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Longley Park Conservatory
Otley, Yorkshire—1839

"It refuses to bloom!" Clementine Laird glared at the leathery evergreen leaves of a small potted plant. "Why will it not produce any flowers for me, Mr. Hedgley? I have done all I can to coax it, coddle it, everything but tuck it into bed at night. Yet it sits there staring at me as though it has no intention of ever making a blossom—and all just to spite me."

The old man's smile widened the wreath of wrinkles lining his weathered face. "It ain't time for t' Christmas Rose to bloom, Mrs. Laird," he said, giving the terra-cotta pot a turn. "It's barely November, and t' old girl don't usually set flowers

till late January or February. Ye cannot 'urry a beautiful thing, me dear."

"But I must hurry it!" Clemma set her hands on her hips and peered intently into the foliage, hoping to spot a bud. "I cannot exhibit my paintings unless I have a Christmas Rose among them. It is not enough to show holly and ivy, Mr. Hedgley. I must have a December flower, and the only one that blooms in that month is *Helleborus niger*—the Christmas Rose."

"She don't 'ardly never bloom in December, me dear lady. I done told ye that near onto fifty times, I reckon."

"But I have brought this plant inside the conservatory." Clemma spread her arms to encompass the vast glass-and-iron hall filled with ferns, bamboos, citrus trees, philodendrons, and other exotic plants. Surely such a living, warm, and very green place should lure the *Helleborus* blossoms out of hiding.

"Indeed ye 'ave, but flowers listen to God more often than they listen to us. Can ye not recall t' words of Solomon? 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under t' 'eaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.' Ye know them words as good as I do. And t' ones that follow 'em: ''e 'ath made every thing beautiful in 'is time.'"

"Yes, but—"

"'ose time?"

"His time. God's time. Yes, I know, I know." Clemma let out a breath of resignation and turned away from the uncooperative plant. "But if that naughty *Helleborus* has failed to bloom by Christmas Eve, then I shall be forced to title my exhibition something other than 'A Year of Flowers in Yorkshire,' and I shall be severely annoyed. Did I tell you, Mr. Hedgley, that I have invited the renowned publisher, Mr. Street, to come to Otley all the way from London? He has seen my other paintings and is quite interested in this collection. I have great hope that my work finally may be made into a book."

"Aye, ye 'ave told me," he said. "Frequently."

Clemma seated herself at a table upon which she had gathered a collection of late autumn flora—chrysanthemums, asters, rose hips, and ears of ripe wheat. Although she had planned to paint each month's flowers at the height of their bloom, in midsummer she had fallen behind schedule. Now the chrysanthemums were past their prime, and the asters had begun to droop. She must get them into water immediately or her entire project was likely to wilt as well.

"Will you stay to tea, Mr. Hedgley?" she asked as she began stripping away dead leaves. "I expect it will be brought down from the great house at any moment. You are more than welcome to join me."

"Nay, but thank ye, Mrs. Laird, for I must be gettin' back to me own cottage lest Mrs. 'edgley give me a piece of 'er mind. Farewell, then."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hedgley."

Clemma hardly noticed the old man as he moved down the path inside the conservatory. Absorbed in arranging the asters in a vase, she felt a flutter of panic in her stomach. This exhibition of her art was the most important thing to happen to her in many years, and she was determined to make it a success.

Raised near the little Yorkshire town of Otley, she had always dreamed of sailing the seven seas, riding horseback across the American frontier, bowing before Indian maharajas, and finding the source of the Nile. But at her father's insistence, she had followed the example of her three elder sisters and married young. It was a blessed union, for not only had Clemma loved Thomas Laird, but marrying him had made her the mistress of a fine manor and the wife of a wealthy man. Not a full year into the marriage, however, their grand home was struck by lightning. It caught fire and burned to the ground. Thomas perished in the blaze.

Clemma, who was badly injured, had deeply mourned the death of her young husband. She moved back to the family home of Brooking House to recover, and slowly she assumed full care for her aging parents. Somehow, in the years that drifted

by, her dreams of adventure and passion faded. She took lessons in the art school housed at nearby Longley Park, and she spent most of her time painting flowers inside the great conservatory. Now, at thirty-two, she knew she would never remarry, and she was far too settled to explore Africa or sail away to India. She was, she realized, a bit dull.

Gazing at the chrysanthemums she had placed in the vase with the asters, she leaned her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands. Dull. Dispirited. Boring. How had she withered away to such a pale vestige of her former self? How had she let herself become so . . .

"No!" she cried out, slapping her hands down on the table and pushing herself up. She would not succumb to this spirit of defeat that assailed her. Grasping a stick of charcoal, she turned to her easel and began to sketch the outline of the simple glass vase. God had blessed her with a good life, and she was a happy woman. She needed nothing, no one.

"Excuse me, miss!"

The voice came from the far end of the conservatory. It was the footman with the tea.

"Put it on the small table in the niche near the palm trees," Clemma called. "I do hope you warmed the milk this time."

"I beg your pardon?"

She glanced around the frame of her canvas at the footman. Tall and broad shouldered, he stared at her with icy blue eyes. Why was he not wearing his livery? Clemma wondered as she stepped out from behind the easel. And where was the tea tray?

"Did you say something about milk?" he asked, starting down the path toward her. She could see now that the man was not as young as she first had supposed, for his dark brown hair was threaded with silver, and subtle lines softened the outer corners of his eyes. Moreover, he did not look much like a footman. Wearing a long black frock coat with velvet cuffs, he sported an embroidered waistcoat of indigo blue and a silk cravat.

"Milk," she repeated, feeling a little off balance. "Indeed, I thought you had come about the tea."

"No . . . oranges, to be exact. Oranges and lemons."

"Oranges?" Her focus darted to the double rows of orange trees hanging heavy with fruit. "What can you mean, sir?"

"I wish to purchase a dozen oranges. I should be pleased to take several lemons as well. And some limes, if you have them."

"Goodness, I mistook you for the footman!" she said, feeling a flush of heat pour into her cheeks. "Not that you resemble a servant, of

course, for you are clearly a gentleman, and . . . that is . . . we normally do not sell the fruit grown in the conservatory . . . sir."

"What becomes of it?"

"The kitchens use it in providing meals for the art students who have taken residence at Longley Park."

"Am I to assume you are one of these students?"

He glanced at her easel, and Clemma felt intense gratitude that it was turned the wrong way around. For some reason, this man disconcerted her, and she was not sure why. He was certainly handsome, and he displayed the elegance and mannerisms of a gentleman. Yet he had a stilted air about him, an upright sort of stiffness that gave him the look of a mannequin in a shopwindow. It was as though he were not quite real, not completely human.

"No, sir," she said. "My student days are long behind me."

"Then you are the proprietress of the conservatory?"

"Oh no, for all the gardening at Longley Park is administered by Mr. Hedgley."

The man's dark eyebrows lifted. "Then may I ask who gives you the authority to refuse my request?"

Though the question was placed with civility, Clemma read the tinge of disdain it contained. But she had a ready answer.

"I am Clementine Laird, sir. My sister, Mrs. Ivy Richmond, is mistress of Longley."

"And this relationship gives you leave to make decisions regarding its citrus fruits?"

She looked to see if he were joking, but she recognized no hint of levity in his eyes. "My sister and her husband are away in India," she said. "But . . . no . . . I am not exactly in charge of making decisions here, for that would fall to Mr. Thompson, the family's solicitor. Or perhaps Mr. Wiggins, the butler, is responsible . . . though more rightly it might be the housekeeper, Mrs. Gold, for she is . . ." She paused and frowned. "At any rate, you may not purchase fruit from the conservatory. I am sorry."

Ducking behind her easel, she focused on her sketch of the vase as she hoped mightily that the man would go away. Instead, she heard again the sound of his footsteps approaching. Fearful lest he might peek at her drawing—which suddenly seemed poorly done indeed—Clemma rounded the easel and faced him.

"Sir, may I be so bold as to know your name?" she said. "I believe I may be compelled to report this incident of trespassing to the constable in Otley."

To her surprise, the man paled and took a step backward. "I beg you, do no such thing, Miss Laird. I come with no ill intent."

"Then who are you, and why must you continue to insist upon purchasing lemons and oranges?"

"I am a physician." He hesitated a moment. "My name is Paul Baine."

As he spoke those words, Clemma felt her blood plummet to her knees. "Dr. Baine?" she repeated numbly.

"Is my name familiar to you?"

"It most certainly is, sir." Trying to regain her composure, Clemma extended the stick of charcoal toward him, as if it were a sword that might protect her. From the earliest days of her youth, she had heard tales of the man who lived at Nasmyth Manor, the darkly shuttered house on a windswept fell some distance from the village of Otley. Dr. Baine kept himself and his practices hidden away—and it was well he did so, for had he flaunted his evils, the town would have driven him off.

It was rumored that women burdened with unwanted pregnancies slipped through the mists of night to knock on the door of Nasmyth Manor. In a day or two, they returned to their cottages, and not a word was spoken of what had taken place at the hands of Dr. Baine.

Not only did the man perform these unspeakable acts, but he also saw patients who had contracted diseases from their profligate activities. It was rumored that sailors came from Scarborough Harbour and the coastal cities of Hull, Whitby, and Filey to be treated with a special cure that Dr. Baine had devel-

oped. The fallen women who consorted with these men came, too, as did villagers who had ventured to Leeds for an evening of revelry and had returned with more than they had bargained for. The man who stood before Clemma had enriched himself by these most repulsive means. He was a fiend.

"Begone!" she cried, thrusting the charcoal stick at him. "Begone from this place, or I shall . . . I shall . . ."

"You need not fear me, Miss Laird—"

"I do not fear you—I revile you! Go away from here at once. As a Christian, I find that the very sight of you sickens me!"

A strange light flickered in his eyes. "You are a Christian. Of course." He shrugged his shoulders. "Nevertheless, I must have the citrus fruits, madam."

"Never. I would not allow you the smallest crumb from my table, let alone permit you to feast upon these beautiful oranges from my sister's hall."

"I do not want them for myself."

"No? And why should I believe anything you say?"

"Why should I believe anything *you* say? We are strangers, are we not? What you appear to know of me is only by rumor and reputation. I know you only by what you have chosen to reveal about yourself, Miss Laird."

"*Mrs.* Laird, if you please. I am a widow. And if you question my truthfulness, I shall . . . I shall . . ."

"You are not very good at making threats, Mrs. Laird," he said, one corner of his elegant mouth tipping up. "Madam, I have very politely approached you and begged permission to purchase fruit. It is not to be eaten by me, whom you seem to find so odious, but by someone who is in dire need of the sustenance it provides. And so I implore you, Mrs. Laird. I appeal to your Christian charity. May you please find it in your pious and devoted heart to assist one so far beneath you as my humble self?"

So saying, he fell on one knee, his arms outstretched and his head bowed.

Clemma was so stunned she hardly knew what to say. There could be no denying the depths of Dr. Baine's wickedness. Though she had never met him before, the tales of his villainous treatments had persisted so many years that they could not be anything but true. He rarely came into the village, and he never set foot in church. If he had, he would have been shunned by one and all.

Yet, this vile man had pointed out Clemma's Christian duty to act charitably. How could she refuse the fruit to one who must be in great need of its nourishment? But what if Dr. Baine planned to eat the oranges and lemons himself? What if his story were all a lie? Then she would be playing directly into his hand.

"Get up at once, sir," she said, irritated at the

indecision that plagued her. Did a Christian have an obligation to help those less fortunate—no matter what? No matter if the one in need was some bedraggled creature who had chosen to end the precious life growing within her womb? No matter if the hungry soul was a pestilent seaman who had spread his filth from port to port around the world? Oh, dear!

"Sir, I beg you to rise," she said again. "Your mockery disgusts me, and your posturing is insufferable."

"I shall rise only when you have permitted me to purchase oranges and lemons," he said, his head still bowed. "I cannot leave this place without accomplishing my mission."

Clemma stared down at the man's bent head. His dark hair was in need of a trim, but the collar of his white shirt had been crisply starched and pressed. The fabric was very fine, she noted, and the cut of his frock coat bespoke exquisite tailoring. No doubt his coffers had been well filled by those wretched and desperate souls who came to him in their need. Of course he could charge any price for his services, for no respectable physician would undertake such unmentionable tasks. Indeed, the practice was illegal, Clemma felt sure, though no one who had made use of it would dare to testify against him. Certainly Dr. Baine was the only such doctor in this entire region of Yorkshire, and his wealth must be immeasurable.

"Five pounds," she said. "Per orange."

His head shot up. "Five pounds for a single orange? You must be mad!"

"I am not. You can afford to pay my price, and as I possess the only oranges in Yorkshire on this particular November day, you have no choice. Agree to it now, or I shall raise the price to seven pounds."

"Preposterous!" he said, rising.

"No more so than the outrageous fees you surely must charge for your despicable practices. Five pounds per orange. And I shall place your money into the offering box at church, where it may be washed clean and then put to good use ministering to the needy in the name of Jesus Christ."

The icy blue eyes narrowed. "Mrs. Laird," he snarled, "you are not a godly woman."

"Oh, yes I am!" she cried, stepping toward him. "I worship Jesus as Lord and Savior, I go to church every Sunday, I do good deeds for the poor, and I do *not* associate with wicked men such as yourself!"

"Five pounds, then," he said, jerking his wallet from his coat. "Fetch me an orange!"

Clemma grabbed the money he held out and set off down the path toward the orangery. Such a horrid man! He did not deserve anything good in this life. She had half a mind to throw his money back at him and run outside to call for assistance in ridding Longley Park of such a miscreant.

But in the years since her husband's death, Clemma had learned to rely on no one but God and herself. She could certainly handle Dr. Baine without any help. Eyeing the double rows of healthy trees, she selected a small, greenish fruit and plucked it from the limb. There, that sour thing would do him very well.

When she swung around, she realized he stood directly behind her on the path. "Your orange, Dr. Baine," she said, handing it to him.

"I need another." He held out a second five-pound note. "I must have it. And how much will you charge me for a lemon?"

Clemma was about to send him away with another harsh rebuke when she recognized something in his face that startled her. He was pleading. His eyes were filled with a mixture of hope and doubt, and the set of his jaw revealed the utmost solemnity. At that moment Clemma saw the truth: He did *need* the oranges. He needed them desperately. He would pay her outrageous prices without further complaint.

"For whom do you seek these oranges?" she asked.

He gazed down at the pathetic little fruit in his hand. "For one who must have them." Pausing a moment, he added, "I cannot say more."

Without hesitation, Clemma reached up and tugged two more oranges from the tree. Then she

hurried to the edge of the small grove and pulled down a handful of lemons. "Here, take these, sir, and begone." She thrust them into his hands. "And do not come to this place again, I beg you."

"You will not take payment for the remainder of the fruit, Mrs. Laird?"

"I do not want it."

"You are good."

She lifted her head. "A moment ago you doubted my Christianity. Am I now different?"

"Perhaps. I believe all humans to be capable of change for the better. Your behavior toward me has demonstrated the validity of this notion. I am grateful." He gave her a small bow. "And now I see that your tea has arrived. I do hope the milk is warm. Good day, Mrs. Laird."

Clemma stared after him as he hurried away down the path. He passed the footman who bore a tray of tea things, and then he slipped through the glass door and was gone. Clemma started toward her easel, but the image of asters had been replaced in her thoughts by the memory of a pair of strangely beckoning blue eyes.

Paul Baine turned the iron skeleton key in the lock and pushed open the large wooden doors of

Nasmyth Manor. Fear of reprisals from the townsfolk had driven away most of the family servants years before, and so he walked alone to the mirrored coatrack and hung up his top hat and cloak. Moments before, he had stabled and fed his horse, and soon he would journey down to the kitchen to make a little supper.

But now he stood in front of the large dusty mirror and gazed at the man reflected in the cold glass. When had so many threads of his hair turned to silver? When had his skin become lined with traces of age? What had become of the little boy who once ran up and down the moorlands, skinning his knees, playing in brooks, and climbing to the top of the mount known as the Chevin? Where was the youth who had traveled away to London to learn the practice of medicine? Full of idealism, a young Paul Baine had dreamed of returning to his home and family, marrying a lovely woman, and filling a bustling office with his patients.

But both his parents had died while he was away at school, too soon to see their son fulfill his dreams—and thankfully too soon to know the depths of degradation into which he would fall. He had never married. And the busy medical practice had become nothing more than a castle in the clouds. Instead, frightened men and women crept up to his doors at night, filled with fear of Nasmyth Manor

and contempt for its owner—yet too needy to shun his services.

Oh, he was wealthy enough. Yet what good had all his money ever done him? Until now, none. But some months ago, a faint flicker of possibility had come to life inside his heart. The vague idea had given him hope. As it took shape, it had led him to step out, to act boldly, to do what he never thought he could do. And now . . . most unexpectedly . . . he had found reason to live.

Turning away from the mirror, Paul hurried down a marbled corridor and pushed aside a heavy curtain of green baize. He would not allow himself to think of the tart-tongued Mrs. Laird, whose sparkling eyes and pink cheeks had both surprised and entranced him. How long had it been since he'd seen a woman in the prime of health, a woman glorying in the sunshine that lit up her pale blonde curls? How long since he had engaged in an actual conversation with a lovely creature of intelligence and education? How long since he had felt even slightly human?

With a shake of his head, he dismissed the ache in his heart and hurried down a long flight of steps into the frigid kitchen. With the aged cook already gone for the day, the fire had died out as usual. Suddenly weary, Paul sighed and laid kindling on the hearth. The sulfurous smell of the match strik-

ing the brick and igniting brought him awake again. He must see to the tasks ahead.

Moving quickly, he located a juicer in the pantry and reamed the three oranges until their pulp was dry. Then he laid a few logs on the fire, poured the juice into a small pitcher, and started back up the stairs.

Clementine Laird was lovely and bright, he reflected as he made his way down the unlit hallways of the east wing, but she was far more acidic than any lemon. She held herself in high regard and occupied her time with nothing more useful than painting flowers. Though she claimed to be a Christian, her heart had grown hard and proud. No, indeed, Paul decided as he pushed through a door at the far end of the corridor. He would think no more of the vain woman.

"Alice?" he whispered. "Are you awake?"

"Aye, Dr. Baine. I canna sleep, sir. Me joints is achin'."

He approached the bed on which the poor woman lay. Instantly, the foul odor of her illness overwhelmed him, and it was a moment before he could bring himself to be seated on the stool nearby. In the waning light, he drew back the sheet that covered her and studied the worsening effects of the disease.

"I lost three more teeth while ye were out, Dr.

Baine," Alice said, pointing to the table where they lay. "If I live, I'll never be able to eat meat again."

As a tear ran down her pale cheek, he parted her lips and examined her diseased gums. "Ah, now, Alice, enough of that talk. You will live, and you will eat all the meat your heart desires—provided you mash it a bit first. Perhaps we shall even find you a denture in the market."

"Ah, Dr. Baine, ye know I canna pay for such a thing!"

"I shall buy it for you then."

"Ye be too good to me, sir!" Her worn hand reached out to stroke his cheek as he carefully examined the blackened lesions in her armpits and the enlargement of her joints.

"Do you feel movement today, Alice?" he asked carefully.

"Aye, sir." She began to weep again. "But not much."

Worried about the unborn child that swelled the woman's belly . . . *his* unborn son or daughter . . . he placed his hands on her skin until he, too, felt the slightest motion beneath them. "The baby lives, and you must live." He took the pitcher of juice and poured the orange liquid into a glass. "Now then, Alice, you must drink this."

"I canna drink, Dr. Baine! Me mouth 'urts too much. Me teeth is all out, and me jaws is—"

"Drink, Alice. If you wish to become well, you must drink this juice. All of it."

Despite the foul odor, he slipped his arm behind her neck and lifted her head until he was able to pour the juice into her bloodied mouth. At first, she gagged. But as the nourishing tonic began to fill her stomach, she clutched at the glass and drank and drank until not a drop remained.

"Better?" he asked as she dropped back onto the pillow.

"Ah, sir, ye have brought me 'eaven itself! Oh, God be praised! Have ye more? Dr. Baine, I feel I could drink that juice until I float away on a river of 'appiness!"

Paul reflected on the pert Clementine Laird and her parting words: *"Do not come to this place again."* The thought of facing her accusations and rebukes turned inside him like a knife. He was well acquainted with such sanctimonious souls. It was people like Mrs. Laird who kept him from the streets and shops of Otley, and it was their ridicule and ostracism that kept him from their social gatherings, their town meetings, and their church.

"I have a few lemons," he said, draping the damp sheet over Alice's ravaged body. "You will have sweet lemon juice at ten o'clock tonight. And then, you must try to sleep."

"But after t' lemons is gone, sir? Can ye fetch me more of them oranges? Please, sir!"

"It is difficult, Alice. I do not go out among people easily."

"Ye dread what they'll say about ye, eh?" She laid her hand on his. "'Twas such thinkin' as drove me 'ere, Dr. Baine, to Nasmyth Manor. I could not bear what folks might say about me in t' village. Me parents would've tossed me out of t' cottage. But ye gave me courage. Ye showed me 'ow to do t' right thing. Now ye must 'ave courage yerself."

Paul squeezed Alice's frail fingers. "We shall see," he said, standing. "And now you should rest."

As he walked to the door, he heard her call out behind him, "Dr. Baine!"

"Yes, Alice?"

"God will give ye t' courage," she said. "Pray, sir. Pray for courage!"

Paul studied the draped figure and then pulled the door to. Because of Alice, he thought, perhaps now God would hear his prayers.