

THE BONES IN THE
ORCHARD - SAMPLE

GRAVESYDE PRIORY MYSTERY, #3



PATRICIA RICE

ONE



MAY, 1815

"THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A PERFECT MAN," CLARE Knightley muttered as she picked her way through the wet grass carrying a basket of the first spring rosebuds.

She had told Captain Huntley that she loved roses. Did the vexing man bring her a bouquet? No, he had wondered if it were possible to grow more roses and promptly set out muddy pots of rose branches.

Her beloved was an engineer. A gardener, he was not. She sighed at the line of dead stalks and proceeded up the front steps, until she heard a horse cantering up. They had so few visitors in these rural environs, that curiosity had the better of her. She waited on the crumbling limestone stairs.

As a city girl, she knew little of horses. This one was black. The rider wore black, although his neckcloth had wilted, and his knee boots had acquired a layer of road grime. Overlong dark hair curled against the cloth—not a family member, then. Was he in mourning or just overly dramatic?

A large man, he swung down and made a sweeping bow with his tall hat. "My lady, dare I hope, my cousin?"

"No, you may not," she told him with assurance, taking an instant dislike to his familiar manner. This close, she could see his beard had been crudely shaved, his shirt cuffs were worn thin, and his coat had a decided sheen of wear.

Poverty did not make him a villain, she reminded herself. But it didn't make him a family member either.

"Is this not Wycliffe Manor?" he asked, pretending shock.

"Of course it is. There is a sign right by the drive you rode up. How may we help you?" She shouldn't be rude, she supposed. She simply didn't like the way he looked at her, then studied the sprawling gothic manor as if he'd possess it, if he could.

She could tell him the decrepit place ate money like a pig eats slop, but she politely refrained.

"My apologies if I have set off on the wrong foot, my lady. I am Duncan Reid, grandson of Lord David Reid, the late earl's brother. I am only back from India and just heard of the earl's will. Is Captain Huntley available?" His winning grin vanished, and he glared at her in stern disapproval, as if she might be a maid loitering on the master's lawn.

She really did not like his attitude—but now her dislike intensified. The man was a blatant liar and fraud. She turned up the stairs to the massive entry. Carved in good English oak, the manor's doors were works of art, but like the rest of the place, sorely in need of refurbishing. "He will not see you unless you have come with a letter from the estate solicitor verifying your claim. Good day to you, sir."

Quincy had a door open before she need reach for it. Over six feet tall, barrel-chested, and still muscled for a man in his fifties, the former boxer glared menacingly at their visitor.

"I demand to see Captain Huntley," the fake Mr. Reid shouted.

"If you are in need of employment," the butler intoned,

"please use the servant's entrance at the rear." He nodded in the direction of the stable yard.

"We need a footman," Clare called sweetly from the safety of the house as Quincy's very large son, and their only footman, crossed the vestibule carrying a massive, rolled-up carpet. Spring cleaning had commenced. He trotted down the stairs with his burden.

The visitor showed no interest in hard labor. Despite his probable assumption, the inhabitants of Wycliffe Manor did not lead lives of luxury and ease.

To Clare's delight, Hunt strolled around the corner, covered in his usual filth from working on the coal retort in the medieval crypt/dungeon. Her fiancé was a tall man, broad-shouldered, and despite his slight limp, he crossed the lawn with a military stride. Simply looking at him gave her pleasurable palpitations.

He'd seen her, and his protective instincts had him eyeing the visitor critically.

The fake Mr. Reid ignored the disheveled captain's air of authority and foolishly turned his back on him as if he were no more than a gardener. "I am a *Reid* and demand to see whoever is in charge, at once!"

Clare's beloved grinned devilishly and glanced at her, as if asking permission to handle their unwelcome guest as he wished. It had taken him a while, but the American captain had learned about the Reid family's eccentricities. Although Hunt had been named one of the heirs due to marriage lines, he was not related by blood, thus, he was the *only* heir with dark hair. And the only adult male at all, as far as the lawyers had ascertained, which was why they accepted him, despite all appearances to the contrary.

Genuine Reid heirs had several distinctive features besides blond hair. This impostor possessed none.

"We've need of a head gardener," Hunt said in crude

imitation of the vernacular, although in his American accent. "Come 'round to the back, if ye're applying."

"I am not a gardener or footman!" the pretender shouted. "I demand to see Captain Huntley!"

Clare left the cat to play with the mouse and carried her roses in to make a bouquet. Hunt might not be romantic, but they suited so well that just his rare smile thrilled her. Had she not accepted his invitation to this crumbling fortress, she'd never have realized that she didn't need to wear fancy gowns, glide about ballrooms, or hide who she was to find a good man.

Hunt not only accepted her tart tongue but *admired* her career as a novelist. Clare had not told anyone else except her best friend, Meera, for fear it would destroy her reputation and harm her nephew's future. Sharing this secret joy and heavy burden, and finding acceptance instead of the shame she'd feared, had been a marvelous relief. She might love Hunt for his understanding if naught else, but there was plenty more to the captain than that.

Wearing an apron and mob cap as if she were a housemaid, Meera emerged from the great hall covered in dust and cobwebs. The manor had been left empty for fifteen years, since the death of the last viscountess. Finding servants had been their task these last months since Clare and Meera had arrived.

"You are not supposed to be on your feet," Clare scolded her best friend. One of the many reasons they had brashly accepted Hunt's invitation to this rural abode was to escape the father of Meera's unborn child. The scoundrel was dead now and buried in the manor's graveyard, but the babe was large and Meera wasn't.

"A little exercise is good for me." With a Hindu mother and a Jewish father, Meera had been given opportunities Clare's aristocratic background had not allowed. Meera had studied as an apothecary under her parents' tutelage, but a

new law prevented her from attaining a license because of her gender. She knew as much or more than most male physicians, which made it difficult to argue with her about healthy practices.

"If we are to have weddings here, the hall needs to be clean," Meera insisted. "We need a proper housekeeper, though. I don't know how to clean the chandeliers."

Weddings, plural. Clare and Hunt had only met a few months earlier and were doing their best to be proper and circumspect, waiting until a clergyman might be found. Without a clergyman, it was impossible to have banns said in their local church, as required by law. And since the church was naught more than walls with rotting thatch, the distant rector had not seen fit to send anyone, despite their pleas. They'd all have to move elsewhere to marry.

But given the rashness of her cousin, Lady Elsa, and the Honorable Jack de Sackville, the man she'd known since childhood, proper and circumspect wasn't to be expected. They would be anticipating their vows, if they had not already. Only Lady Elsa's interest in establishing the manor's kitchen and Jack's launching of his newly purchased stable kept the two apart much of the day. The nights, however. . .

"To have a wedding in the manor, we'd need special licenses from the archbishop," Clare reminded her friend. "It might come to that, if Jack can summon the time to ride to London and Hunt can find the coin."

"Jack and Elsa are threatening to return to their homes to have the banns cried," Meera warned. "They still have residence there."

"Hunt has written to everyone he knows about our need for a clergyman. Unfortunately, he's an American and not an Anglican and knows no one in the church. I've asked the aunts for their aid, and they're looking into it." The Reid family had female aunts and cousins aplenty, just no adult

males. Clare proceeded down the corridor with her roses. "We must be patient."

So perhaps Lady Elsa's estate in Newchurch was their best choice. Clare hated to see them leave. No cook for the month it would take to read the banns and arrange the service. . . They would all have to travel a day's ride or more to celebrate with the newlyweds, and they had no carriage. Hunt's negotiation for a used one had fallen through. Uncertain whether her fortune would survive her bank's default, even Elsa couldn't afford a new one.

By noon, Clare had the roses in vases, scenting the family parlor. Cleaned up and ready to eat, Hunt stomped down the corridor. He checked to be certain no one was about, then swept her up in a hug and planted kisses all over her blushing cheeks.

"I love being allowed to do that," he said, once she was breathless. "Will you believe, after I dispatched the first rascal, *another* fool showed up declaring he was the parish curate and his *wife* is family? We will have to station the hounds and a gatekeeper on the drive to keep out needy hordes now that word of the earl's will has leaked out."

"A curate?" She pounced on this glimmer of hope. She dared a kiss to his bristly jaw, then took his arm as he aimed for the smaller dining parlor where a cold luncheon was laid out. "Do curates carry papers to verify their identity? Shouldn't a rector or vicar send one with recommendations or some such? It would be lovely if a clergyman could just materialize on our doorstep!"

"I'm new to your customs and ownership of mansions and have no idea. Have you heard nothing from our noble relations?" He handed her a plate to fill.

Starting early and working hard all day as they did, they'd come to rely on these brief mid-day meals to last them until dinner. Being rural, they could set their own hours without need of worrying about visitors, who really ought to

announce the day of their arrival. Apparently, the good weather had dispensed with that nicety.

Clare frowned as she filled her bread with meat and cheese and took a spoonful of preserved fruit. If they started having regular callers. . . Visitors would have to bring their own picnic baskets. The few pantry staples the former caretakers had put up were nearly gone, and the village market was limited.

"You have seen how irregularly our family corresponds. It's as if I am the only one bequeathed with the ability to put ink on paper. If we are very fortunate, one of them will stuff a parson into a carriage and send him. . ." Realizing what she was about to say, she looked at Hunt. "You said the second visitor claimed to be a *curate* and his wife is a relation to the earl?"

He poured ale into his mug and pulled out a chair for her.

Before he could answer, Meera and Walker wandered in to fill their plates. Walker was Hunt's African steward and best friend. Although Walker and Meera spent as much time arguing as they did working, they had fallen under the romantic spell of the manor. Clare hardly ever saw the two apart these days.

As if conjured by her thoughts, the scent of jasmine wafted through the room. The estate grew no jasmine. The late Lady Reid had favored a floral French perfume that clung everywhere, years after her death. Or her ghost lingered.

"Who claimed to be a curate?" Meera asked. "That dreadful man who insisted he was an heir this morning?"

"We had two visitors. I did not meet the second." Clare waited for Hunt to explain.

He was more interested in his food, but he swallowed hastily when they all waited in anticipation. "Older, garrulous gent, shabby, driving a pony cart. No sign of said wife. No papers. Just said he was the perpetual curate assigned to the parish."

"If he was assigned to this parish, it must have been during the viscountess's time, and that was fifteen years ago." Clare frowned. Lady Reid had had no money of her own to provide a benefice or upkeep for any church. The village had been deteriorating since the earl's death nearly thirty-five years ago.

Hunt shrugged. "I didn't ask. I just told him to come back with documents. He rode off more cheerfully than the first fellow."

Carrying a plate of freshly baked biscuits, Lady Elsa Villiers entered in a cloud of vanilla and spices. After setting down the tray, she doffed her apron to join them, as she had not when she'd first arrived, while hiding from her bullying brother. In the manor's protection, she had finally come out of hiding, if not entirely out of the kitchen.

Like any good cook, the lady was not svelte, but she was most certainly a blond Reid heiress. She helped herself to the luncheon she'd prepared and took a seat next to Clare. "Who are we discussing?"

"The villains showing up at the door, claiming to be heirs," Walker offered. "I think we should have voted to keep the curate, even if he is a fraud."

"A curate? Would that be the fellow the maids are nattering about?" Lady Elsa looked up eagerly. "I sent Marie to fetch greens at the market, and she came back all atwitter. Her grandfather said the curate has returned. Could it be true? Could we actually hold a wedding in the village?"

"Have you seen the chapel?" Walker asked disparagingly. "The roof has fallen in and pigeons roost on the rafters."

"And we are unsure as to whether we can use the manor's maintenance trust to repair it. The bank insists it holds the mortgages, and they are in the names of people who have long since moved away. Although. . ." Hunt rubbed the scar over his blind eye. "A chapel and parsonage usually belong to the church, so they shouldn't be mortgaged."

“The trust probably would not approve of tithing to the church from our maintenance fund. And we don’t have any other income to tithe. But if the *manor* owns the property, and the earl once provided the benefice. . .” Clare worked her creative mind around the possibilities. “Perhaps if this person really is a curate, he would know?”

“Well, there is one way to find out.” Meera finished her soup. “We must go into the village and see if the gentleman has lingered.”

Meera wanted to check on an Anglican clergyman? Clare tried not to raise her eyebrows, but she was pretty certain the look Meera and Walker exchanged was significant.

Oh my, *three* weddings? They definitely needed a church, one way or another!

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