay there against him, feeling more connected to him than she'd ever felt with anyone. The warmth of his body pressed along hers was the most comforting thing she'd ever known. But as the silence stretched between them, she suddenly felt awkward. Did he want her to leave now? He hadn't asked her to stay. Perhaps he would rather sleep alone. She had no idea of the etiquette of such things.

She should probably go back to her own bed.

Allowing herself to enjoy his warmth for one more moment, she rolled away and started to get up.

"Don't go," he said softly, catching her hand. "Stay with me tonight."

Relieved, she gladly lay back down beside him, and he pulled her gently into the circle of his arms once again.

"Tonight was amazing," he murmured as she laid her head on his chest. He gently rubbed her back, his touch so tender it brought tears to her eyes. "Maybe the best night of my life. I don't want it to end yet."

"I've never felt like that before," she whispered.

He chuckled, obviously pleased. "I'm glad. I want nothing more than to make you

feel good.”

“Well, you succeeded,” she said quietly, the soothing comfort of his touch on her back and the long day making her drowsy.

As Lavender drifted closer to sleep, she could feel Kendrick’s steady heartbeat beneath her ear, a calming rhythm that matched the rise and fall of his chest with each breath. She had never felt this sense of safety and security.

This must be what love felt like. She had thought she’d known before, but she hadn’t. Not really.

In the soft glow of the flickering candlelight, Lavender turned her head slightly to press a gentle kiss against Kendrick’s chest, feeling the rise of his chest beneath her lips. The intimacy they had shared moments ago lingered in the air, a tangible connection that bound them together in ways words could never fully express. He was hers, and she was his. She felt it to her very core.

She, too, wished the night would never end.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

Lavender awoke slowly, feeling luxuriously warm and comfortable. She hadn't slept that well since Geoffrey had died. It made all the difference in the world to have someone in the bed beside her.

The early morning light filtered through the curtains, painting the room in a soft glow. The events of the previous evening flooded back to her in a rush of emotions and sensations, leaving her breathless with the weight of what had happened between them during the night.

Turning her head slightly, Lavender saw Kendrick still asleep beside her, his features relaxed in repose. His dark hair was tousled from sleep, and the hint of a smile played on his lips as if he were dreaming of something pleasant.

She hoped he was dreaming about her.

With a soft grin tugging at the corners of her own lips, Lavender reached out to gently brush a lock of dark hair away from Kendrick's forehead, marveling at the tenderness and vulnerability she felt for him. The man who had once been so guarded and closed off was now revealed to her in all his complexity and depth.

He stirred beside her, his dark eyes flickered open, and his smile grew wider.

"Good morning, sunshine," he said huskily, lifting his hand to brush a lock of hair tenderly from her face. "Sleep well?"

"Perhaps better than I ever have," she murmured, cuddling up to him even closer.

Kendrick's eyes held a warmth and tenderness that made Lavender's heart flutter with joy and uncertainty. She wanted to tell him everything she was feeling—that she feared that she had fallen helplessly and irrevocably in love with him—but it all seemed so fragile, so ephemeral. She'd told him that she had no expectations of him, but that really wasn't true. She was terrified of all the expectations she had of him. How could any man live up to such hopes and dreams?

"I wish we never had to get out of this bed," Lavender whispered as she gazed into Kendrick's eyes, searching for reassurance and answers.

Kendrick's expression softened even more, his gaze holding a world of unspoken emotions. "So do I," he replied, his voice laced with a vulnerability that took Lavender by surprise. "But our train is leaving in about two hours, and we really need to be on it."

She sighed and stretched, a bit self-conscious to realize that she was still naked. She'd never slept naked in her entire life. But it felt wonderfully decadent to have done so. It had felt glorious to be pressed against him, bare skin to bare skin. If he were truly hers, she would want to be naked in bed with him every night.

If only he were truly mine...

He rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom, and she got a wonderful glimpse of his taut backside. She still couldn't believe how much he'd seemed to appreciate hers. She'd always thought it was too large and soft, but the way he'd practically worshipped her bottom made something deep inside her clench.

She wanted to be on her hands and knees before him again before they even started their day.

Blushing, Lavender quickly pulled the covers up to her chin, feeling a mix of

embarrassment, admiration for Kendrick's physique, and confusion over her own desires.

Until he'd asked her what she wanted last night, she hadn't even known it was all right for her to feel these things. She still couldn't believe that he'd put his mouth against her... there. But it hadn't seemed at all dirty. It had been... glorious.

With a contented sigh, Lavender swung her legs over the side of the bed and stretched, relishing the sensation of her body waking up after a night of deep rest. She was slightly sore in all sorts of places but didn't mind because the memory of how she'd gotten that way made her smile.

As she performed her morning ablutions and donned a traveling gown of a deep, dusky rose, her mind raced.

What did last night mean for them? What had it meant for him? Every word he'd said, every soft touch, had seemed to indicate that perhaps he wouldn't be averse to becoming... what? Her husband?

Once the thought had taken root in her mind, she found it almost impossible to banish.

What would it be like to wake up with him every morning?

When Kendrick emerged from the bathroom, freshly dressed in a tweed traveling suit of dark blue and looking as ruggedly handsome as ever, Lavender couldn't help but steal glances at him as they prepared for the day ahead. The easy camaraderie between them felt both exhilarating and nerve-wracking, as if they were standing on the precipice of something unknown yet undeniably thrilling.

As they packed up their belongings and made their way to catch the morning train,

the ease between them remained. She felt as though they'd been together for years, and she realized she'd never felt this way with Geoffrey. There had always been a stiffness in their interactions. She'd always tried so hard to please him, and he'd always seemed so distracted, faintly irritated by her very presence beside him. She didn't have to try and please Kendrick. He seemed to like her just as she was, and that was a wonderful feeling.

They again hired a porter to take their baggage to the train, then stopped for breakfast at a charming sidewalk cafe.

The quaint cafe bustled with the energy of the early morning crowd, the aroma of freshly baked pastries and rich coffee filling the air. Lavender and Kendrick sat at a small wrought-iron table, the sun casting a warm glow over their surroundings as they sipped their steaming cups of coffee. The bitter brew was much stronger than the tea she was accustomed to, but it seemed appropriate for the occasion. She felt incredibly worldly as she sipped coffee with her lover in a Parisian café.

My lover.

Lavender gazed at Kendrick as he perused the menu, a small smile playing on his lips as he considered his options. He seemed happy this morning, too. Happier than she had ever seen him.

As they placed their orders with the waiter, Lavender's gaze lingered on Kendrick's profile, taking in the rugged contours of his face and the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. A surge of affection welled inside her, a deep-rooted sense of connection that grew stronger with each passing moment.

Kendrick's hand found hers on the table, his touch sending a thrill of warmth through her. Their fingers intertwined naturally as if they had done this a hundred times before. Lavender looked up to meet his gaze, seeing a mixture of tenderness and

something more profound flicker in his eyes.

“These last twenty-four hours have been some of the best I’ve ever spent,” he told her. “Thank you again for coming with me.”

“I feel the same,” she assured him. “And thank you again for asking me.”

He glanced down at his plate. “Once we arrive in Barcelona and hopefully are able to find Miranda, we won’t be able to be... physical with each other on the trip home.”

Why did he feel the need to tell her that? She was fully aware that they wouldn’t be able to engage in wild lovemaking in close proximity to his young daughter. She gave him a tight smile. “I know,” she said, stung, but trying not to read too much into his words. Was he already trying to put some distance between them? Had he not enjoyed last night as much as she had?

All the morning’s happiness and optimism seemed suddenly foolish. Why was she like this? Why did she always care too much?

Despite her attempts to remain stoic, something in her face must have given her away because when she tried to pull her hand away, he held on to it, squeezing tightly. “I didn’t say that right,” he told her, sounding frustrated with himself. “What I was getting at was that we have a whole day before that happens, and I don’t want to waste a single minute of it.”

The tight knot of anxiety melted, and she offered him a real smile this time. “I would like that too.”

He squeezed her hand once more, then let go, and they once again chatted comfortably for the rest of their meal. But a seed of doubt had sprouted within her, and she couldn’t completely banish it.

What would happen between them once they found his daughter? She realized that she would no longer be his entire focus. She didn't mind that. But would he be able to give her any of his attention at all?

When they'd finished eating, they strolled to the train station. Lavender wished they could have spent a little more time here, but of course, that was not the purpose of this trip. She'd managed to get swept away by their lovemaking, but their conversation a while ago had reminded her that none of this was about her.

The train station loomed ahead, a bustling hive of activity with travelers rushing to catch their respective trains. Lavender and Kendrick navigated through the crowd, their fingers intertwined like a lifeline that tethered them together amidst the chaos.

As they approached their platform, Lavender's heart fluttered with excitement and trepidation at the thought that they would soon be in yet an entirely different country. She wondered what Spain would be like, and her sadness at leaving Paris turned into excitement about seeing Barcelona.

After they had procured their tickets and boarded the train, the conductor showed them to their private sleeping compartment.

The small space was cozy yet luxurious, with plush benches that converted into beds, a small table set with fresh flowers, and a large window that offered a sweeping view of the passing countryside. Lavender couldn't help but marvel at the opulence of their accommodations.

Kendrick settled himself across from her, their knees brushing lightly when the train lurched into motion about ten minutes later. The rhythmic sound of the wheels on the tracks filled the compartment, creating a soothing backdrop to their shared silence.

For a while, she just watched as the city passed outside the window, but as the

cityscape gave way to the countryside, she sighed and sank back in her chair. Her jacket was pinching her, and her blouse was itchy. “I wish I was wearing my trousers,” she said with a laugh. “Women’s clothing is so ridiculous.”

He smiled and gestured at the door. “You can get as comfortable as you want. We can always lock the door.”

The possibility of more lovemaking or being more comfortable during their long journey, which wouldn’t end until around this time tomorrow, was so tempting. “I’ve never felt as comfortable around anyone as I do you,” she told him. “I believe that if I were to strip down to my chemise right now and sit here across from you, you wouldn’t bat an eye.”

He gave her a wolfish grin. “I’d like nothing more, sunshine.”

She loved that he’d started calling her that, but was it just a silly endearment or something more?

Holding his gaze, her heart pounding in her chest, she stood and slowly unbuttoned her travel cloak. She placed it on the seat behind her, then discarded her jacket, blouse, and skirt as well, her eyes never leaving Kendrick’s. A shiver ran through her as she saw the hunger and desire reflected in his eyes. Knowing that she could have such an impact on him was a heady feeling.

She still couldn’t believe he actually desired her, that he found her round, soft body pleasing. But she no longer had any doubts that he did.

“Come sit beside me,” he whispered.

She walked toward him slowly, enjoying having his gaze on her in a way she’d never imagined she could. She had been raised to believe that sex was shameful, that a

woman shouldn't enjoy it. But even with Geoffrey, she had, and she'd started to think something was wrong with her, that she was wicked. But what had taken place between her and Kendrick last night had been beautiful. She refused to believe that there was anything wrong in giving and receiving pleasure with someone you cared about.

Gathering all her courage, she straddled him instead of sitting beside him, the soft cotton of her chemise brushing against his trousers as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, their faces just inches apart.

He cupped her face gently in his hands, his fingers tracing the contours of her cheekbones before brushing back a stray lock of hair from her eyes. "I think this is going to be a very interesting trip," he breathed. "Thank God I decided to get the sleeper compartment."

She laughed softly, pressing her lips to his. Last night had been an explosion of passion, and there had been an urgency that neither could deny. But today, they had all the time in the world, and the kiss demonstrated that. He did nothing but kiss her for an achingly long time, and she drowned in the taste and feel of him, in having someone to care for once again.

The doubts she'd had earlier this morning faded away at his tenderness, the way he treated her as though she was made of glass and he didn't want to break her. But eventually, the kisses grew more feverish, and she could feel his hardness pressing against her through his trousers.

He gathered the hem of her chemise and lifted it over her head, then cupped her breast with one hand and slid a finger inside her with the other. The rhythm of the train intensified the experience, and she gasped into his mouth, moving against his hand in an effort to get more friction. How strange that until last night, she'd never even known how good lovemaking could feel, and now she was straining against

him, desperate to know that bliss again.

“I know what you need,” he breathed, removing his hand and fumbling with his trousers.

She made a little mewl of disappointment, feeling incredibly empty, but within moments, he grabbed her hips and lifted her slightly, then pushed his hard length into her, making her cry out with pleasure. “Yes,” she moaned. “Oh, Kendrick, you feel so good.”

He lowered his mouth to her breast, lightly scoring her nipple with his teeth as he showed her how to ride him. She couldn’t believe there was yet another way to do this, but she heartily approved. That spot that gave her so much pleasure rubbed against his pubic bone with each thrust, and it felt incredibly good.

His hands held her hips so tightly, and the light pain of his teeth on her breast seemed to fuel the desire rising within her. She wanted it to continue forever, but that pressure was growing within her, and she knew she wouldn’t last much longer.

Then, the tension burst in an explosion of pleasure even greater than last night. Perhaps because this time she’d been expecting it. She let out a low, keening cry, and he moaned her name and found his release as well, his big body shuddering as he came within her.

She hugged him tightly as the train rocked beneath them, burying her face in the crook of his neck as her breathing slowly returned to normal. She didn’t think she’d ever felt so relaxed in her life.

After a long while, he stood, still holding her in his arms, and managed to make the bench into a narrow bed. He laid her upon it, then stretched out beside her, covering them both with a blanket. “Sleep,” he whispered. “Just let me hold you.”

Warm in his embrace, she slipped off to sleep, dreaming once again that one day, they could be together like this all the time.

Later that evening, they were still cuddled as comfortably as possible in the narrow bed, gloriously naked. Kendrick lazily stroked Lavender's shoulder as they stared out the window at the passing scenery. A rare moment of peaceful serenity settled over him, and he brushed a light kiss upon her brow.

"Are you getting hungry?" he asked. "I could have some dinner brought to us."

Lavender shook her head, snuggling closer to him. "Not yet," she murmured, her voice thick with contentment. "I'm still savoring the memory of your touch."

Kendrick smiled, feeling a swell of pride and affection for the woman in his arms. He knew he didn't deserve her but was determined to prove himself worthy.

As the train continued its journey through the night, the scenery outside their window morphed from rolling hills to rugged mountains blanketed in a soft layer of snow, even though it was nearly summer. The romance of it all made Kendrick realize how long he'd been hiding from reality, living in the worlds he created in his head and the very small sanctuary of his garden and cottage. Why had he let Isabella take so much from him?

Suddenly, the peacefulness of the last few hours dissipated, and the fears about Miranda came crashing back. What was he doing? He knew nothing about being a father. She probably didn't even remember him.

As though she could tell what he was thinking, Lavender pressed back against him and squeezed his hand.

"Kendrick," she whispered, her voice soft and reassuring. "I know you're worried

about what tomorrow will bring, but I'll be there with you, and whatever happens, we'll face it together. You're not alone anymore."

He turned to look into her eyes, seeing the depth of her love and support for him. It was a feeling he had never experienced before—the unwavering loyalty of a true partner. And it filled him with a newfound strength, a determination not to let his fears hold him back any longer.

"You're right," he said, his voice steady now. "We'll face whatever comes together."

She smiled and stretched lazily. "Maybe I am getting hungry. Why don't we get dressed and go down to the dining car?"

He knew she was just trying to distract him from his dark thoughts, but he appreciated it, and it even worked to some extent.

"All right," he agreed, rolling to a sitting position and immediately missing the feel of her in his arms. If given his way, he'd probably shrivel up and die in her arms, too content to move.

As they slipped into their clothes, he couldn't help but marvel at the way she moved. Every motion was graceful, each gesture full of life and energy. She'd mentioned that she was clumsy, but he didn't see it. She had an inner light that illuminated everything around her. She was his sunshine.

In the dining car, they shared a meal of succulent roast beef and crisp vegetables, savoring the flavors as much as the company. Between bites, they shared more stories from their past—tales of childhood adventures and first loves. He was getting to know her in a way he'd never known anybody. He was also letting her get to know him, something he'd never expected he'd do.

The train rocked gently beneath them as it continued its journey, carrying them ever closer to their destination. Kendrick couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation—not just for finding his daughter, but for all the possibilities ahead.

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They reached Barcelona the next afternoon. As they gathered their things, Lavender gave one last longing look around their private train compartment. She was excited for what the day would bring but also reluctant to be leaving the wonderful little cocoon of peace and passion they'd created together.

By tomorrow, they would hopefully have found Miranda. She wanted that for Kendrick more than anything, but she also had no idea how that was going to affect their relationship. At the very least, as he'd pointed out, they wouldn't have the chance to be intimate again on the way home.

She shook herself, ashamed. That was a very small price to pay to have his daughter safely with him once again.

"What are you thinking?" Kendrick asked as they turned to disembark the train.

"I'm a little sad to leave our private little oasis," Lavender admitted, her eyes softening as she glanced at the cozy compartment. "It was like our own little world, just the two of us."

"I enjoyed it as well," he assured her as they stepped off the train and onto solid ground once more. "But I guess all good things must come to an end."

That's exactly what she was afraid of. She didn't want this to end. She didn't want any of it to end. She bit her lip and followed him toward the station exit, trying not to read too much into his words.

Fortunately, her senses were soon awash with new sights, smells, and sounds,

distracting her from her momentary bleak thoughts. The city of Barcelona seemed to welcome them with open arms. The vibrant colors, bustling streets, and sweet aroma of local delicacies were a world apart from the quiet solitude of their train ride.

They checked into a quaint inn, and once again, they got a suite with two bedrooms, as he'd hopefully be returning with Miranda tomorrow. The guest rooms were quaint and comfortable, and the garden in the back was breathtakingly beautiful, with vibrant blossoms as big as dinner plates. Their private water closet had hot and cold running water, so when their baggage arrived, Lavender decided she would take a bath.

"I'm going to bathe and change before we go exploring," Lavender told Kendrick, taking that opportunity to go to her room and close the door, collapsing on the bed. The last three days had passed in a blur, and she was a little bit overwhelmed by it all. It felt nice to be alone for a few moments to let her emotions show. Kendrick had been with her every moment, and as much as she'd loved that, she'd gotten used to being alone and able to say and do whatever she wanted.

Her friends kept asking her why she had any interest in having a man in her life now that they had all gained so much independence. She knew what they were saying, and this moment really encapsulated that, but she wouldn't give up the time she'd spent with Kendrick since leaving Kent for anything. Was it possible to have both? A man she loved and a life where she was more than just a part of his?

She would like to believe that there was. Kendrick was nothing like Geoffrey. He actually listened to her and seemed to value her for who she really was instead of insisting that she become what he wanted her to be.

She sighed and stood up, gathering a fresh gown, underthings, and toiletries. Then she went to the bathroom and started running the hot water. She slowly stripped off the clothes she had worn on the train, smiling a bit when she remembered how daring

she'd been when she'd taken it off for him. With a sigh, she sank into the hot water, pouring a little lavender oil in with her since he had said he loved the scent.

She let the warmth sink into her bones, soothing away the aches and twinges the last few days had brought. As she did so, her worries faded as well.

There was no rush to decide any of this. He hadn't indicated that he wanted to marry her. In fact, he hadn't really mentioned the future at all. Why was she so worked up about an outcome that might never occur? He was still dealing with Isabella's death and the realization that he was finally free.

The last thing she wanted was to make him feel pressured in any way. Besides, for the next few months, she was certain he would have his hands full with rebuilding his relationship with Miranda.

She wet a washcloth and brought it to her face, scrubbing the travel from her skin as she stared at her reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall. She looked happier than she had in a very long time, her cheeks glowing and her eyes sparkling. He was good for her, she decided. No matter what the future held, she wanted to wring as much happiness as she could out of this journey.

She didn't exit the tub until the water cooled, and she took her time getting dressed. She wore a deep purple gown and took extra time with her hair, sweeping it up into a fancy chignon. When she was done, she gave her mirrored reflection the most confident smile she could muster.

Kendrick knocked softly on the door, interrupting her thoughts. "Lavender? Are you almost ready? It will be dark soon."

"Yes, just a minute," she called, loving the hominess of the interaction. She hurriedly finished the last few touches and met him in the sitting room.

His gaze swept her from head to toe, and there was no mistaking the appreciation in his eyes. “You take my breath away,” he said simply.

“Shall we explore?” she ventured, taking in how handsome he was in a fresh shirt and jacket, his dark hair freshly combed.

“Lead the way,” he replied, and there was something new in his tone, a depth that reverberated through her, setting her nerves alight.

They walked side by side through winding streets, their shoulders brushing intermittently, sending sparks of awareness cascading down Lavender’s spine. Kendrick’s hand brushed hers, a caress that lingered just a moment too long, charged with electricity. She caught his gaze, dark and fathomless, and felt as if she were teetering on the brink of an abyss.

“Look!” Kendrick’s voice cut through the thick air, gesturing toward a tree bursting with large orange blooms. “It’s a Royal Poinciana. Gorgeous, isn’t it? I’d love to grow one, but the climate in Kent wouldn’t allow it.”

“It’s magnificent,” she breathed, but she wasn’t looking at the flowers. Her eyes were locked with his, and in them, she saw the reflection of her own yearning. And she knew that yearning was for more than just the physical aspect of their relationship. She thought he had enjoyed the quiet moments when they’d curled up together and whiled away the hours talking just as much as she had.

For a long time, they simply walked around the city, holding hands and pointing out interesting things to each other, but at last, their rumbling stomachs forced them to look for a restaurant.

They found a quaint local cafe, the scent of garlic and olive oil wafting through the air. The walls were adorned with intricate tapestries, and soft lights hung from beams

overhead. As they ate, they chatted about inconsequential things. Lavender made sure to steer the conversation away from Miranda as much as she could, not wanting to dampen the mood or put unnecessary stress on Kendrick.

She knew that he must be very worried about what tomorrow would bring. If he'd brought it up himself, she'd have tried to ease his fears, but she was relieved when he didn't. She couldn't imagine how badly it would destroy him if they'd come all this way just to find out that Genevieve's information had been wrong.

After dinner, they strolled arm in arm back to their inn, stopping briefly in an empty courtyard to share a passionate kiss. She couldn't believe she was kissing a man in a courtyard in Barcelona. Never in her life had she imagined such an adventure. Or that a man would desire her enough to kiss her in public.

"Kendrick..." Lavender breathed, but she didn't know what she was asking for. She trembled when his fingers traced the line of her jaw.

She gasped against his mouth, her hands finding the solid warmth of his chest, then winding into the softness of his hair. He hugged her tightly, and she was shocked to realize that his embrace was starting to feel like home to her, even though they were a world away from everything she'd ever known.

"Let's go back to our hotel," he breathed near her ear. "I need you."

"I need you too," she replied, feeling dizzy with longing.

Somehow, they made it back to the inn, and he led her through the sitting room and into his room, pushing her gently down on the large bed. Holding her gaze, he slowly stripped off his clothes. She propped herself up on her elbows, enjoying the show with wicked delight. His body was so beautiful to her, so rugged and strong from the hard physical work he did in his garden. Most men of the aristocracy were pale and

soft. She didn't think a single other man of her acquaintance was built this way, his body long and lean and hard with muscle. She loved the neat trail of dark hair that dusted the area between his flat male nipples and then narrowed to a thin line that trailed all the way to...

She wasn't even really sure what she should call that part of him. She knew that the technical term was penis from a book of anatomy she'd perused before her marriage, but she didn't like the way that word sounded. She'd heard other dirtier words over the years, but she wanted to know what he called it.

As he kicked out of his trousers, she sat up and lightly ran her fingertips across his hard length, biting her lip. "What do you call this?" she asked him.

He gave her a wry smile though his eyes were already wild with desire. "There are many words for it."

"I know," she murmured, heat rushing to her cheeks. She didn't want him to think she was completely naïve. She had been married for many years, after all. "I just want to know your own word for it."

"If I tell you, will you ask me for it?" he asked, his smile fading and his voice growing rough. To her surprise, she realized that her question had excited him.

She nodded slowly, feeling more daring than she ever had in her life. "Yes, Kendrick. Tell me what you call it, and I'll beg you to put it inside me." She tightened her hand around him, stroking him from base to tip as she spoke.

He moaned and closed his eyes for a moment as though praying for strength. "My cock," he finally managed. "That's the word I like."

"Cock," she whispered, liking the way it sounded, a little dirty, a lot sexy. "Tell me,

my darling, what would you like me to do with your cock?” She couldn’t believe she’d had the courage to ask such a thing, but he’d shown her so much the last few days. She was certain there were things he liked that she’d never even imagined.

“I...” He swallowed thickly. “There’s something I’ve heard of but never tried, and if you don’t want to...”

“Tell me,” she breathed, hoping that it was something she could manage.

Taking her hand, he brought it to his lips and put her index finger into his warm mouth, sucking on it briefly before pulling it out. “Do you remember the way I put my mouth on you that first night?” he asked, his excitement palpable. “I’ve heard that sometimes women will do that to a man.”

When she realized what he was asking, her cheeks flamed even hotter. Surely not. But she looked at his flushed face and knew he wanted it desperately. It seemed shocking, but then she could say that about nearly everything that had passed between them in the past few days.

How could she possibly refuse him after all the pleasure he’d given her?

Taking her hesitation for disgust, he cleared his throat, looking abashed. “I’m sorry,” he told her hoarsely. “I shouldn’t have asked that of you.”

“No,” she hastened to reassure him. “The first night we were together, you asked me what I liked. I didn’t know because I’d never really tried anything. But if you’d like to try this, I will do my best.”

“Lavender,” he breathed, tenderly cupping her cheek. “Don’t do it if you don’t want to.”

“How will I know whether I like it if I don’t try?” She frowned suddenly. “Did you like it when you did it for me?”

“More than anything,” he hastened to assure her. “You tasted like heaven.”

She gave him a weak smile. “Well, I’m sure you will as well.”

He pulled her to her feet and then took a few steps back. “I think it will work best if you get on your knees,” he told her, and she loved the edge in his voice.

Her heart thundering in her chest, she did as he asked, licking her lips as she stared at the hefty girth of his... cock. As she continued to hesitate, he placed one hand on top of her head.

“There’s no wrong way,” he said thickly. “I’ll love anything you do. Just don’t... bite.”

She stifled a laugh at that, but his small joke gave her the courage she needed. Leaning forward, she ran her tongue across the bulbous head, eliciting a deep moan from Kendrick.

He tasted slightly salty but also clean, and she found she didn’t dislike it at all. Remembering what he’d done with her finger, she tried to mimic it, but he was far larger than her finger, and it was more difficult than she’d thought it would be. However, given the sounds he was making, she guessed that he was enjoying her attempts.

Since she couldn’t fit the length of him fully in her mouth, she wrapped her hand around the base of him, stroking him the way she had before, and he seemed to like the combination even more.

“Someday, I want to come in your mouth,” he said, breaking away and pulling her to her feet, then tossing her on the bed and following her down, bunching up her skirts, his chest heaving. “But right now, I just need to be inside your perfect little quim.”

Within moments, he had seated himself deep within her, and she gasped at the fullness. She was somewhat disheartened that he hadn’t let her finish, but the look on his face told her that maybe it had been almost too good for him. She loved that he wanted to ensure she was pleased as well, though she made a mental note to ask her friends what they knew about that act.

But all thoughts of the future quickly evaporated, and all she could think of was this moment and this man, whom she feared she would love for the rest of her life, no matter how he felt about her. The pleasure built and built within her until it finally crested and shattered within her, turning her world upside down.

When she finally came back to herself, Kendrick pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead and once again pulled her into the circle of his arms.

“Thank you,” he breathed.

She snuggled close, burying her face against his broad chest, wishing she didn’t feel as though this was the last time he’d ever hold her this way.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

The next morning, Kendrick woke up with Lavender sprawled across his chest. He stroked his hand down her smooth back, knowing that if things went his way at the orphanage today, he wouldn't be able to be with her like this for the rest of the trip. He sighed softly, trying to keep his panic at bay and enjoy the last calm moment.

The memories of last night played themselves over and over in his mind, making him shift uncomfortably. He couldn't believe the things she'd said, the things she'd done to him. He had never been with anyone who was so adventurous and willing. She was a true partner in every sense of the word.

At last, she began to stir beside him, blinking up at him with those blue eyes that had somehow become the center of his world.

Which made what he had to say all the more difficult. "I think I should go to the orphanage alone today."

A spark of hurt flickered in those expressive eyes, but she quickly masked it. "Oh, of course. I understand."

"Do you?" he asked softly. "I just... It's going to be so difficult to see her after all these years. I think those first moments should be just for her and me. It might be confusing for her if you were there as well."

"Yes," she whispered, and this time, she didn't do as good at hiding her hurt feelings. "I shouldn't be part of that."

She pushed away from him and sat up, pulling the sheet around her, looking as

though she felt exposed and vulnerable. “I just... I’ll wait for you here,” she murmured, her voice barely audible. “I hope...”

She trailed off, then stood up, hurriedly gathered her clothes, and went back across the sitting room to her own room, quietly shutting the door behind her.

He suddenly wished he had just let her come with him. He knew she would make everything better and didn’t know why he’d thought otherwise. He was just so nervous about this first interaction with his daughter. If things didn’t go well, if she wasn’t even there... He would need a few moments alone to process that, and he didn’t want her to see him in such a state.

In any event, now it was too late. Anything he said to try and rectify the situation would just make things worse.

He sighed and got ready for the day, then knocked softly on her bedroom door. “I’m leaving now,” he called softly.

For a minute, he thought she wouldn’t answer, but then the door opened, and she smiled at him, putting on a brave face. He loved her for that.

“Good luck,” she told him. “I hope everything goes well. I will be thinking of the two of you all day.”

He pulled her in his arms and held her for a few minutes, drawing strength. “Thank you,” he murmured. “For everything.” He pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head and then swiftly turned away while he still could.

Finally, he set out on the last leg of a journey that had taken him seven years. The innkeeper had given him rough instructions to the orphanage, though he was certain he would have to ask for further instructions along the way. He was glad that it was

within walking distance. He could use a few moments to stretch his legs and prepare himself for whatever was going to happen.

The city spread before him like a vibrant tapestry with splashes of color that danced under the azure sky. Orange blossoms perfumed the air, mingling with the sizzle of meats from street vendors' carts. Throngs of people bustled about their business, their voices rising and falling in an unfamiliar cadence. Fruit stalls erupted in riots of reds and yellows, and the aroma of freshly baked bread flirted with his senses, a stark contrast to the staid propriety of his English home.

“Discul pe,” he ventured as he approached an old woman selling oranges and squash, his voice rough with disuse of the language, and asked her the way to the orphanage, “¿Dónde está el orfanato?”

The vendor, a woman with lines etched by the sun and years, squinted up at him, her hands never ceasing their work of arranging the day's produce. Her response tumbled forth in rapid Spanish, the words colliding in a cascade that left Kendrick fumbling for comprehension. He caught fragments, enough to give him the general direction, then gestured thank you and pressed a coin into her palm before moving on.

With each attempt to bridge the gulf of language, Kendrick's isolation grew more pronounced. A child ran past, laughter trailing like a kite in the breeze, and Kendrick's heart clenched with memories of the little girl he had once loved so much. So much time lost. Would they ever be able to get that connection back?

As the marketplace gave way to quieter streets, Kendrick reviewed the scant information he had gathered. Left at the florist whose fragrant wares spilled onto the sidewalk, straight past the fountain where pigeons cooed and pecked at scattered crumbs, then a right at the church with its doors open wide, as if inviting all of life's wanderers to enter.

His journey had taken him from the solitude of his study, surrounded by the trappings of success, to this lively canvas of humanity. He couldn't believe he was finally almost there.

At last, Kendrick came upon the orphanage's gravel path. The building loomed before him, its facade pockmarked with the passage of time—crumbling stucco and shutters hanging askew. He imagined thousands of children had been banished to this place over the years, and he hated that Miranda had been one of them.

He paused at the threshold, trying to catch his breath and blink away the sting in his eyes. Finally, he raised a hand to knock but found the door creaking open under his touch, revealing a dimly lit foyer that smelled faintly of wax and wool.

“ Senor ?” A voice cut through his reverie, hesitant but not unkind.

Kendrick turned to the source, his gaze falling upon a woman clad in the drab colors of service, her face etched with lines like a map of cares and woes. She regarded him with the weary skepticism of one who had seen too many strangers pass through these doors bearing hollow promises.

“ Disculpe ,” Kendrick began nervously. “ Estoy buscando a mi hija. Me dijeron que reside aquí.”

I am searching for my daughter. I was told she resides here.

His Spanish, though carefully practiced, fumbled on his tongue, thick with the cadence of his English roots. The woman's gaze did not waver as she took his measure. He wondered what she saw.

“Many children reside here,” she said slowly in English, having obviously pegged him as British immediately. “What is her name?”

“Miranda Wycliffe,” he whispered, glad that she knew English. Though Isabella had tried to teach him Spanish, that had been years ago, and he had never been that good at it. “Her mother’s name was Isabella.”

The mention of names kindled recognition in the woman’s eyes. Yet she crossed her arms, a barrier as formidable as any wrought iron gate.

“Many come claiming kinship,” she said. “What proof do you offer that you are indeed her father?”

Kendrick reached into his coat, handing over his marriage license and Miranda’s baptismal certificate. Hopefully, that would be sufficient. “Isabella left me seven years ago and took Miranda with her,” he told the woman. “I only recently found out that she had died and that Miranda had ended up here.”

The woman’s expression softened, if only slightly. She glanced up at Kendrick, her scrutiny now tinged with a reluctant compassion.

“Wait here,” she instructed, her voice no longer brusque but not yet welcoming. “I will speak with the Mother Superior.”

As she disappeared into the bowels of the orphanage, Kendrick was left alone in the foyer, the weight of years pressing down upon him.

Miranda must be here. The woman hadn’t told him that she wasn’t.

At last, the nun returned and gestured for him to follow her. Their footsteps echoed hauntingly through the narrow orphanage corridors, and her robes whispered against the stone floors. The air was thick with the scent of boiled cabbage and worn linen, a stark reminder of the meager existence within these walls. They passed doorways that stood like silent sentinels, each one giving him a glimpse of the children who had

been abandoned here.

Their eyes, which had probably once been bright with curiosity, were now dimmed by years of uncertainty. He saw rows of small beds, their possessions scant and treasured—a wooden horse... a threadbare doll...

Kendrick's heart constricted as he realized that his precious daughter had been living in such reduced circumstances. For the thousandth time, he wondered why Isabella had allowed this. Had she truly hated him so much? As they moved through the sea of little faces, he searched for the familiar dark eyes that haunted him.

At last, they reached a door at the far end of the corridor, its paint chipped and handle worn from the grasp of countless hands. The nun paused before pushing it open. Inside, the sunlight fought bravely through the dust-laden windows, casting golden beams upon a solitary figure seated on the edge of a bed, her gaze focused on the pages of a tattered book.

"Miranda." The nun's voice broke the hushed atmosphere, and the girl looked up. Her eyes, a reflection of Kendrick's, widened with a flicker of fear, then suspicion.

"Your father has come," the nun announced, stepping aside to reveal Kendrick's towering frame in the doorway.

Kendrick stepped forward, his gaze drinking her in. "Miranda," he said, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper, rich with emotions long suppressed.

The girl—no longer the child he remembered but not yet the woman she was destined to become—rose slowly. A tangled halo of dark curls framed her delicate face, her mother's beauty unmistakable even in the austere setting. He tried to see the child he'd known, but there was so little left of her. Just those bottomless dark eyes.

Kendrick cleared his throat and attempted the few Spanish phrases he had rehearsed on the journey. “ Mi hija ,” he murmured, the words clumsy on his tongue. “ Soy tu padre .”

Miranda reached out, her fingers brushing against the rough stubble of his cheek, then jerked her hand back as though she hadn’t expected him to be real. Her lips parted, but language failed her. The English words from her early childhood were probably muddled and distant.

“ Padre ,” she whispered, a tentative acknowledgment wrapped in uncertainty.

Kendrick pointed to himself, saying “Papa” with a hopeful inflection.

A smile flickered across her face. “ Si, Papa ,” Miranda said, the title foreign yet fitting, as if she was trying on a dress tailored for another lifetime.

“Miranda,” Kendrick began again, his voice stronger now. “I’ve come to take you home.”

A single tear breached Miranda’s long dark lashes, and she took a halting step forward. Kendrick closed the distance, his arms opening in a silent offer of sanctuary. Their embrace was awkward, with the angles and edges of a bond fractured by time, but it held the promise of healing, and for a moment, he thought everything was going to be all right.

But then she pulled away, shaking her head. “No,” she said, a mix of sadness and determination on her lovely face. “I will stay. I will stay with Rafael and Teresa.”

“Rafael and Teresa?” He glanced at the nun. “I don’t understand.”

“Rafael and Teresa are her younger brother and sister,” the nun supplied in halting

English.

“Brother and sister?” He knew he was parroting her words, but he couldn’t help himself. Isabella had more children after she left him? While she was still married to him? He forced down his anger, his mind racing as he tried to understand what this meant for him. He turned back to Miranda. “You have a brother and sister. You don’t want to leave them. Of course, you don’t.”

She nodded, relief flooding her features. “They go, too?”

Those three words shook him to the core. Was this the cost of having his daughter back in his life? Must he welcome Isabella’s by-blows as well? It seemed a cruel joke, as though Isabella was having one last laugh at his expense from the grave.

He looked back toward the nun. “Is that even possible?” he asked, hoping she might take the decision away from him.

She bit her lip. “If you’d like to adopt them, it could be arranged.”

Kendrick’s mind whirled with this sudden turn of events. He couldn’t imagine taking not only his daughter but her half-siblings as well. He wasn’t quite sure how he’d raise one child, let alone three. The logistics of it all were mind-boggling. Every part of him wanted to say no, but Miranda had lost enough already. He couldn’t ask her to leave them behind. These children were a part of Miranda, her own flesh and blood if not his, and he couldn’t turn away from them.

“Yes,” Kendrick said, his voice steady despite the storm of emotions raging inside him. “I’ll take Rafael and Teresa home with us.”

Relief flooded Miranda’s face, but also suspicion. She obviously hadn’t expected him to agree to her demand and didn’t trust that he had.

The nun nodded in approval, her expression softening. “I will go and speak to Mother Superior. I think she will agree, and then we will make the necessary arrangements for their adoption.”

“Can I meet them?” he asked, realizing that everything was moving far too quickly. He wished again that he had brought Lavender with him today. She would know what to do. He’d been such a fool to believe he could do this without her.

The nun gave a gentle smile and nodded. “Of course. They are in the common area with the other children. I will bring them here.”

As she left to retrieve Rafael and Teresa, Kendrick turned his attention back to Miranda. She stood there, a mix of emotions playing across her face—relief, apprehension, hope... but also anger. He felt a surge of protectiveness toward her, a fierce determination to make up for the lost years, to be the father he should have been all along.

“I didn’t know your mother had passed away,” he told her in an attempt to explain his long absence, hoping she still understood enough English to know what he was saying. “No one ever informed me. She hid you away from me, Miranda. I have been looking for you all these years.”

She dropped her gaze, her shoulders stiffening, and he realized that he should not have started by criticizing her mother, who was not only dead but the only parent she probably remembered.

“I want to give you a good life,” he continued. “I have a lovely house by the sea.”

Her gaze flicked up to him, but again, she was silent. He didn’t know if it was because she couldn’t find the English words or because she had nothing to say.

When the nun returned with Rafael and Teresa, Kendrick's heart clenched at the sight of the two young children. Rafael had dark, unruly hair like Miranda and shared her piercing gaze. He looked as though he was about the same age Miranda had been the last time he saw her. Isabella must have gotten pregnant with him mere months after she left Kendrick. Teresa was adorable, perhaps four, with light brown hair and freckles sprinkled across her nose. Her green eyes were wide with curiosity and a hint of wariness. The difference in their appearances led him to believe that they had two different fathers, and his fury toward Isabella, already immense, grew even more.

All those years, he had been faithful...

"Rafael, Teresa," Miranda called out softly. The two children looked up and hesitated before making their way over to where Miranda stood. She bent down and whispered to them in rapid-fire Spanish. The smaller children looked at him with wide eyes, fear and fascination flickering over their faces.

"Ask them if they want to come live with me," he said, feeling as though the entire situation was spiraling out of control. But he felt they should have some say in their future as well. He couldn't very well take them out of here kicking and screaming.

The conversation continued so fast that his limited grasp of Spanish couldn't keep up. Finally, Miranda gave him a weak smile. "Yes, Papa. We will go with you to England."

Her English was only slightly accented, and he was relieved that she must have understood him. She must have retained quite a bit.

Teresa ran over to him and wrapped her arms around his legs. She was absolutely adorable, and his heart melted. "Gracias."

The boy came toward him as well, more cautious, a world of broken promises

reflected in his dark eyes as he took Kendrick's measure. "Thank you, sir." His English was surprisingly good as well, making Kendrick wonder if Isabella had spoken it with her children. She had been born in England, though her parents were Spanish, so it had been her native tongue.

He patted Teresa's shiny hair gently, meeting the little boy's hopeful eyes. "You're very welcome. Shall we get this adoption started?"

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

Lavender waited all afternoon for Kendrick to return with Miranda, but as the evening shadows lengthened, she grew increasingly worried. It reminded her of the night Geoffrey had died, this feeling that something had gone horribly wrong, and her helplessness to figure out what. She tried reading in the inn's sunny courtyard, then pulled out her sketchbook and sketched some of the things she had seen when they'd walked through the city last night in an attempt to commit them to memory. At last, she decided to go and get herself something to eat.

When Lavender returned to the inn after dinner, the sinking feeling in her chest had only deepened. Her steps were heavy as she climbed the stairs to their suite, the worry gnawing at her insides.

Pushing open the door, Lavender's heart sank. The room was empty, devoid of Kendrick or any sign of Miranda's return. Panic gripped her, threatening to choke off her breath as she scanned the room for any clue, any indication of what might be taking so long.

Her mind raced with possibilities, each one more terrifying than the last. Had something gone wrong at the orphanage? Had Miranda refused to leave with Kendrick? Had she not been there at all? Was Kendrick in trouble? Should she go and look for him?

Just as her anxiety had built to a fever pitch, the door opened, and Kendrick strode in with not one but three children! She stared at him momentarily, reading the stress on his face, then rushed over to hug him. "I was so worried," she told him. "What happened?"

He cleared his throat and pulled away. “Miranda has a brother and a sister.” He gestured to the other children. “Teresa and Rafael. She couldn’t leave without them, so... I adopted them. That’s what took so long.”

Shock burned through her for a moment, but then she turned a bright smile on the children. “Of course, she couldn’t!”

The older girl, who must be Miranda, hung back near the door, giving Lavender a suspicious look, though the younger children gave her tentative smiles.

Miranda had a hint of Kendrick around her eyes, but it was easy to see that her mother had been a great beauty. Her features were delicate, her dark hair cascading in waves down her back, her gaze guarded and uncertain. Lavender could sense the girl’s wariness, the weight of years spent in an orphanage, away from any semblance of family. The girl had probably done all she could to keep her small family together, but it couldn’t have been easy. Her heart ached for Miranda and the two younger children, who stared at her with curiosity and trepidation.

Kendrick stood beside her, his shoulder brushing hers as if seeking comfort in her presence. She felt a surge of warmth at the contact, a silent reassurance passing between them in this exceedingly difficult moment.

“Lavender,” Kendrick told her under his breath, looking completely overwhelmed, “I hope you don’t mind that I’ve brought them here. It was... unexpected. I didn’t know what to do.”

She turned to him, seeing the turmoil in his eyes and the weight of this sudden responsibility pressing down on him. He seemed lost, uncertain, and... angry.

“It’s fine,” she murmured, wondering why he was worried about her feelings. He was the one who would now be the father to three children, two of which were not even

his. How hard it must have been for him to realize that Isabella had given birth to more children while she was still technically his wife. “How are you?”

He gave her a shell-shocked look and shook his head.

Lavender knelt to be at eye level with the younger girl and boy. “Hola , Teresa, Rafael,” she said warmly, wanting to put them at ease. “I’m Lavender. It’s lovely to meet you both.”

Teresa’s eyes widened in surprise, but Rafael stepped forward, his curiosity getting the best of him. “? Hablas espanol? ” he asked tentatively.

Lavender smiled. “ Un poquito ,” she replied softly, holding up her forefinger and thumb, causing the children to exchange glances before breaking into small smiles.

“We speak a little English,” Rafael said. “Our Mama taught us.”

“Who is this woman?” Miranda suddenly asked Kendrick, her voice shrill. “Is she why you left my mother? You left us so you could be with her ?”

Dismay swept through Lavender at the obvious anger in the girl’s voice.

“What?” Kendrick gazed down at his daughter with sad eyes. “No! I didn’t leave your mother. She left me. She took you, and she left.” He glanced helplessly at Lavender. “Lavender is just a friend. She lives next door. She just came with me to help me take care of you on the journey home.”

Lavender felt a surge of sadness at his easy dismissal of their relationship. Just a friend? Was that really all she was to him? She had thought she was so much more. Still, she knew he had to tread carefully where the girl was concerned, especially given the anger she’d just displayed. Lavender wondered if that had been her

mother's excuse for leaving Kendrick. Had she told her daughter that he had been unfaithful? No wonder she was looking at Lavender with such suspicion.

As the tension hung heavily in the room, Lavender glanced back at Kendrick, seeing the conflict in his eyes. She could sense the struggle within him, torn between his past with Miranda's mother and his growing feelings for Lavender. She wasn't certain how to help him, but at the very least, she didn't want to make matters worse.

"I'm here to help," Lavender interjected gently, meeting Miranda's gaze with a reassuring smile. "I have only known your father for a few months, so I can assure you I wasn't the reason your mother left him. I came with him because he thought you might want a woman with you on the trip while you and he get to know each other again."

Miranda looked away as she considered Lavender's words. Rafael and Teresa, meanwhile, seemed to be taking in their new surroundings with wide-eyed wonder, their fear gradually giving way to curiosity as they drifted around the suite of rooms. Teresa probably didn't even remember her mother since she couldn't have been much more than a baby when Isabella died.

Kendrick nodded gratefully at Lavender, silently acknowledging her support in this delicate moment. He turned back to Miranda, his expression earnest. "I know this is all a lot to take in. If you have any questions, please let me try to answer them."

She frowned and shook her head, finally venturing farther into the room. The suite was extravagantly furnished, and Lavender wondered what her living conditions had been like previously. Not very good, she imagined, either with her mother or at the orphanage. She was probably reeling at her change in circumstances, but she was also rightfully terrified and conflicted about whether to believe her mother's version of events or her father's.

“I thought Rafael and I could share my room tonight,” Kendrick said softly to Lavender when Miranda remained silent. “Perhaps you can share yours with the girls?”

He looked so overwhelmed. She wanted nothing more than to hug him and tell him that it would be all right, that he had done the right thing, but Miranda was still watching them out of the corner of her eye, and she didn’t want to give the girl any more reason to be suspicious of her. She was obviously struggling with some jealousy now that she had actually gotten her father back.

Lavender could relate to that. She remembered how suspicious and angry she’d been when her father had first brought home her stepmother. Of course, Lydia had been perfectly awful, so she’d been right to fear her. She couldn’t stand the woman to this day.

What a sobering thought. Was it possible that Miranda would never like her, no matter how hard she tried to win her over?

“That sounds perfect,” Lavender assured him. She looked at the one beat-up bag he’d set down by the door. “Is that their bag?” Her heart broke at the thought that that was all they owned between the three of them.

He nodded, remaining carefully neutral. “Yes. I thought perhaps we might spend a day in Paris on our way back and do some shopping. If that’s all right with you? Unless you’re in a rush to get home.”

“I would love to help you shop for them,” she said quickly. “I’m in no rush at all.”

“I don’t even know what to get,” he muttered beneath his breath for her ears alone. “I don’t know what they need.”

“It’s all right,” she said softly. “I don’t either, but we’ll figure it out.”

Kendrick gave her a grateful smile before turning to the children. “Teresa, Rafael,” he called, his voice gentle. “Would you like to pick out some new things for yourselves once we reach Paris?”

Their eyes lit up at the mention of shopping, a glimmer of excitement replacing the uncertainty clouding their expressions. Teresa nodded eagerly, her freckled face breaking into a shy smile, while Rafael bounced on his heels, unable to contain his enthusiasm. Lavender wondered if they’d ever had anything new in their entire lives.

Miranda remained silent, her arms crossed defensively over her chest as she observed the interaction. Lavender understood the girl’s wariness, the deep-seated fear and mistrust ingrained in her from years of instability and disappointment. Earning Miranda’s trust would not be easy, but she was determined to show her they were here to help, not harm.

For the next hour or so, Lavender helped the children settle into their new surroundings. She went down to the lobby and arranged for some sandwiches to be brought up after realizing the children and Kendrick hadn’t yet had any dinner. Then she supervised them with washing up and changing into their threadbare nightclothes.

Rafael and Teresa, though initially reserved, warmed up to her quickly, their curiosity piqued when she showered them with laughter and kindness. Lavender felt a sense of fulfillment as she told Teresa and Rafael a bedtime story in a mix of Spanish and English that left them all giggling before tucking them into their respective beds.

Meanwhile, Miranda remained distant, her walls still firmly in place. Lavender understood the girl’s wariness, empathizing with the fear of trusting strangers after a lifetime of uncertainty. She’d been very much like this after her mother’s death. Her father hadn’t been able to look at her because she reminded him so much of the

woman he'd loved, and she'd been abandoned with the servants until he'd brought home Lydia. She made it a point to give Miranda space while silently promising to show her through actions rather than words that she could be trusted.

Kendrick hesitated at the door of Lavender's room. His gaze met hers, and she wondered if he was thinking about the night of passion they'd enjoyed just last night. Would they ever be together like that again? Suddenly, the obstacles seemed insurmountable.

"Goodnight, girls," he said softly, his gaze shifting to Miranda. "I hope you all sleep well."

"Goodnight, Kendrick," Lavender told him, a lump in her throat. She'd like nothing more than to go to him and hold him tight, assure him everything would be all right, and that she understood that he'd had no choice but to take all three children. As far as she was concerned, this was a wonderful development. But even now, she could feel Miranda's angry gaze. She had refused to get into the bed, choosing instead to take a blanket and a pillow to the padded window seat.

Neither of the girls replied to Kendrick, though she knew Teresa was just following her sister's lead. She could see the hurt in his dark eyes before he turned away, shutting the door behind him.

With a deep sigh, Lavender went behind the screen in the corner and changed into her own night clothes, then crawled into the big, soft bed beside Teresa. To her surprise, Teresa snuggled up close, staring at her with her big green eyes. "Gracias," she said sleepily, placing her little hand gently on Lavender's hair, seeming to like the color and texture. "So... bonita. "

Tears stung Lavender's eyes as she wrapped her arm around the little girl and held her close. This was all she'd ever wanted, to have a child of her own to love. And

even though Teresa was not hers, the thought that she might be able to be part of her life warmed her heart. Deciding to just enjoy the moment while it lasted, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning was a whirlwind of activity as they prepared to board the train to Paris. Kendrick found himself juggling between helping the children pack their few belongings, soothing Rafael's nerves about the journey, and trying to engage Miranda in conversation.

Unfortunately, Miranda remained aloof, her guarded demeanor a stark contrast to Teresa and Rafael's growing warmth and excitement. Kendrick couldn't blame her for her wariness; after all, she had been through so much upheaval and uncertainty in her young life. But he was determined to break through Miranda's defenses, to show her that he was here to offer stability and care. Now that he'd found her again, he had no intention of ever leaving her alone again.

However, Kendrick felt weighed down by the responsibility of caring for these children. Even his daughter was a stranger to him. He wanted to talk about it all with Lavender but was beginning to believe he'd never have any time alone with her again. Every time he turned around, one of the children was right beside him, needing his attention. He knew this was what it was supposed to be like but couldn't help wishing he'd been able to ease his way into this instead of being thrust in headfirst.

The train ride to Paris was a mix of excitement and apprehension. He'd once again gotten them a private compartment, but what had been such a lovely oasis when it was just him and Lavender seemed full to bursting with the addition of the children. Kendrick shared the bench on one side of the car with Rafael while Lavender and the girls sat across from them.

Lavender and Miranda seemed lost in their thoughts, staring out the window and saying very little during the first few hours of the trip.

Kendrick found himself more than occupied by Rafael and Teresa. They were full of questions, and he pointed out the passing scenery and shared snippets of stories to keep them entertained.

Their English was better than he'd expected, though they stumbled over some words. When pressed, Miranda admitted that Isabella had generally spoken English at home, but they'd been at the orphanage for over two years, a big portion of Teresa's life. Miranda said she still talked to them in English when she didn't want anyone around them to understand what she was saying, so they managed to keep some of the skills alive. He was relieved that they didn't have a language barrier to deal with on top of everything else.

The rhythm of the train clacking against the tracks provided a soothing backdrop to the journey, eventually lulling Rafael and Teresa to sleep. Rafael was sprawled across the bench beside him, and Lavender had made a little bed for Teresa on the floor.

After a few hours, Kendrick felt like he was crawling out of his skin. "Can you keep an eye on the children for a few minutes?" he asked Lavender. "I'm going to go down to the dining car and arrange for some food for all of us."

"Of course," she said softly, and he wondered if she realized how much panic was welling up inside him. Did she think poorly of him for how badly he was handling all of this? He hoped not, for he could not bear to disappoint her too.

Kendrick made his way through the narrow aisles of the train, the rhythmic motion of the carriage swaying gently as he walked. He tried to push away the gnawing anxiety that had settled in his chest since they had left Barcelona. Unfortunately, the weight of his newfound responsibilities felt heavier with each passing mile. He'd counted on one nearly grown child, not three, the youngest of which was only four.

Entering the dining car, Kendrick found a moment of respite in the bustling activity

around him. The clinking of glasses, the murmur of conversations, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee enveloped him, offering a temporary distraction from his worries.

He approached the counter, where a middle-aged steward stood with a friendly smile. “Good morning, sir. How can I assist you today?”

Kendrick cleared his throat, his usual confidence faltering in the unfamiliar surroundings. “I need to order food for my family.” He stumbled over the word, then cleared his throat. “Various pastries, fruits, and some sandwiches would be appreciated.”

The steward nodded understandingly and began assembling a selection of items while Kendrick waited, his mind drifting back to the compartment where Lavender and the children were. He couldn’t shake off the feeling of being an imposter in this caretaker role, especially in Miranda’s eyes.

The train lurched suddenly, causing Kendrick to reach out and steady himself against the counter. His heart raced as he thought of the children in the private car, hoping they were safe and unharmed by the jarring movement.

As the steward handed him a tray laden with food, Kendrick thanked him and quickly made his way back to their compartment. Upon his return, he found Lavender sitting by the window, gently comforting Teresa, who had woken up from her nap and was feeling disoriented.

“Is everything alright?” Lavender asked as she noticed the concern etched on Kendrick’s face.

Kendrick nodded, setting the tray down on the small table. “Just a minor bump in our journey. I brought some food for everyone.”

The aroma of fresh pastries and fruit filled the compartment, drawing Rafael out of his slumber as well. Soon, all five of them were gathered around the table, sharing a simple meal in the cozy confines of the train.

Lavender's laughter filled the air, a sound so warm and genuine that it momentarily eased Kendrick's anxieties. He watched her with admiration and longing, struck by how effortlessly she had connected with the smaller children in a way he struggled to emulate. They needed her, he realized. They desperately needed a mother, and he remembered the longing in Lavender's voice when she'd told him about her difficulty conceiving. Perhaps she needed them as well.

If only Miranda hadn't taken such an instant dislike to her.

Rafael and Teresa chattered away, their voices blending with Lavender's melodic tone as she told them all about Seacrest and England in general, which was all very foreign to them. But they seemed so excited to see it. He imagined them there momentarily, chasing Daisy through the garden, and it suddenly seemed very right and real.

Miranda sat apart from the group, her expression guarded. He wondered how many times Isabella had disappointed her. He couldn't imagine what her life had been like, moving from place to place as Isabella jumped from one man to the next. And through it all, she'd believed that her own father didn't want her, that he'd left them for another woman, which couldn't be farther from the truth. How could he ever overcome so much trauma and sadness?

Leaving the younger children to their conversation with Lavender, he crossed the space to sit beside his daughter.

"How are you doing?" he asked softly.

Miranda's eyes flicked up to meet Kendrick's, and for a moment, he saw the wariness and hurt reflected in those deep brown depths. She didn't answer immediately, her silence stretching between them like an unspoken barrier.

Finally, she spoke, her voice edged with restraint. "I'm fine, thank you."

Kendrick could sense the walls Miranda had built around her, the layers of protection forged through years of abandonment and disappointment. He understood it very well since he'd done the same thing when he'd lost her and Isabella. He longed to break through those defenses, to show her the care and love she had been denied for so long.

"I know this journey must be overwhelming for you," Kendrick began, his voice gentle yet tinged with regret. "I want you to know that I am here for you now, Miranda. I may not have been there before, but I am committed to being the father you deserve."

Miranda's expression softened slightly, a glimmer of vulnerability shining through her guarded facade. She looked away, her gaze drifting toward Lavender. "I wish she wasn't here. Why does she have to be here? She doesn't belong with us. She's not part of our family."

"Why do you dislike her so?" he asked softly. "She's been nothing but good to you all. I don't understand."

The girl flushed. "I just don't know why you had to bring her."

Was that jealousy that flashed in her dark eyes? Was she worried that he might love Lavender more than he loved her?

Dear god. Was she going to insist that he choose between them?

Kendrick's heart ached at Miranda's words, the raw honesty cutting through the tension in the air. He reached out tentatively, placing a hand on Miranda's shoulder in a gesture of comfort. "Miranda, Lavender is here to help me. She's a very good friend to me, and I know she already cares deeply for all three of you."

Miranda shrugged his hand off, her eyes flashing with defiance. "I don't need her help. I've taken care of Rafael and Teresa all this time."

Kendrick felt a pang of guilt at Miranda's words, realizing how much burden she had carried on her young shoulders. "I know you've been strong for your siblings, Miranda, but you shouldn't have to bear that weight alone. Let us take care of you, too."

Silence settled between them, heavy with unspoken emotions and past wounds that refused to heal. Kendrick didn't know how to bridge this chasm between them. He didn't know his own daughter well enough to know what to say to calm her fears. He was the cause of most of them, after all.

Just then, Lavender approached them, looking between them with concern. He wondered how much of his conversation with Miranda she'd overheard. He hoped she hadn't heard any of it. "Is everything all right?"

Miranda turned and looked out the window, refusing to answer.

"We're fine," he answered tightly.

Lavender squeezed his shoulder, and he drew a surprising amount of comfort from the small gesture of comfort. She always seemed to know exactly how to soothe him.

"I'm going to get the children ready for bed," she said softly.

“Thank you,” he replied.

She nodded, her eyes full of sympathy. Her gaze flickered to Miranda, but she didn’t say anymore.

He sighed and looked back over at his daughter. “You’re old enough to decide when you’re ready to go to sleep, but we have a big day once we arrive in Paris, so keep that in mind.”

She nodded but still didn’t look at him. He supposed he had to give her some space. He just hoped that, eventually, she’d grow to trust him and know that she had nothing to fear from Lavender.

Because if she didn’t... He couldn’t even put the rest of that thought into words.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

When Lavender, Kendrick, and the children disembarked from the train the next day, they were more than ready to get off. The day and a half of travel in the cramped space had been challenging for them all.

Lavender held Teresa's hand tightly as the little girl looked around her in awe.

The bustling platform of the Paris train station greeted them with a cacophony of sounds and a kaleidoscope of colors. Teresa's eyes widened at the sights, her infectious excitement spreading to Rafael, who clung to her other hand, taking in the station's grandeur.

Kendrick stood close by, his gaze sweeping over the throngs of people moving hurriedly around them. She sensed he was watching for any sign of trouble, and his protectiveness warmed her. He might not realize it—in fact, she was certain he didn't—but he was already doing a wonderful job as a father to these three children.

Miranda walked a few steps ahead, her posture tense and wary, as if she was bracing herself for any potential threats as well. Lavender couldn't help but feel a pang of sorrow at the way she carried herself, burdened by a wariness that should never have been hers to bear.

"We'll get some rooms at a hotel and then freshen up a bit before we go shopping," Kendrick announced, having already arranged for their baggage to be taken to the hotel they had stayed at a few days ago.

"Yes," Lavender said enthusiastically. "You all need new clothes, toys, books—"

“We don’t need anything,” Miranda said fiercely.

Kendrick paused, meeting Miranda’s defiant gaze. She was prideful and determined to prove she was self-sufficient and didn’t need anyone’s charity. In that way, she reminded Lavender so much of Kendrick. But vulnerability also lurked beneath the surface, the fear of depending on others and being let down once more.

“I understand you want to take care of your siblings, Miranda,” Kendrick began, obviously choosing his words carefully. “But it’s important for all of you to have proper clothes and things to make you feel comfortable. Let me do this for you all of you, please.”

Miranda’s expression softened slightly, a flicker of uncertainty passing across her features. She glanced at Lavender, who offered her a reassuring smile. She immediately jerked her gaze away, seeming angry at herself for having looked in her direction.

Lavender’s heart sank. It was starting to seem as though the girl was never going to give her a chance to be her friend.

“We’ll make sure it’s just a fun outing, Miranda. You don’t have to worry about anything,” Kendrick assured her, trying so hard to get through to her, to make her realize he was going to take care of her.

After a moment of contemplation, Miranda nodded reluctantly. “Teresa and Rafael do need new clothes.”

“Of course they do,” he said, obviously not wanting to push the idea of her getting anything until he must. “I know you’ve done the best you could, Miranda. But you don’t have to do it by yourself anymore.”

She blinked rapidly as if holding back a flood of tears, then whirled around and started marching toward the exit again, not wanting to show any sign of weakness. Lavender and Kendrick shared a pained look, and it was all Lavender could do not to chase after Miranda, pull the girl into her arms, and smother her with love. Unfortunately, she knew that would not be appreciated. In fact, that seemed to be the last thing she wanted.

“It’s going to be hard to get her to accept anything from me,” Kendrick muttered to Lavender.

“I don’t think we should push her,” Lavender said just as quietly. “It might take a few weeks before she’s ready to let you in.”

“If not longer,” Kendrick said with a sigh, trailing after his daughter with a look of pure longing on his face.

Lavender and the other children followed him, and soon they arrived at the hotel, where they all bathed the travel off them. Then they got dressed in the nicest clothes they had, which wasn’t saying much for the children. But at least they were clean.

After lunch in a café near the hotel, they were ready to go shopping.

As they made their way through the bustling streets of Paris, Lavender glanced over at Kendrick, noticing the way his eyes crinkled at the corners as he observed their surroundings. There was a hint of a smile on his lips, a rare sight that warmed her heart. She wondered if he was thinking of the night they had gone exploring, when they’d kissed on a bench in the moonlight. But perhaps he was just happy to show the children something they’d never seen before. Either way, for the moment at least, he seemed more relaxed than he’d been since he’d gone to the orphanage.

Rafael and Teresa skipped along beside her, their excitement palpable as they pointed

out different sights and sounds to each other in their strange mixture of English and Spanish. They were especially awed by the Eiffel Tower. Lavender felt a surge of affection for the children, grateful for this opportunity to show them a world beyond their previous confines as well.

Miranda walked a few steps behind them, her gaze guarded but curious. Lavender could sense the wariness in her posture, but perhaps the walls she had built around herself were slowly softening. Lavender knew winning Miranda's trust would be a slow and delicate process, but surely, it was possible. She had to believe it was possible because otherwise...

Otherwise, she might never have the chance to be a part of Kendrick's family.

At last, they reached a small children's boutique, its windows displaying an array of colorful premade garments and toys. Lavender could see the sparkle in Teresa and Rafael's eyes as they pressed their faces against the glass, marveling at the beautiful dresses, small suits, and intricate toys on display. Miranda lingered a few steps behind, her arms folded defensively across her chest.

Taking a deep breath, Lavender turned to Miranda. "Would you like to go in here and help me pick some things for Teresa and Rafael?"

Miranda hesitated, her gaze flickering between Lavender and the shop window. Finally, she nodded, albeit reluctantly. "Yes," she said quietly.

As they entered the store, a bell tinkled above the door, announcing their arrival. The shop was filled with the scent of roses, mingling with the soft rustle of fabric as customers browsed the shelves. A shopgirl came over to speak with Kendrick, and Lavender led Teresa and Rafael toward the back, where colorful clothes and toys were displayed.

Miranda trailed behind them, scanning the shop warily as if expecting trouble to arise at any moment. Lavender could sense the tension in her, the conflict between her desire to protect her siblings and her reluctance to accept help from others.

After having satisfied the shopgirl that despite the children's threadbare appearance, he had the funds to be shopping here, Kendrick moved closer to Miranda, his presence a silent reassurance beside her. "You don't have to feel obligated to get anything for yourself, Miranda. But surely you want Teresa and Rafael to have some nice things."

Miranda's gaze softened slightly as she glanced at Kendrick, a flicker of gratitude in her eyes. "Thank you," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "They haven't had anything new in ages." She obviously hadn't either, but she seemed only to think of her siblings.

Lavender knelt next to Teresa and Rafael, who were already chattering excitedly about the toys and clothes they liked. She picked up a soft blue dress with delicate lace trim, holding it out for Teresa to see. "How about this one, Teresa? Do you like it?"

Teresa's eyes widened with delight as she reached out to touch the dress, her face breaking into a wide smile. "It is so..." Her face scrunched up as she obviously tried to find the English words. "So pretty, Lavender! May I try it on?"

Lavender returned her smile warmly. "Of course, let's see if it fits." She glanced up at Miranda, who was watching them, her expression softening at Teresa's excitement. "Miranda, would you mind helping me look for something for Rafael? We can divide and conquer."

Miranda hesitated for a moment before nodding. "I will," she agreed softly, stepping closer to Lavender to join the search.

As they sifted through the racks of children's clothing, Lavender could feel Miranda's guarded demeanor slowly melting. With each small interaction—a shared smile over a cute pair of trousers, a quiet discussion about color preferences—Lavender could see Miranda opening up, allowing herself to help choose clothes for her siblings.

Meanwhile, Kendrick stood back, observing the scene, looking decidedly uncomfortable. She knew he was feeling overwhelmed by all of this, and he obviously had no idea what the children needed. Neither did she, really. But she did her best to help each of the children get a half dozen or so outfits, the necessary underwear, and several toys for the younger children. It wasn't easy to figure out what Miranda liked, but eventually, even she settled on some things for herself, including a few books, which were the only things that had tempted her enough that she'd actually shown some interest in them. Kendrick had noticed and softly asked if she'd like them, and she'd shyly nodded.

Kendrick seemed to have no problem paying what Lavender considered a rather outrageous bill, and she wondered how deep his pockets ran.

Finally, they all headed back to the hotel, where they ordered dinner to be brought up. The younger children were worn out from excitement but still managed to find the energy to play with their new toys for a while before falling into an exhausted sleep. Miranda stayed up reading for a while. Lavender was pleased to discover that she was a reader. Perhaps she could take her to the bookshop back home.

Unfortunately, she once again had no chance to speak to Kendrick. The distance that seemed to be growing between them terrified her. She was so happy that he'd gotten Miranda back, but she'd never thought Miranda would take such an instant dislike to her and had no idea what to do about it.

As she drifted off to sleep, Teresa's warm little body once again snuggled up tight

against her, she prayed there would still be a place for her in this small family once they arrived home tomorrow.

The final leg of the journey went smoothly. They boarded the train to Calais early in the morning and were on the ferry back toward England by noon. The children were all wearing their new clothing, and Lavender thought they all seemed to be carrying themselves differently. She hoped they would finally understand that they didn't need to worry about the future anymore.

When they reached Dover, they hired a comfortable carriage, though it wasn't nearly as nice as the duchess's had been. The children sat on the forward-facing seat, and Lavender and Kendrick shared the rear-facing one. She could feel his heat along her side and wanted nothing more than to lean her head on his broad shoulder. Instead, she sat stiffly beside him, very aware of Miranda's disapproving gaze.

As the carriage made its way toward Seacrest, Lavender couldn't shake off the unease within her. The comfortable silence that used to exist between her and Kendrick now felt heavy with unspoken words and unresolved tension. She stole glances at him whenever she could, noticing the furrow in his brow and the distant look in his eyes as they grew closer to their destination.

Miranda's presence had created a rift between them that seemed insurmountable. Lavender couldn't help but worry about what it meant for their growing friendship, for the fragile, beautiful love affair they'd begun. Would this newfound distance push them apart, erasing all the progress they'd made during the first half of the journey?

She couldn't help but once again compare herself to Lydia. The last thing she wanted was to become the wicked stepmother who had stolen Miranda's father away. But I'm nothing like Lydia! She wanted nothing more than to shower the girl with love and affection. But Miranda didn't know that. How could she? She had every reason to be suspicious and to want all her father's love for herself.

Miranda seemed lost in her thoughts as well, gazing out of the carriage window with a contemplative expression. She clutched one of the books Kendrick had purchased for her yesterday as though it were a lifeline. Lavender couldn't imagine how frightened she must be. Even if the orphanage hadn't been the best place, it had at least been familiar. Now, she was in an entirely new country, on her way to a home she'd never seen with a father she probably hardly remembered.

The carriage rolled on, the sound of hooves against the gravel road a steady rhythm in the background. Lavender glanced out the window, watching the countryside pass by in a blur of green fields and blue skies. The landscape was so familiar it was hard to believe she'd seen Paris and Barcelona. She had the strange feeling that it had all been a fever dream, and she'd awake in her own bed and find out that none of it had actually happened.

Perhaps that would be preferable to facing the reality that she'd experienced the best few days of her life, but now it was over.

Suddenly, Kendrick cleared his throat, breaking the heavy silence that enveloped them. His voice was gruff but tinged with a hint of vulnerability. "Lavender, may I have a word with you?" His voice was little more than a murmur—he obviously didn't want any of the children to hear whatever he had to say.

Lavender's heart skipped a beat at his request. She turned toward him, her eyes searching his face for any sign of what he wanted to discuss. "Of course, Kendrick," she replied softly, filled with both apprehension and hope.

With a nod, Kendrick shifted on the seat to face her fully. The carriage rattled slightly over a bump in the road, and she was thrown against him. He steadied her, his hands lingering slightly on her shoulder before quickly dropping away. "I am so grateful for all you've done during this trip. I couldn't have done any of it without you."

She smiled faintly. "It has been my pleasure, truly."

He held her gaze, and she sensed he was trying to convey something without words, but she didn't know what. He cleared his throat and looked away. "But I think it's best if I drop you off at Willoughby Hall. The children and I need some time to settle in, and you've already done so much."

He hadn't spoken softly enough because, on the other side of the coach, Miranda leaned forward, a look of surprise and happiness on her face. She obviously approved of Kendrick's decision, and Lavender realized that was what this was all about.

Lavender's heart sank at Kendrick's words, the weight of his decision settling heavily on her. She tried to mask the disappointment that threatened to consume her, offering him a small, understanding smile. "Of course," she agreed, her throat thick with unshed tears. "It will be good to be home."

Deep down, she knew she had no right to demand more of his time or attention. After all, Miranda and the children were his priority now. Besides, they weren't married, and it wouldn't have been proper for her to stay at his home, even if she was only there to help with the children.

As the carriage continued its journey, Lavender stole glances at Miranda, who was now engrossed in her book. The fact that the girl could find solace in the world of words warmed Lavender's heart despite her own heartache. Perhaps books would be a refuge for Miranda in this new phase of her life as they had once been in her own after her mother died.

The closer they got to Willoughby Hall, the more Lavender felt the tendrils of loneliness wrapping around her. She would miss the children's laughter, the shared moments of tenderness with Kendrick, and even Miranda's quiet presence. But she also understood that her place was not with them anymore. Kendrick had made that

abundantly clear.

When the carriage finally pulled up in front of Willoughby Hall, she smiled tremulously at Teresa and Rafael. “I’ll miss you, children. You be good for your new papa.”

They nodded solemnly. “We will miss you too.” Rafael’s dark eyes held the calm acceptance of someone who’d been left too often in his life.

“Goodbye, Lavender,” whispered Teresa, her lower lip trembling.

Kendrick swallowed as the footman opened the carriage door. “I’ll be in touch soon,” he said quickly. “Can you have someone send over Daisy?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied.

As a footman came out of the house to help her down, her friends rushed out to welcome her home. She accepted their hugs and sidestepped their questions as the footman unloaded her portmanteau. Then she was ushered back into the house, and the carriage drove away as though the most romantic, wonderful week of her life had never happened.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:31 am

When Kendrick and the children finally exited the carriage in front of Seacrest, Teresa and Rafael could hardly contain their excitement. The large cottage with its lovely gardens and views of the sea sparkling in the distance was now their home, and they rushed ahead to explore every nook and cranny. Kendrick watched them with amusement and exhaustion, his shoulders slumping slightly as the weight of his new responsibilities settled over him.

Miranda showed no excitement whatsoever, her face a mask of indifference as she proceeded more slowly in front of him. He fixed his gaze on the rigid set of her shoulders, wishing she would allow herself to be a child instead of a small adult who was suspicious of everything. It broke his heart to know that he bore some responsibility for that.

When he walked inside, the younger children were already running from room to room. “We get to live here?” Rafael asked, looking completely overwhelmed. “Forever?”

“Forever,” Kendrick agreed, realizing how much permanence meant to them. He cleared his throat. “There are three bedrooms upstairs and another in the attic. I’m not sure if you girls want to share a room or if perhaps one of you wants the one upstairs. There’s only one extra bed at the moment, but we’ll see what we can do about that tomorrow. I’ll sleep on the sofa tonight, and some of you can use mine.”

Kendrick gave all three of them a full tour, including the garden and the gazebo overlooking the ocean. One of the servants from Willoughby Hall brought Daisy home, and even Miranda seemed thrilled at the thought of having a dog. For her part, Daisy wagged her tail so hard that Kendrick worried she might hurt herself, then

chased Rafael around the garden until the boy was breathless with laughter.

Kendrick watched with a half-smile, glad the younger children were settling in so well, though he wished Lavender had been the one to bring his dog home. But why would she? He knew he'd hurt her when he'd told her not to come home with him and the children.

Her absence weighed heavily on Kendrick, but he didn't know how to overcome the fact that Miranda felt so threatened by her. Still, he couldn't help missing her with every fiber in his body. The younger children had been utterly charmed by her, and he didn't understand why Miranda seemed so determined to hate her. He didn't know how he would have managed any of it without Lavender. How could he move on with his life, knowing she was right next door? So close, yet so far. He couldn't bear the thought of never holding her in his arms again nor waking to her sweet smile. The memories of the sweet solace they had found in each other's arms on the way to Barcelona haunted him.

He loved her. He wanted her in his life desperately.

All he'd wanted for the last seven years was to have his daughter back. Now, he had her, but it meant losing the only other person in his life who mattered.

He had always believed that fate could be cruel and capricious, but he didn't think that fact had ever been illustrated to him so clearly. Did he really have to make this choice? Was there nothing he could do to convince Miranda that Lavender would never hurt her?

As the evening shadows began to lengthen, Kendrick could not shake off the heaviness that settled in his heart. The laughter of the children playing in the garden echoed through the house, but it couldn't dispel the ache of loneliness that gnawed at him.

He stood by the window, watching the waves crash against the shore in the distance, a tumultuous dance that mirrored his own conflicted emotions. The realization that he had let Lavender slip away, that she was now beyond his reach, weighed on him like a stone pressing down on his chest.

“Papa?” Miranda said softly from behind him.

He turned and tried to smile. “Yes?”

She bit her lip. “You seem sad.”

“How could I be sad?” he asked softly. “I have you and now your brother and sister as well. All is finally as it should be.”

She bit her lip. “Truly?”

He nodded. “I’ve wanted nothing more since the moment your mother took you away from me.”

“My mother never loved me,” she whispered, her face crumpling. “She only cared about the men she brought home. And they were never nice to me. When they would leave her, she always acted like it was my fault.”

He sighed and crossed the distance between them, pulling her into a tight embrace. “Oh, Miranda,” he said with a sigh. “She loved you. She just needed more love than anyone could ever have given her. Not you, and definitely not me.”

As he said the words, he knew they were true. For so long, he’d blamed himself for not having been able to make Isabella stay, but now he knew that no matter how much he’d loved her, it would never have been enough.

He also finally understood why Miranda had been so averse to his relationship with Lavender. She was so afraid of him ignoring her in favor of Lavender that she didn't want her around. Dear Lord, knowing the reason for Miranda's behavior made everything even more difficult. How could he let her believe that he would put her through that again? That he was going to put his own selfish needs above her own?

Miranda hugged him tightly. "Thank you, Papa. For coming and getting me. I think Teresa and Rafael and I will be very happy here."

He bowed his head and kissed the top of her shiny dark head, loving her so much it hurt and fully understanding that if a choice had to be made, it had to be her, no matter what it meant for him and Lavender. "You're welcome, sweetheart."

"Three children?" Daphne asked, her voice rising. "Mr. Wycliffe now has three children?"

Lavender nodded, taking a sip of tea, her nerves still rattled from all that had happened. She'd told her friends everything— everything —that had happened during the trip, hoping they could help her make sense of it all.

Daphne clutched her teacup, her blue eyes wide with disbelief. "And he let you go? Without a fight?"

Lavender's heart clenched at the memory of Kendrick's parting words, the ache of longing still fresh in her chest. She shook her head softly. "He had to think of the children first. Miranda is wary of me, and he didn't want to upset her further."

"But what about you, Lavender?" Genevieve asked, concern etched on her features. "You're obviously madly in love with the man."

A wistful smile tugged at Lavender's lips as she remembered all the moments she'd

spent with Kendrick, both the steamy and the sweet ones. “I... I care for him deeply, but I understand he needs to put the children first.” The words felt heavy on her tongue, a bitter truth she had to accept.

“Perhaps he just needs time to adjust,” Eden offered gently. “Taking in three children all at once is bound to be overwhelming.”

Lavender nodded, her fingers tracing the delicate pattern on her teacup. “I know you’re right. And I suppose there is a chance that eventually, Miranda will feel secure enough to be open to Kendrick and me being friends again.” Despite the circumstances, she could not deny the ache in her chest, the longing to be by Kendrick’s side.

Genevieve placed a comforting hand on Lavender’s arm. “It must be difficult for you, my dear. To have found such a connection with him, only to have it cut short.”

“It is,” Lavender admitted softly. “But I cannot fault him for prioritizing his children. Miranda, Rafael, and Teresa need him far more than I do.”

Daphne leaned forward, her expression thoughtful. “Do you think he will realize what he’s missing without you there?”

Lavender sighed as she considered Daphne’s question. “I don’t know. Kendrick is a man of duty and responsibility. He would never choose me over his daughter. And I don’t think he cares nearly as much for me as I do for him.”

Had she somehow managed to convince herself that there had been more between them than there had been? She was so confused. That day they had spent in their private railroad compartment, she would have sworn that he loved her, but he’d never actually said the words. How could she have once again let herself be the one to care more?

As Lavender sat with her friends, their words of comfort and understanding washing over her, she couldn't shake the lingering doubt in her heart. The memory of Kendrick's conflicted gaze as he bid her farewell haunted her, as did the unspoken emotions that had passed between them during their time together on the journey home. They'd had no chance to discuss any of it, and she supposed that was the most difficult thing of all. If she only had a true picture of what he was thinking and feeling, she might realize that nothing was lost, that there was still a way forward for them.

But since he had left her without a backward glance, she had only fear and regret to keep her company during all the long, lonely nights to come.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself against the swell of longing that threatened to consume her. "I must respect Kendrick's choices," she said softly, more to herself than to her friends. "He has a family now, and I cannot intrude where I am not wanted."

Daphne frowned, concern evident in her eyes. "But what about your own happiness, Lavender? Are you prepared to sacrifice it for the sake of his family?"

Lavender's fingers tightened around her teacup, the porcelain cool against her skin. "Of course," she replied because when put like that, there was really no other answer she could give.

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Over the next few weeks, Kendrick and the children managed to muddle through their new life together.

Despite his best efforts, Kendrick couldn't shake the lingering sense of emptiness that pervaded the cottage, a hollow ache at the absence of Lavender in his life. He found some solace in the children's laughter, Miranda's fierce protectiveness over her siblings, and the simple routines they established together, but he still felt desperately alone.

Realizing he could not do it all himself, he reluctantly hired a woman to do the cooking and cleaning. Her name was Mrs. Harper, a stout woman with a no-nonsense demeanor that belied a kind heart. She took charge of the household duties efficiently, allowing Kendrick more time to bond with the children, catch up on his writing, and make some headway on the garden, which had grown wild in his absence.

Miranda, Rafael, and Teresa slowly began to settle into their lives at Seacrest, their hesitance toward Kendrick gradually melting away as they saw the genuine effort he put into caring for them. At first, he'd feared that he'd never be able to look at Teresa or Rafael without thinking about what Isabella had done, yet he was surprised by how quickly he'd fallen absolutely in love with the two of them. For their part, they embraced his presence in their lives without any reservations, even shyly asking him after a couple of weeks if they could call him Papa as Miranda did.

He had told them they could with tears stinging his eyes. Their resilience humbled him.

As days turned into weeks, Kendrick threw himself into the role of a father with unwavering dedication. He helped Rafael with his studies, comforted Teresa during her nightmares, and listened patiently to Miranda's fears and worries. Each night, as he tucked them into bed, he marveled at how much he loved his makeshift family.

Yet, despite his efforts to create a sense of normalcy for the children, Kendrick couldn't ignore the persistent tug of longing in his heart. The memories of Lavender lingered like a bittersweet melody in his mind, her absence a constant reminder of what could have been.

Every day, he fought the urge to go to Willoughby Hall, beg Lavender's forgiveness, and try to explain why he felt he needed to devote all his energy to the children for now. But he was certain that if Miranda found out that he'd seen Lavender again, it would undo all the good he'd managed to do toward rebuilding their relationship.

And honestly, how would that help Lavender? To tell her he loved her but feared he wouldn't be able to be with her for years? Wasn't it better to just let her go, no matter how much it hurt?

The thoughts kept him up at night and haunted him all day, but no matter how much he turned it over in his mind, he didn't know how to fix it.

More than two weeks passed without any word from Kendrick. Lavender was reminded of the last time they had gone so long without speaking, and her frustration grew with each passing day. Was he just not going to ever reach out to her again? Would he remain so close, just next door, but never talk to her? As though they were strangers? As though all the sweet friendship and passion between them had meant nothing?

Lavender found herself lost in a flurry of conflicting emotions, her heart torn between understanding Kendrick's priorities, anger that he was shutting her out, and longing

for his presence. She went about her daily routine with a heavy heart, the weight of his absence a constant ache that refused to dissipate. She often found herself flipping through her sketchbook at drawings she'd made during their trips, lingering over one of him stretched out on the bench in the train, his gaze tender as he'd stared at her.

She found herself even more confused when she received a cheque in the mail for her contribution to Kendrick's gardening book. That must mean that he'd sold it. She wanted nothing more than to run to his house and celebrate with him. The amount had surprised her but also given her a much-needed sense of self-reliance. She finally had a little nest egg of her own, should she ever need it.

More than that, he'd shown her that she did have a skill and a passion for something. She supposed that she might be able to find more work as an illustrator if she wanted to, and she decided to write a letter to the publishing house, asking them if they had any leads on whom she might offer such services to.

But all of it just reminded her of all those spring days they'd spent together working on it, of how he'd helped her find a direction and a purpose.

Without him, she felt completely rudderless. She'd loved him far more than she'd ever loved Geoffrey. For the first time in her life, she'd felt seen for who she truly was, and she missed that. She missed the sense of belonging she'd felt in his arms. And she missed the children, even Miranda, who reminded her so much of herself at that age.

Her friends tried to offer her solace and companionship, but being with them no longer made her as happy as it once had. She had finally figured out what she wanted from life, and it was next door. She didn't want the freedom to do whatever she wanted, not if it came with this aching loneliness.

She wanted a family, specifically Kendrick's family. He needed her. They all needed

her. Even Miranda. She could never replace Isabella, but she had so much love to give if only the girl would let her.

She agonized over how to fix the situation but didn't even know if Kendrick wanted her to try. If he cared for her as much as she cared for him, wouldn't he have contacted her? Or was he laboring under the mistaken idea that he and the three children would be a burden to her?

She talked the situation over with Eden, and her friend finally gave her an idea that made sense.

"Perhaps you need to make friends with the girl. Let her know you're not trying to steal her father away. Didn't you say that she liked to read?"

Lavender nodded. "Yes, she always had her nose in a book on the trip."

"Why don't you go to Seacrest and ask if she'd like to go with you to the bookstore? Just the two of you on a girls' adventure."

A small smile curved Lavender's lips. "Do you think that might work?"

Eden nodded and squeezed her shoulder. "I don't know why you want to give up what you've found here to go and raise a bunch of children that aren't even yours, but I can see how much you love them all. And I will do everything I can to help you make it happen."

"Thank you," Lavender breathed. "You don't know how much that means to me." The others had tried to be supportive, but they had done nothing but try to convince her that he did not deserve her. That she was crazy for even thinking of taking on Kendrick and his children. A part of her felt truly sad that none of them understood what it was like to love and be loved, that they couldn't even conceive of wanting to

be with a man they loved over remaining independent. But she had finally realized that no one's journey was the same, and what made one person happy might make another miserable. What mattered was that together, they had all found the courage to go their own way.

The following Saturday, Lavender mustered her courage and approached Kendrick's lovely cottage. As she stood at the doorstep, her heart pounded with a mixture of apprehension and hope. Was she doing the right thing? She had no idea. But after nearly talking herself out of it a dozen times, she had decided she had to take the chance.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door, the sound echoing through the quiet morning air.

Miranda was the one to open it, her expression decidedly unfriendly. "Lady Crestwood," she greeted her coolly, even though Lavender had never introduced herself to the girl so formally.

"Good morning, Miranda," Lavender replied softly, offering a tentative smile.

"My papa is busy," Miranda told her sternly. "He's in his study working on his new book and isn't to be disturbed."

Lavender had the unwelcome thought that the girl had been monitoring the door these long weeks, determined to head her off should she try and visit.

Fighting to maintain her smile, Lavender said, "I am not here to see him. In fact, I am here to see you. I was wondering if you might like to accompany me to the bookstore in Broadstairs today."

Miranda's eyes widened in surprise, a flicker of interest sparking in their depths

despite her obvious intention to remain cold toward Lavender. The thought of going to a bookstore was obviously more enticement than she could resist, no matter how much she wanted to keep Lavender at arm's length. She glanced back into the cottage as if seeking approval from Kendrick, who suddenly appeared in the doorway behind her.

"Papa, may I go to the bookstore in town with Lavender?" she asked him.

His gaze met Lavender's, and something unreadable passed between them. She once again had the impression he was trying to convey something without words. Something important.

"Would that be all right?" she asked him. "I know Miranda loves to read, and I thought she must be nearly out of books by now."

"Of course, it would be all right," he replied, his gaze raking over her from head to toe. The naked longing in his eyes gave her hope, and she wanted her visit to give him some as well. He shifted his gaze to Miranda. "Go get ready," he urged her.

She dashed away toward the stairs, and as soon as she was out of sight, he pulled Lavender into a passionate embrace, kissing her as though he were starving for a taste of her.

The moment seemed an eternity and yet far too brief, but as soon as she was in his arms again, she knew she had been right not to give up on him.

He pulled away reluctantly and then cleared his throat. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you too, Kendrick," Lavender whispered, her voice barely above a breath as she gazed up at him, her heart racing with longing and relief. The tender moment hung between them, wrapped in unspoken words and unfulfilled promises. It wasn't

over between them. It couldn't be.

Kendrick's eyes searched hers, dark and intense with emotions he struggled to contain. "I thought about you every day," he admitted quietly, a rare vulnerability flickering in his gaze. "I just don't know how to fix this. But the fact that you've come here, that you're trying to build a relationship with her..." He shrugged helplessly. "I don't deserve you."

"Yes," she murmured. "You do. You deserve love, Kendrick."

"Do you love me?" he asked hoarsely, looking as though he'd been punched in the gut.

"Of course I do," she hurried to assure him, hearing Miranda returning. "I thought you knew that."

Miranda descended the stairs, ready for their outing to the bookstore, but Lavender was almost certain that if they'd had more time, he would have said the words she desperately wanted to hear.

"We'll talk later," Kendrick said, looking just as frustrated at not being able to continue their conversation now as she was.

She nodded quickly and stepped outside with Miranda, who looked pensive but much less hostile than she had the last time Lavender had seen her. As they headed toward town, Lavender tried her best to engage the girl in conversation, with limited success. She was obviously still resistant to the thought of Lavender in her papa's life but also very eager to get a few new books.

They went to the bookstore that Lavender and Eden loved so much, and Lavender could see that Miranda was enthralled the moment they walked in the door.

Miranda's initial reserve melted away as they browsed through the aisles, replaced by animated discussions about her favorite books and characters.

Lavender listened attentively, sharing Miranda's enthusiasm for stories that transported them to another world. Miranda agonized over her selections, but Lavender was pleased to see that several of the ones she ended up picking had been her suggestions, books she had loved when she was a child.

She ended up buying Miranda half a dozen books with some of the money she had gotten for illustrating Kendrick's book, and the girl was overwhelmed with excitement and gratitude. As they headed back to Seacrest, she held the books as though they were the most precious things she had ever owned, and maybe they were.

They were nearly to the cottage when Miranda stopped, grabbing Lavender's hand and turning to face her. "Did you only do this because you're in love with my papa and you want him to love you back?"

With a sigh, Lavender gestured to a fallen log, knowing that this needed to be a longer conversation than could be accomplished in the middle of the road. She hoped that she would find the words to make Miranda understand that she wasn't going to try and take Kendrick away but just wanted to be a part of their family.

Taking a seat on the log, Lavender patted the spot beside her, encouraging Miranda to join her. The girl hesitated momentarily before settling down, her gaze fixed intently on Lavender.

"I care for your papa very much, Miranda," Lavender began softly, choosing her words with care. "But my feelings for him have nothing to do with how I feel about you or your siblings. I want to be a part of your lives because... because I care about all of you."

Miranda's brow furrowed in thought, her eyes searching Lavender's face for any hint of insincerity. After a moment of silence, she spoke hesitantly, "Papa seems different when you are around. Happier. And Rafael and Teresa like you too."

A small smile tugged at the corners of Lavender's lips at Miranda's observation. "I am glad to hear that. I want to be here for all of you, not to replace anyone."

Miranda frowned and dug her toe into the ground. "My mother didn't care about us. All she cared about was finding a new man to have fun with. She often left us alone, and I did my best to take care of Rafael and Teresa."

Lavender's heart ached for Miranda, who had carried the weight of responsibilities far beyond her years. At least when her own father had abandoned her, there had been servants to watch over her.

"Oh, sweetheart," Lavender murmured, gently placing a hand on Miranda's shoulder, glad when she did not flinch away. "I am so sorry that happened. You should never have been put in such a situation. But you were so brave to take care of Rafael and Teresa."

Miranda bit her lip and then shook her head. "I wasn't brave. I was so afraid. I was always scared that something would happen to them, and I wouldn't know what to do."

"But you're not alone now," Lavender told her gently. "Your papa is here, and I think you must know that he would never leave you alone. I've known him for a while now, and I can assure you that he's the most dependable man I know."

"That's why I don't want you to take him away from me," Miranda wailed. "I know that he wants to be with you. He spends half his day staring out the window toward your house."

As much as Lavender's heart thrilled to hear that bit of news, she knew how upsetting it must be for a girl who had been abandoned far too often. "I don't want to take him away from you," she whispered. "I want to be a partner to him. I want to help him take care of you and your siblings. We wouldn't leave you alone to go have fun together. We want to include you in everything we do."

Miranda lifted her gaze to meet Lavender's, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I don't know if I can trust you yet," she admitted, vulnerability seeping into her words. She reminded Lavender so much of her father that it took her breath away.

Lavender's hand tightened slightly on Miranda's shoulder. "Trust takes time, Miranda. I understand that. I will be patient and prove to you that I can earn it."

Miranda studied Lavender, her expression softening slightly as if considering her words. After a moment of silence, she nodded slowly, a hint of reluctant acceptance in her eyes. "All right," Miranda whispered. "I will try to trust you."

A sense of relief washed over Lavender as she wrapped an arm around Miranda in a gentle embrace.

"I know something of what you're feeling," she assured her. "My own mother died when I was no older than you. My father remarried a horrible woman. She let me know from the beginning that I was not wanted, that I wasn't part of the new family that she and my father started." Tears clogged her throat, and she cleared it. "But that is exactly why I'm so sensitive to what you're going through. I was never able to have children of my own. But it has always been my fondest wish to be a mother. I think I might be good at it."

"You're not my mother," Miranda said sharply, and Lavender cursed herself for having used that word. "But you are nice," she continued in a softer voice. "And Rafael and Teresa do need a mother."

“Yes,” Lavender agreed. “They do.”

Miranda sighed. “I want my papa to be happy, and I want Rafael and Teresa to know what it feels like to be loved and cared for. It would be selfish of me to deny them your love just because I am jealous they’ll all love you more than they do me.”

“Oh, Miranda,” Lavender whispered, hugging the girl even tighter, stunned by the maturity of her observation. “Don’t you think it’s possible that we can all just love each other and not try to quantify it? That maybe we could truly be a family someday?”

Miranda pulled away, her dark eyes bright with tears. “I want to believe that, Lavender. I’m just so afraid that all this...” she waved a hand to encompass Seacrest and the ocean in the distance... “is just too good to be true. That if I let myself believe in it, that it will all be snatched away from me.”

“I’m afraid too,” Lavender admitted. “For all the same reasons. But if we don’t at least try, we’ll never know, will we? And isn’t it better to at least try?”

Miranda gazed back toward the cottage, a frown pulling at her lips, and Lavender could tell she was truly thinking about it. “I suppose so,” she finally agreed reluctantly.

Lavender squeezed her once more, then let go and stood. “I’m going to leave it all in your hands, Miranda. If you don’t want me at Seacrest, all you have to do is say so. But if you are willing to try, perhaps I could come by once a week for dinner?”

“I suppose that would be all right,” Miranda said stiffly, gathering her books and getting to her feet as well.

“We’ll take it slow,” Lavender told her. “And if at any time you don’t feel

comfortable about it, I will stop coming. All you have to do is talk to me.”

Miranda kicked a rock in her path, still clutching her books tightly. “You’re different than I expected you to be,” she admitted, and Lavender was pretty certain that was a begrudging compliment.

As they walked back to the cottage, Lavender felt a renewed sense of determination blooming within her. She knew building a relationship with Miranda would take time and patience, but she was willing to invest all she had into nurturing that bond. And Miranda now seemed open to at least trying.

When they reached the cottage, Kendrick greeted them at the door with a warm smile, his dark gaze flickering between Lavender and Miranda. “Did you have a good time?” he asked tentatively.

“Yes, it was wonderful.” Miranda hesitated momentarily before surprising them both by taking Lavender’s hand briefly before letting it go. “Thank you for the books,” she whispered.

“You’re so welcome,” Lavender replied. “I hope you like them.”

Miranda nodded and headed inside, and Kendrick held Lavender’s gaze. “It went well?”

“Better than I expected,” she answered, wanting so much to ask if she could come inside but not wanting to push things. She had made more headway than she expected, and she should just be happy with that.

Kendrick seemed to feel the same way. She could see the longing in his eyes. “I have to see you,” he whispered. “Can you meet me at the gazebo tonight? Around nine?”

She nodded, her heart soaring. “Yes. I’ll be there!”

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After Lavender left, Kendrick was at a loss for what to do with himself until the evening. He tried to focus on work, but his thoughts kept drifting back to Lavender and the progress she'd obviously made with Miranda today. He desperately wanted to ask Miranda what they'd talked about, but she'd gone straight to her room after dinner, eager to dive into her new books, and he hadn't wanted to do anything to upset her. Not after he had actually caught her smiling several times after she had returned.

After he had gotten the younger children to bed and the appointed hour finally arrived, Kendrick made his way to the gazebo where he had arranged to meet Lavender. The moon cast a silvery glow over the garden, and he glanced toward Willoughby Hall and the towering oak that technically belonged to the widows. A smile curved his lips as he remembered the way that Lavender had quite literally fallen at his feet. If she had not, his life would probably still be very small and lonely.

He definitely wouldn't have Miranda back.

When he arrived, he found Lavender already there, her silhouette outlined by the soft moonlight. She turned at the sound of his footsteps, and the relief in her eyes mirrored his own.

"Lavender," Kendrick greeted her softly, his heart thundering. "Thank you for coming."

She smiled, her heart in her eyes. "Of course, Kendrick. I have wanted to talk to you ever since you returned to the hotel in Barcelona with all three children."

He sighed and raked a hand through his hair as he sat on the bench beside her, remembering what a crushing blow that had seemed at the time. “I didn’t know what to do. Miranda would not have gone without them.”

“Of course not,” she soothed him, leaning her head against his shoulder. “You did the right thing. But I know it could not have been easy for you, given that they are products of Isabella's affairs after she left you.”

Lavender’s easy acceptance filled him with surprise and gratitude. Her words stirred a deep ache within him, a reminder of the wounds that still lingered from Isabella’s betrayal.

“I never imagined I would have to face the consequences of Isabella’s actions in this way,” he muttered, his voice heavy with emotion. “But I can’t let those children suffer for their mother's mistakes. They deserve better. And I’m already starting to love them.”

“You’re doing the best you can, Kendrick,” Lavender reassured him, her voice gentle but firm. “And the children see that. Miranda may still be cautious, but she’s slowly realizing she can depend on you. And Rafael and Teresa obviously adore you.”

“They adore you, too,” he said. “They’ve been asking about you constantly. But Miranda is so hurt, so suspicious, and jealous...”

“She told me a bit about why that is this afternoon,” she told him. “I think she’ll eventually realize I’m not trying to take you away from her. In fact, she agreed to let me come to dinner once a week until she feels like she can trust me.”

“Really?” he asked, shocked that she had managed to bargain with Miranda so that they could have some time together. “She agreed to that?”

Lavender nodded, lifting her head from his shoulder so she could gaze into his eyes. “I promised that she could depend on me too, that I didn’t want to take you away from her but become part of the family the four of you are building.”

He swallowed dryly, her words striking him speechless. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve her, and he couldn’t believe she actually wanted to join him on this mad path he’d sent himself down.

“Is that what you want?” she asked softly. “These last few weeks, I haven’t been so sure.”

Guilt welled within him. He should have told her what he was feeling. He should have let her make her own choices instead of deciding he was doing her a favor by walking away.

Lavender’s expression shifted subtly when he remained silent, a flicker of vulnerability crossing her features before she masked it with a neutral expression. The moonlight bathed her in a soft glow, highlighting the delicate curve of her jawline and the shimmering uncertainty in her eyes.

“Lavender, I...” Kendrick began, his voice trailing off as he struggled to find the right words to convey the tumult of emotions swirling within him. His heart thrummed with the weight of his love for her, still trying to find the words to tell her how much her efforts on Miranda’s behalf, on his as well, had humbled him.

He cleared his throat and tried again. “I’ve been so afraid,” Kendrick admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. “Afraid of letting myself hope for something more, for fear of losing it all over again.”

A soft sigh escaped Lavender’s lips as she reached out and took Kendrick’s hand, her touch warm and reassuring. “I understand, Kendrick,” she said softly. “Miranda said

nearly the same exact thing. But sometimes, we have to take a leap of faith, even when it's frightening. I'm here for you, for the children, for whatever may come. I will never give up on any of you. But you have to believe in me, too."

"I do believe in you," Kendrick said hoarsely, his voice raw with emotion. "I want to try despite all the doubts and fears that haunt me. But until you spoke with Miranda today, I thought there was no way I could have you and her both. It was killing me. I didn't know how to fix it."

A soft smile tugged at Lavender's lips as she squeezed his hand gently. "Then I'm happy to be able to set your mind at ease a bit. She said she wants you, Rafael, and Teresa to know what it is like to be loved. And I am determined to prove to her that she can be loved too."

"Did you mean what you said earlier? Do you truly love me?" he asked softly, hating how vulnerable he sounded. And immediately, he knew he had done it all wrong. He should have told her that he loved her first. But saying those words without knowing for sure how she felt terrified him.

Lavender met Kendrick's gaze, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears that reflected the moonlight like liquid silver. Her hand tightened around his, her touch grounding him.

"I do, Kendrick," she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper. "I think I have loved you almost since the day we met. When I am with you, I feel at peace. Both with you and with myself. Your kindness, your strength, and the love you have for your children... It is all a part of why I fell for you."

Kendrick felt a weight lift off his shoulders at her words, a sense of relief flooding him as he gazed at Lavender with newfound clarity. The walls he had built around his heart were no match for her love and kindness.

“I love you too, Lavender,” Kendrick admitted, stunned by how easy the words had been to say. “More than I ever thought possible. You’ve awakened parts of me that I thought were lost forever, and I want nothing more than to build a future with you by my side, facing whatever challenges life throws at us.”

Tears welled up in Lavender’s eyes, spilling over as she launched herself into Kendrick’s arms. She buried her face against his chest, and he lowered his face to her hair, simply breathing in the scent of lavender that always clung to her.

She smelled like home.

“Oh, Kendrick,” Lavender whispered, her voice muffled against his shirt. “I have dreamed of this moment, of being able to hold you like this and hear you say those words. I want nothing more than to be with you, to support you, and love you and our children with all that I am.”

Our children.

With those words, he finally realized that he was no longer alone. She had convinced him that she would eventually win his daughter over and that the five of them would become a family.

As they sat there, wrapped in each other’s embrace under the soft glow of the moon, the waves crashing on the beach below, Kendrick felt a sense of peace settle over him, a profound certainty that with Lavender by his side, nothing was impossible.

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One year later...

Lavender stretched luxuriously, running one foot up the side of her husband's calf, grinning when he groaned and buried his face in the crook of her neck, wrapping his strong arms around her. "You'll be the death of me, woman," he whispered. "I already want you again."

They had spent the morning making love, enjoying the rare time alone. Genevieve had invited all three children to come to Willoughby Hall to see her new puppy—a decision she'd made after the time she'd spent with Daisy—and the moment they'd all disappeared down the road, Kendrick had taken her hand and led her back up to their attic bedroom. He had remodeled it before they'd married six months ago to give them as much privacy as possible in a house now bursting with children. He had even made a place for her collection of sea glass on the windowsill, where they sparkled in the sunlight, and a cozy little reading nook under the eaves.

She bit her lip, enjoying the kisses he spread along her throat for several moments before pulling back and meeting his gaze. "I want you every minute of every day," she told him breathlessly. "But I have something to tell you."

He tensed beside her, then pushed himself up on one elbow and brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes. "That sounds serious," he said solemnly.

"It is," she murmured, trepidation welling within her. "But I think it's good news, and I hope you'll feel the same."

He cocked his head to one side, his expression suddenly shuttered. "You can tell me

anything.” But the look in his eyes told her he feared the worst, and she cursed herself for going about this all wrong.

She pushed up to lean against the headboard and cupped his dear, handsome face. “We’ve been under the impression that I couldn’t have children, so we’ve taken no precautions, but... apparently, the fault in my last marriage was not mine.”

He caught his breath and dropped his gaze to her still-flat stomach. “Are you saying...?”

She nodded, tears welling in her eyes. “I know that you weren’t expecting another child, that we just got Teresa in school—”

He cut her off with a fierce kiss, silencing her for a very long time. When he finally broke away, a big grin stretched his lips. “I’m thrilled,” he assured her. “Absolutely thrilled. The more, the merrier.”

The anxiety that had been churning in her gut since the doctor had confirmed her pregnancy yesterday dissipated in a surge of relief. She’d desperately wanted to talk it over with Eden, but her friend had finally left for Egypt. “Good,” she breathed. “Because I’m thrilled, too.” She had never even dared to hope this could happen, but it felt very right to be giving Kendrick another child. She hoped it was a little boy with the same dark eyes and hair as his father.

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. “You’re a wonderful mother and an even better wife,” he assured her. “I’m sure the other children will be thrilled.”

“Even Miranda?” she asked hesitantly. “I finally feel like she is warming to me. I would hate her to feel threatened by a new baby.”

“You’ve given her all the love and attention in the world,” he told her. “She loves you just as much as you love her, even if she isn’t always good at showing it. I think

she'll be fine."

After that first conversation, when Lavender had taken Miranda to the bookstore, they had slowly worked on strengthening their relationship until the girl had seemed just as happy as her brother and sister when Lavender and Kendrick had announced their plans to marry. Ever since, Lavender had done everything she could to be the complete opposite of her own stepmother.

"Good, I'm glad you think so," Lavender said, the last of the fears she'd harbored about this profound new development fading away like dandelion petals in the wind. "I've been so worried about telling all of you."

He leaned forward and kissed her again, gentler this time. "I love you so much, Lavender. And I will love this new addition to our family. I am the happiest man in the world."

And as she stared into his dark eyes, she knew that she'd finally found her purpose in life.

THE END