

Rosette

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White Rose



LASTING
LOVE

Lasting Love

by

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Dedication

"For those who believe in rebirth and resurrection."

Abbey Jordan's floral shop resembled a dollhouse from a bygone era. Block after block of chiseled glass gave the illusion of glistening ice. Long, trailing vines of climbing roses meandered up the lattice on either side of the entrance door. As Abbey pulled into the parking lot, her heart swelled with pride. Bathed in the early morning sun, her floral boutique shimmered like a citrine jewel. Getting out of her car, she inhaled the sweet essence of Spring. Everything was so fresh—the fragrant green grass, the budding maples, and the cheery daffodils. From deep in the woods, a meadowlark whistled, followed by the chirping of songbirds. The hills were alive with the rebirth of the earth after a long, cold winter, and with Easter in a week, what better time for flowers and plants to resurrect.

The quiet serenity was broken by the jazzy jingle of the cell phone. It was Annie, who managed the garden nursery.

“Abbey, I hate to leave you high and dry the week before Easter, but something's come up. My daughter was in an accident and needs me. I'm catching the next flight to San Diego. I can't tell you how much I hate to do this, but you'd better hire someone else to take care of the nursery.”

“Of course,” Abbey said instinctively. “Your place is with her; don't you worry about a thing. I'll pray for her speedy recovery.”

As Abbey tossed her cell phone into her purse, a wild rush of adrenaline hurled through her, making the palms of her hands sweat. With Easter in a few days, where was she supposed to find someone to

manage her garden nursery? She didn't have the time to hire and train someone at the onslaught of one of their busiest seasons. Her jawline was stiff and rigid, her shoulders tight with tension. Without her nursery manager who checked the pH balance of the plants and roses, adjusted the drip irrigation system, and knew more about botanical insecticides than anyone in the state of Vermont, she was up the proverbial creek without a paddle. Staring up into the azure blue sky, Abbey sent up a prayer and placed it in God's hands.

Walking across the covered bridge to the nursery, she took in the scenic landscape of the New England countryside. The green mountains of Vermont were emerging from their snow-capped peaks. As the last of the winter snow melted into the surrounding waters, the gushing streams were a sure sign of Spring.

Just as Abbey was about to unlock the door to the nursery, she heard a rustling in the clearing. Expecting to see a bushy-tailed squirrel scamper out of the woods, she was surprised to spot a little girl of about ten pedaling her bicycle toward her at full speed. When she reached Abbey, she grinned. "Do you own this flower shop, lady?"

Abbey gave the little girl a winning smile. "I sure do. My name's Abigail, but my friends call me Abbey. What's yours?"

"Kayla."

"And where do you live, Kayla?"

"Over there," she gestured across the meadow to a white cottage with red shutters. "With my dad."

"And does your dad know where you are so early this morning?"

"No, he's still sleeping. Besides, I'm here on business."

Somewhat amused, Abbey raised an eyebrow. "Business, huh? Sounds pretty serious. What kind of

business?”

Kayla swiped at a strand of hair that had come loose from the ponytail on top of her head. “My dad lost his job and we’re flat broke. Are you hiring?”

Abbey’s heart went out to the little girl. Although she was trying to be brave, her bottom lip quivered. She was dressed in a pair of jeans, tennis shoes, and a sweatshirt. With the sun just rising to meet the horizon, there was a definite chill in the air. Abbey reached into her purse for her phone. “First things first. Why don’t you call your dad and let him know where you are. While you’re doing that, I’ll go in and make us some hot cocoa I keep around for special occasions.”

With a resound sigh, Kayla shrugged her shoulders and took the phone. “I guess.”

Over hot cocoa and sugar cookies, Kayla told Abbey of her dilemma. “So that’s why I need a job. My ballet lessons cost a bundle and my recital’s coming up. If I don’t get some bucks for my costume, I can’t be in it.” She stared at Abbey. “And I really wanna be in it ‘cause when I grow up, I wanna be a prima ballerina.”

Abbey patted Kayla’s hand. “With Easter coming up, I really could use some extra help. Tell you what. My shop doesn’t open for another hour or so. How about we go to your house and talk to your dad. I need his permission before I hire you.”

Kayla’s face lit up. “Will I make enough money to get a ballet costume for the recital?”

Abbey winked. “Absolutely.”

By the time Abbey got to Kayla’s house, the little girl had abandoned her bike in the front lawn and was playing with her dog. Her father was adding compost to his roses, and by the clusters of dainty little pink blooms, he knew what he was doing.

“Looks like you have the touch,” Abbey smiled. “Your Ballerina roses are beautiful. By the way, I’m Abbey Jordan.”

Turning around, Kayla’s father wiped his hands on his jeans before extending one. “Pleased to meet you; I’m Brady Jones. Thanks for calling about my daughter. She knows better than to take off on her bike without telling me where she’s going.”

Abbey liked what she saw. With his brown tussled hair, warm hazel eyes, and the physique of an athlete, Brady Jones was pretty darn easy to look at. She met his gaze and smiled. “I thought I was the only one who knew about the Ballerina rose and here you have hundreds of the pretty pink and white blooms, all healthy and thriving.”

Using the scissor-pruning cut, Brady snipped the dry foliage, checked the pH, and added just the right amount of water. “Planted them for Kayla. With their ruffled edges, they remind me of my little girl when she dances, graceful and elegant.”

As Abbey watched Brady toil with his prize roses, she was struck with an epiphany. Wasn’t it only an hour ago she’d been fretting about finding someone to replace Annie? And hadn’t she placed it in God’s hands? She stared in amazement as he expertly scattered a layer of loose mulch around the plants. His roses were gorgeous, big beautiful blossoms with healthy green leaves and what Abbey saw next convinced her Brady Jones was indeed heaven sent.

With his watering can sloshing as he walked, he crossed the yard to a wall of red roses on big, bushy plants. He grew her favorite flower in the whole wide world, the Lasting Love rose. Abbey nearly swooned. This man was a gift.

Her violet eyes sparkled with joy as she looked upward and mouthed the word, “Yes!” Then she looked at Brady and beamed brilliantly. “Your roses

could be featured in magazines. I've never seen any quite so lovely. What's your secret?"

"Organic compost. A good six inches of mulch will help preserve moisture, reduce weeds, and encourage healthy root growth. When the mulch breaks down, it adds organic matter to the soil. Roses are heavy feeders and will benefit quite nicely from the nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium." He paused, a bit sheepish. "Would you just listen to me go on and on. You own a nursery and probably know more about cultivating roses than anyone on the mountaintop."

"Actually," Abbey said. "I leave most of the cultivating to my garden nursery manager. She's highly trained in horticulture. But the thing is, she—"

"Abbey," Kayla yanked on the sleeve of her hoodie. "Go on, ask my dad about the job. You promised."

"Job?" Brady's penetrating gaze seared into Abbey's like lasers. "What job?"

"When Kayla came to my floral shop this morning, she expressed an interest to earn some money to pay for her ballet recital." Abbey turned just in time to see the determined look in Kayla's eyes as she arched her arms over her head and did a graceful pirouette. For a moment, Abbey was stunned speechless. Without question, Kayla had the moves of a prima ballerina. Abbey couldn't help but wonder about the little girl's mother. There had been no mention of her and Brady wasn't wearing a wedding ring. In that split second, she knew she'd do everything in her power to help Kayla get her ballet costume for the recital. Even if she had to buy it herself. .

"Kayla," Brady placed his hand on her shoulder and gave her a gentle shove toward the door. "Why don't you go in and get some breakfast. There's

cereal on the counter and Grandma left some donuts last night.”

“All right, Dad,” Kayla scurried off. “But make sure you don’t go messing things up. I need this job.”

Brady waited until his daughter was out of earshot before he said anything. “Ah, I’m sorry my daughter’s put you in this awkward position. I don’t know what all she told you, but the truth is I got laid-off six months ago. We’ve been cutting back a little, and the other night, Kayla overheard me telling a friend I didn’t know how much longer I could send her to ballet lessons. You saw her out there twirling around. The kid’s obsessed with becoming a ballerina. That’s all she thinks about. So if I have to flip flapjacks at an all-night diner, I’ll do it. Whatever it takes to make my little girl happy.”

His words touched her. This man could get to her. The compassion she saw in his eyes when he talked about his daughter pulled at her heartstrings. She wondered if he knew how special he was. She wondered if Kayla knew what a gift her father was. Abbey looked into Brady’s eyes and hoped she didn’t blow it. Careful not to step on his male pride, she said, “You know Kayla’s coming around to my shop this morning was a Godsend.”

“How so?”

“You know what they say about God working in mysterious ways. With Easter in a few weeks, I have more orders than I can keep up with, and this morning, my garden nursery manager quit on me, just when I need her the most.”

“She quit on you, without giving notice?” Brady shook his head. “Man, that’s gotta be rough.”

“Oh, no,” Abbey was quick to defend Annie. “She would never do that. Her daughter was in a bad accident and needs her. It’s just that these things always seem to happen at the worst possible time. I can’t go on a wild goose chase for a replacement

right now. I'll be perfectly honest with you. When your daughter came to my shop this morning, asking for a job, she reminded me of myself when I was a little girl. I was just about her age when I asked my grandmother if I could work at her greenhouse to make some money to buy ballet slippers. I wasn't a ballerina, but my best friend was and I fell in love with her shoes. Without hesitation, my grandmother allowed me to work at her shop. I never did buy those ballet slippers, but what I did buy was a dream for my future. Working in my grandmother's greenhouse that summer and every summer after that was where I discovered my passion for roses. When I look back on those years, I have my grandmother to thank for helping me find my dream. So I thought if it's all right with you, Kayla could help me in the shop."

Abbey paused for a moment and looked at the beauty around her. "But now that I've met you, I'm thinking you are the answer to my prayers. Until a few minutes ago, I didn't think anyone could pamper roses like my nursery manager. I was wrong. Watching you nurture your garden with such tender loving care is like watching Annie. Now that she's gone, would you consider taking the position? I'm really in a bind, and with the way you are with roses, you'd really be helping me out. So come on, what do you say, Brady? Do we have a deal?"

Brady grinned. "You mean actually get paid for something I love doing? Go on, twist my arm. When do I start?"

"You mean when do we start?" Kayla popped her head out of the shrubbery. "I say the sooner—the better."

In the week that followed, Abbey couldn't imagine not having Brady and Kayla in her shop. They were gifts. While Brady fussed with the plants

and flowers in the nursery, Abbey and Kayla were in the back, filling orders. Like history repeating itself, Abbey taught Kayla about the roses the same way her grandmother had taught her.

“Now for this next one, we’ll use purple for the theme, and since it’s an Easter arrangement, we’ll choose the Lavender Simplicity rose. We only need a few to create a sense of harmony and balance. Notice how pretty the lavender smells. Do you like it?”

Kayla sniffed the flower. “It smells like lemons.”

“Very good,” Abbey said. “The citrusy aroma enhances each blossom and sends off a fresh smell, like a breath of Spring.”

“I like this one,” Kayla picked up a pink rose with a white stripe. “Can I plant this one in the dirt?”

“That’s a Candy Land climbing rose, and yes, a few will complement the basket. Remember, though, it isn’t dirt we use. It’s oasis that has been soaked in water so the plants will stay fresh and lively.”

“Do you have kids, Abbey?”

Abbey’s heart sank the way it always did when the subject of children came up. The simple question packed a powerful punch. She didn’t have kids and never would. With her advanced endometriosis, she’d had a complete hysterectomy a year ago. And it hurt. Thinking about it or talking about it was like rubbing salt in the wound, but she couldn’t hide her head in the sand and pretend either. She looked at Kayla and answered her. “No, I don’t have any children.”

“How come?”

Abbey looked into Kayla’s innocent blue eyes and got teary eyed. For a fleeting second, she allowed herself to fantasize they were mother and daughter, having a chat while decorating the house for the holiday. Biting her lip to choke back her emotions, she picked up a flower and tickled Kayla’s nose. “I guess it was God’s will.”

“I wish you were my mom.”

It was like a shot to the heart. Abbey had to get over this, she knew, but the wound was still fresh. Learning she could never have children had devastated her and she had to learn to deal with it. That’s why nurturing her roses was so important to her. They filled a void in her, a maternal instinct.

Blinking, she snapped out of her pity party and sucked it in. “Kayla, where’s your mother? You don’t have to tell me, but you can if you want to.”

“It’s all right,” Kayla picked up a Ballerina rose and twirled it between her fingers. “My mom’s a dancer. She didn’t want me ‘cuz ballet takes up all her time. She left me and my dad and went off to live in New York with the stars. If I grow up to be a prima ballerina just like her, maybe she’ll love me.”

Something in Abbey went ice cold. How could a woman turn her back on her own child, her own flesh and blood? It made Abbey sick. How many nights she’d cried herself to sleep, asking God why she couldn’t have children. Yet here was a woman who had so carelessly thrown hers away. With a tear in her eye, she reached over and took Kayla’s tiny hand in hers.

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m so sorry. I know if you were my daughter, there is no way in the world I’d ever leave you. Don’t you know how special you are?”

“I guess,” Kayla said. “Before I go to sleep at night, the last thing I do before I close my eyes is pray my mom will come back. Maybe you can be my mom.”

From the doorway, Abbey watched Brady place the seedlings on the soil heating table he’d installed. The device was used to speed up germination and growth with gentle bottom heat. The seedlings were for the Falling in Love rose. Sentimental fool she was, the rose was another one of her favorites.

As Brady gingerly caressed the satiny petals of the roses he was spraying, Abbey watched his every move. She wondered what his hands would feel like, caressing her. Kayla's words came back to haunt her. "I wish you were my mom." She wondered if Brady was involved with anyone. She didn't think so, but then again, she couldn't be sure. No, she mused, a smile curling her lips. Kayla would have blurted it out. As sweet as the child was, she couldn't keep a secret.

The scent of the roses made her think of romance. Romance with Brady. What would it be like to go on a date with him, she wondered, her mind wandering. What would it be like to kiss him? It would be...

"Abbey," Brady turned around. "How long have you been standing there? I was just about to check the soil temperature to make sure the thermostat's working. It's built-in and automatically activates the heating element if the soil temperature drops below 70 degrees."

"As long as it's safe," Abbey said. "Don't go frying my precious seedlings. They're my babies, you know."

"No problem," Brady rechecked the soil temperature. "Piece of cake."

"Well, it's just about quitting time," Abbey joined him. "And Kayla's on the bridge, practicing her ballet moves. She's quite good, very impressive. You must be so proud."

"I am." Brady washed his hands and started toward the door. "If you're not doing anything after I drop Kayla off at her ballet lesson, would you like to go grab a bite at the Carriage House? It's casual and we could take a walk around the grounds. What do you say?"

Abbey was pleasantly surprised. Smiling, she said, "That sounds great."

Lasting Love

Nestled in the rolling green hills of Vermont, the Carriage House offered a warm and friendly ambiance with true New England hospitality. Hand in hand, Abbey and Brady took a leisurely stroll amidst the Victorian gardens overlooking a fairy tale village. They stopped to admire a beautiful white swan execute a flawless dive into the mirror-still water. The pond rippled slightly as the bird glided gracefully across the stream.

“One of life’s little pleasures,” Brady said. “I’ve been bringing Kayla up here since she was a little girl. She always wanted to go feed the ducks.”

“Just so we don’t tiptoe around the subject all night,” Abbey said. “Kayla told me about her mother.”

Brady stared into her eyes. “She told you? How much?”

“Enough to know her mother prefers a life of dancing to her child. It broke my heart, Brady.” Abbey touched his arm. “It must have broken yours, too.”

Brady didn’t answer for a while. He gazed into the water before he looked into Abbey’s eyes. “We were all wrong for each other. We never should have married, but we did. My ex-wife made it crystal clear from the beginning she didn’t want children. Kayla was unplanned and a total surprise—not a pleasant one. Nothing was going to get in the way of my ex-wife’s dreams of being a dancer, not even a precious baby girl. As soon as Kayla was born, she was out of there. We’ve never heard from her since. She made it big, but at what price? Kayla has it all figured out. The way she sees it, if she becomes a ballerina, her mother will love her and come back home. It will never happen, and in my heart, I know Kayla knows that, too. It’s something she has to eventually come to terms with.”

“She seems so well adjusted,” Abbey said. “But have you considered counseling? It couldn’t hurt.”

“I’ve thought about it from time to time, but I don’t want to rock the boat, especially now when she’s doing so well. She talks about you non-stop.” He ran his hand through Abbey’s long ebony hair. “You’re good for her. You’re good for me, too.” He took her in his arms and kissed her.

After the kiss had ended, Abbey took a deep breath. This must be the day for bearing souls. Before she could stop herself, the words tumbled out of her mouth. “I can’t have kids. Last year, I had a complete hysterectomy which nearly destroyed me. Having kids was right up there with having my own floral shop. It makes me sick how your ex-wife could just turn her back on a child when I want one more than life itself. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve cried myself to sleep, demanding to know why. And then there’s Kayla, wanting nothing more than to win her mother’s love by emulating her. Your ex-wife has no idea what a precious gem she tossed away. I would be so proud if Kayla was my daughter.”

“Life isn’t fair,” Brady traced his finger along her lip. “I’m sorry you can’t have kids. You’d make a wonderful mother. Just because you can’t give birth to a child is no reason why you can’t have one. There are plenty of kids out there who would love to have you as a mother. With your warm heart and compassion, they’d be lucky to have you for a mommy.”

A lump formed in Abbey’s throat. “You’re pretty special yourself. I think your ex-wife was crazy to walk away from you. She left behind the best part of her.”

An amicable silence hovered between Abbey and Brady as they walked toward the restaurant hand in hand. They knew they’d just crossed a major milestone. The quiet was broken by Abbey’s cell

phone. Annoyed at the interruption, she sighed and answered. It was one of her employees. "Come quick, Abbey. It's the nursery. There's a fire. It's spreading like wildfire. Things look bad. Get here soon."

When Abbey and Brady reached the nursery, it was a burning inferno. The glass walls had collapsed and it was going up in a snarling hiss of smoke and flames. Firefighters struggled to get the blaze under control. Police and paramedics had arrived and Eye Witness News was on the scene, snapping photos.

"Oh my!" Abbey was out of the car the minute it came to a screeching halt. Her face was as ashen as the thick clouds of smoke billowing up into the night sky. Tripping over the gravel and cinders as she rushed toward the fire chief, she screamed. "What happened? I'm Abigail Jordan and I own this nursery. What happened? When I left, everything was fine. Please tell me nobody was in there!"

"No one was in there," the fire chief placed a hand on her shoulder. "Things could be a lot worse. Dead plants can be replaced. People can't."

Riveted with shock as reality filtered through her, Abbey screamed, "My roses! All my precious roses. All those hanging baskets of lavender. My exotic orchids and Easter lilies. Gone, all gone!"

"It's all right," Brady folded her into his arms. "Shh."

"What started it?" Abbey stared at the fire chief. "How did it start?"

"It's being investigated. At this time, the cause is unknown. Could be a gas leak. A neighbor reported hearing an explosion, and in a few minutes, your greenhouse went up like a house of cards."

In less than an hour, the fire was under control, but all that remained of Abbey's nursery was a bed of ash. The floral boutique across the covered bridge was unharmed but the rest of the damage caused by

the fire was insurmountable.

“Do you have any idea how long it took me to choose and cultivate each of my prize roses?” Abbey finally let the tears roll. Leaning on Brady, she sobbed in between hysterics. “My Lasting Love rose, demolished. And to think I’ll never smell the spicy aroma of my Sentimental rose again. And at prom time, I never had enough of the Falling in Love rose. They all wanted a corsage made of the pink roses, timeless and romantic. And not to forget the Arctic Flame rose, popular for keeping the romance alive. All my hard work, up in smoke.”

“Ms. Jordan,” the fire chief interrupted. “We know the cause of the fire. It was caused by a recently installed heating table. Some of the cable wiring possibly touched each other due to improper installation.”

Abbey shoved Brady away and stared at him, her eyes glinting with anger. “It was you. You said you knew how to install the heating table and I listened to you. You ruined my dream. Get away from me.”

“Abbey,” he tried to reach her. “There’s gotta be some mistake. Let me—”

“There was a mistake all right,” Abbey hissed. “Hiring you and trusting you with my roses. Get out of here and never come back. I never want to see you again.”

On Easter morning, Abbey pulled up to her floral shop, her heart heavy with grief. Feeling as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders, she crossed the bridge to where her garden nursery had been. Even before she got there, the thick scent of smoke lingered, a pungent reminder of what had happened the night before.

She wanted the world to stop spinning. How could Brady have been so careless? How could she

have been stupid enough to trust him? Somewhere deep in her subconscious, she knew she should have had an electrician install the heating table. So why hadn't she listened? Because she'd been attracted to him and had been well on her way to falling in love with him. She recalled how infatuated she'd been only yesterday when she watched him touch the roses with such tenderness. And the kiss they'd shared last night. Tears spilled down her face at the memory.

She kicked her foot in the rubble and screamed at the top of her lungs. Sobs ripped through her until she couldn't breathe. On Easter morning of all mornings, a time of rebirth and resurrection.

Hurling herself on the bed of ashes where her nursery had been, she kicked and screamed, not caring if the world came crashing down on top of her. Hearing footsteps behind her, she looked up and gasped.

An old man with flowing white hair stood over her, his gnarled body stiff and bent. He poked at her with his walking stick. "Get up, girlie," he commanded. "Quit feeling sorry for yourself."

"Who are you?" Abbey stood up and backed away. Other than the birds, there was no one around. She reached for her cell phone, only to remember it was in her purse in the car. Her heart pounded with adrenaline. "Who are you and where did you come from?"

"I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to help."

Abbey started across the bridge. She wanted to get far away from this nut. Who was he?

"Stop."

His words had a jarring effect. She turned around to see him rooting through the rubble with his cane. What was he doing, digging around in her dirt? Was he looking for money? Food? Was he homeless?