

A CONTEMPORARY
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

PINECONES
AND
HOLLYBERRIES

CLARE
REVELL

Pinecones and Hollyberries

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Pinecones and Hollyberries
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Dedication

For Mum and Dad. Scotland just isn't the same without
you.

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalm 23:1,6. KJV

1

The door to her treatment room flung open. Rapid footsteps followed. “Octavia, have you lost your mind?”

Grateful she wasn’t with a patient, District Nurse Octavia Berry glanced up from the computer at her stepsister Kate, one of the doctors of the general practice in which she currently worked. She tried to look as innocent as possible, but from the glare on her sister’s face, she knew her secret was out. “Lost my mind how, Kate?”

Although there was only one reason Kate would burst in here between patients and only one way her secret could now apparently be common knowledge. And that would be because Kevin the practice manager couldn’t keep anything quiet for more than a minute. A second later her suspicions were confirmed.

“You’re leaving? No, let me rephrase that because it’s not a question. You’re leaving! With an exclamation

mark for added effect. I've just been asked to sign your farewell card. When were you going to tell me?" A hurt expression covered Kate's face and her voice trembled. "You could at least have told *me* if not anyone else. And why go to the middle of nowhere?"

Octavia sighed, guilt making her stomach cringe. "I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to find out like this. I intended to say something this Sunday over lunch, as everyone will be there. You know things aren't easy between me and Dad and haven't been for years. I go and see him and Auntie Mel as infrequently as I can get away with. As tempting as running away is, I'm not doing it. I'd fully intended to be upfront with everyone once everything was confirmed and set in motion. This will be a new start somewhere miles away."

"Will you never forgive Dad?"

Octavia shrugged. She ought to. It was the Christian thing to do, but part of her refused to let go of what he'd done. It wasn't as if she could forget, was it? "Honestly, I'm not sure I can. He ruined what should have been the best day of my life. Anyway, it's not as if he's forgiven *me*. He mentions it at least once every time I see him. And I'm sick of it."

"Hmm, OK." Kate dropped into the chair next to her desk. "Although, still wearing your rings won't help him forget. It kind of rubs his nose in it all the time. Or is that the point?"

Octavia glanced at her left hand, running her right forefinger over her wedding and engagement bands. "It's who I am, despite his best efforts to the contrary. I

kept my maiden name to shut him up, not that it worked."

Kate stifled a grin and twirled the end of the stethoscope around her neck. "To be honest, I think I'd have done the same in your place. Anyway, you have ten minutes before Mr. Franklin is due to have his stitches removed. And Miss Jones can wait a moment before you do a blood draw for me. Talk. And I want all the gory details, including how you kept the secret for so long."

Octavia studied her sister. "I didn't tell anyone except the practice manager when I got the job offer and asked him to keep it quiet, which he obviously failed to do. It's a year-long posting in the Orkneys. About as far north as you can get and still be part of Scotland. The island is three miles long, has a population of seventy-two people and several hundred sheep."

"That far north it'll be dark most of the time. You hate the dark, almost as much as you hate sheep. You're terrified of them, even toy ones."

She raised an eyebrow. "Blame Gerry and his zombie sheep for my fear of the animals. He terrorised me with it on a regular basis. And it doesn't get dark until three in the afternoon and light until around half eight in the morning, which let's face it, it can be this far south in winter if it's cloudy."

Her extended, or should that be co-joined family, was complicated to put it mildly. Her mother had died giving birth to her and her father had remarried when she was three. She had three step-siblings, Trevor,

Gerry, and Kate, and two half-siblings, Della and Frank. It was kind of hard being the odd one out at the best of times. She'd never felt comfortable calling her new stepmother Mum, and calling her Mel seemed rude, so she'd stuck with the more informal Auntie Mel. Gerry would frequently point out Auntie Mel wasn't *her* mother. At least in the early days when they were all finding their feet in the new life together.

Kate rubbed the back of her neck and nodded. "He did love to upset you. Still does to be honest. Does this island of yours have electricity? More importantly, does it have any Internet? You're a people person. How will you cope?"

"Yes, it has power. Don't know about the Internet, although most places have it now, and it does have a website, which is how I found the job. But it will have a postal service, so there is always snail mail. And before you ask, yes, I have resigned my position here, rather than taking furlough. They've found someone to replace me. She starts Monday."

Kate almost choked. "Monday? You're leaving here for good? When do you go?"

"The post is only for a year and it's Scotland, not Mars. I'm not sure what I'll do after that, but yes, I'm leaving here for good. My last day is Wednesday of next week. I'll overlap with the new nurse for a couple of days so I can fill her in properly. I fly out on Friday."

Kate gave her the exasperated older sister stare. "Have you even thought this through properly? What about your flat? December starts tomorrow and that's practically the holiday season. What about your

birthday? And Christmas? Is there a doctor in this hospital? Actually, is there even a hospital?"

Octavia laughed. "For seventy-two people? No. I'll be it. There is, however, a fully stocked clinic. In an emergency they send the air ambulance over, or a boat, depending on the weather. The island has an airport. You can come visit. And they do get post there, so you can post my birthday card. And the same goes for the Christmas cards. Personally, I'm planning on doing all the Christmas shopping tonight, wrapping it up and leaving all the presents with you on Sunday. And as for the flat? I've given up the lease. I'll find somewhere when I get back. Figured I could camp on your couch to start with. But honestly, I need this. I can't live like this any longer. I need to move on with my life and I can't do that with Dad breathing the past all over me."

Kate tapped the wedding and engagement rings on Octavia's finger. "That's the past."

Octavia shook her head firmly. "No, that's who I am. In order to move on I need to deal with all the left-over emotion and hurt. And I can't do that here where Dad is because it's getting mixed up with anger and that's not helping anyone."

"And you reckon moving seven hundred miles away will do the trick?"

"Seven hundred and thirty-three to be precise." Octavia grinned. "But that's the hope, yeah."

Kate shook her head, amazement shining in her eyes. "You are certifiably insane, woman."

Octavia threw her head back and laughed. "It takes one to know one. Besides, this is something I feel

I'm meant to do. Working together has been fun. And speaking of which, your locum placement here is half over. Have you decided where you're going next?"

Kate shook her head. "I'm hoping to be able to stay here. I've applied for the post, but nothing's been said yet. I definitely feel I'm called to be a GP rather than work in a hospital setting."

"Yeah, you're really good at the community part of the job."

Kate grinned and held up a hand. "And you can totally do this."

Octavia high-fived her. "And if I can't, then it'll be too bad. I'm tied into the contract for a year. Anyway, better get on if you still need this blood draw done. Send Miss Jones in now and then I can see to Mr. Franklin."

"Just think though, only seventy-two patients on the books instead of twenty-five thousand. It'll be a cinch."

As Kate breezed out of the room, Octavia let out a long sigh. Her gaze fell on her left hand. She still wore the rings because it kept would be suitors at bay and annoyed her father. But perhaps, it was also a sign that once she had known love. Along with a reminder to never give her heart away or trust again.

~*~

Nine days later, with two suitcases and carry-on bags over each handle, along with her laptop bag, Octavia made her way to the check in desk at Kirkwall

Airport on the main island of Orkney. It had taken two flights and over seven hours just to get this far and that didn't include the check in time at Heathrow for the first flight.

Her options now were a ferry which would take another two hours and forty minutes, weather permitting of course, or a flight of half an hour. That was assuming there was one today. The whole travel situation to get to her destination was weather dependent.

The man at the desk beamed at her. "Can I help yer?"

At least that's what she assumed he'd said. His thick Scottish drawl made it rather difficult to decipher.

Octavia tugged the ticket and passport from her handbag. For once she'd remembered not to pack them in her suitcase. "Hi. My name's Octavia Berry. I'm booked on the flight to North Ronaldsay. Is it flying today?"

He took her papers and checked them against the clipboard in front of him. "Aye. Are yer staying overnight?"

"I'm the new nurse. I'll be there for the year."

"Then that'll be twenty-one quid. Flight leaves in fifteen minutes. Take a seat over there with the other passengers."

Octavia paid for the flight and wheeled her bags to where three other people sat. She perched on the edge of a seat and let out a deep, slow breath. Too late for second thoughts, though maybe not fifth and sixth

thoughts. Still a change of pace was good for the soul. Christmas would be strange, rather than surrounded by a busy, noisy family with over excited nieces and nephews, she'd be alone.

Not being around family for her birthday wasn't an issue. No one ever celebrated it on the day, not even when she was a kid. It was like the actual day didn't exist for anyone other than her. But then after her eighteenth birthday, the day every part of her life fell to pieces, she hadn't celebrated it at all.

Octavia tugged her phone from her bag and ran a finger over the lock screen. She sent a quick message to the family group chat.

At the airport waiting for the final flight to the island. Journey has been good so far, just long.

She tucked the phone away, not wanting to know what snarky reply her father would send. He'd been more than usually rude when she'd told him she was leaving town, even going as far as to threaten to cut her off entirely when she refused to give him her exact new location. But honestly, that would be a relief if he did.

An older chap smiled at her. "Going to North Ronaldsay?"

She nodded. "Yes. I have a job starting on Monday."

He grinned. "Then you must be the new nurse. I'm Ray Baxter. This is my wife, Stephanie, and my nephew Sammy. He's coming to stay with us for a bit to learn crofting and help repair the dyke."

"Octavia Berry." Octavia shook hands with the couple and then held her hand out to the younger man.

She imagined him to be early twenties, but the Down's Syndrome made it impossible to guess accurately.

The younger man scowled, shoving his circular glasses back up his nose. "What Uncle Ray didn't say is my parents have gone on a cruise and won't let me stay home alone. They don't trust me."

"You did set fire to the kitchen," the woman chimed in. "Not sure I'd trust you after that."

Sammy folded his arms tightly and pouted. "Not like I did it on purpose. I was hungry and the pan with the sausages in got too hot. And they won't be around for Christmas."

"My parents won't be either," Octavia told him. "It'll be different for the both of us. Doesn't mean it won't be fun though."

Ten minutes later, the plane was airborne. Octavia gazed out of the window at the vast blue ocean beneath her. There was no going back now. She just hoped and prayed she wasn't making a mistake.

~*~

Ulysses Pine leapt out of his truck as soon as he tugged the keys free from the ignition. He pocketed them as he trotted up to the small building that served as air traffic control, arrivals, departures, and airport fire station. Not that they'd ever had a plane crash...yet. But it was better to be prepared.

He grinned at the man already on the porch, dressed in firefighter gear. "Hi, Joe."

"Cutting it fine, Uel."

Ulysses shrugged. "At least I made it. I've spent the last hour pulling a sheep out of the well."

"Again?" Joe's voice followed him into the building. "Maybe you should put a cover over the hole before the whole flock take it into their silly heads to follow suit."

Ulysses chuckled as he pulled the fire-resistant outfit over his own clothes, seeing the image play out in his mind. "I intend to as soon as I get home. You have the passenger list?"

Joe held out a clipboard. "Yep. Edgar radioed before he took off."

Ulysses read the sheet. Six passengers, a full complement. Ray and Stephanie Baxter were returning along with their nephew, Sammy Stead. Rosie and Jason Drinkwater, who ran the island's pub/hotel, ironically called the Drinking Hole, were returning from visiting family in England.

His breath caught as his gaze hit the last name on the sheet. He read it slowly, five times, stomach pitting in shock. Octavia Berry, district nurse. It couldn't be the same woman. Could it? He really hoped there were a dozen women with the same name in the country.

Because he couldn't see her again. Not now, not ever.

He swallowed hard several times, unable to find his voice. "I...is this right? The new nurse is Octavia Berry?"

"According to Edgar she's on the flight. Just as well Nance and I set the medics house up for her this morning. Lovely name, albeit an unusual one. Never

heard the name Octavia before.”

“Yea...” Ulysses tried to breathe and swallow at the same time. It didn’t work. He choked and bent over, coughing hard.

Joe thumped him on the back. “Are you OK?”

His eyes streamed. With frantic coughs wracking his body, Ulysses couldn’t respond with anything other than a nod. Finally, he straightened and took the glass of water Joe offered. “Thanks,” he managed. “Just choking on air.”

“Good thing there’s a nurse coming in on the flight today then. We’ve been fortunate nothing happened since Bella left last week. Especially with Elspeth getting close to term.”

Ulysses nodded, not trusting his voice just yet. He drank the entire glassful and set it down on the windowsill as the plane came into view. He fastened his firefighter jacket and headed to the fence that separated the small runway from the building. Another fence lined the entire airfield.

The plane circled, banking hard before lining up with the small tarmac landing strip. It landed smoothly.

Joe undid his jacket. “Never do need this fireproof gear. Edgar is too good a pilot to allow anything to happen.”

“Aye, but the day we don’t wear them, is the day we’ll need them.” Ulysses tugged open the jacket. “Sides, no one plans on a crash landing.”

The plane taxied to a stop and the door opened. Edgar jumped down and headed around to unload the

plane. "Afternoon, gents."

Ulysses nodded. Time to get back to the sheep before another one fell down the well. And before he knew for certain it was her. He'd rather remain in blissful ignorance a little longer. "Afternoon, Edgar. Right, I need to get back to the sheep. Joe, I'll leave the rest of them in your capable hands." He turned to leave and stopped stock still at the sight of the woman at the top of the steps.

Long dark hair fell from the edge of her red beanie almost to her waist. Her slender frame, assuming it was still slender, was bundled under a thick padded jacket. A triangle scarf in vibrant rainbow colours draped around her neck.

He hadn't seen her in years, but she was still unmistakably Octavia.

His Octavia. The only woman he'd ever loved. The woman he'd left nine years ago, almost to the day, and moved to the ends of the earth to avoid seeing again.

This couldn't be happening. He pulled his peaked cap down further over his face. Hopefully she wouldn't recognise him. The beard would help with that.

He wanted to move, to get back in his truck and return to his sheep and hide. But his feet were rooted in the ground, and he couldn't move. He couldn't even tear his gaze away as Octavia made her way down the steps to retrieve her luggage.

Joe headed over to greet her. He held out a hand. "Joe Bloggs. Air traffic control, fire fighter, and owner of the general store."

“Octavia Berry, district nurse.”

Her oh-so-familiar voice cut Ulysses to the core. Inhaling deeply, he forced himself to move. He scrambled into the building and hung up the firefighting gear. He leaned against the wall for a long moment, trying to collect his shattered nerves. He had to make a quick exit, preferably before he had to make polite conversation with her. He exited the building and headed towards his truck.

“Hey, Uel, before you go, come and say hello. Octavia, this is Ulysses Pine. We all do various jobs as I explained. Uel here is pastor, shepherd, and firefighter when needed, which fortunately isn’t often.”

Her cool gaze swung in his direction, before her pretty, green eyes widened in recognition. Her left hand swung into view as she flicked her hair over her shoulder. She still wore the ring.

Rings, he corrected.

His rings.

Ulysses’ cheeks heated beneath his beard. No. More than heated. Scorched so much they could heat his entire cottage for a week.

Joe clucked like a mother hen. “Get over here, man. Your sheep can wait a few more minutes.”

Unwilling feet carried Ulysses in the opposite direction from the one he wished to go. At least she seemed as shocked to see him as he was to see her. He held out a hand, and then dropped it, not sure what the proper protocol was for this twisted turn of events. Did he shake hands? Hug her? Kiss her? What was the correct greeting for the wife he hadn’t seen in nine

years since the day he'd abandoned her on the steps of the registry office? "Hello, Octavia."

"Ulysses."

Joe grinned. "You two ken each other?"

He swallowed, past the huge lump in his throat. He wished she'd say something. Anything. He hugged her briefly, then let go. After all, leaving her was something he excelled at. "Yes."

"Good. Mebbe you can drive Nurse Berry over to Doone House." He turned to Octavia. "That's the medic's house. Living accommodation and clinic. Nance, my wife, made up the bed and turned the heating on for you. There's enough food and milk for the week. Supply ship is due in five days and usually comes once a week. You'll need to put your order in two days before then with me at the store. But Nance left instructions on the table for you."

A smile lit Octavia's face. "Thank you." Then the smile vanished as her green eyes focused on Ulysses.

He pointed to the cases beside her. "Is that all your luggage?"

She glanced at her cases. "Yes, it is. Figured I wouldn't need that much. I tend to travel light."

"So, how do you two know each other?" Joe didn't drop it.

"Octavia is...um..." Ulysses' cheeks heated further. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't get the words past the lump that had appeared from nowhere in his throat.

Octavia shook her head. "I'm his wife."

2

Octavia sat in the passenger seat of Ulysses's beat up old truck, watching the animated conversation between him and Mr. Bloggs. Ulysses was the last person she'd ever imagined she'd find here in the back of beyond. Or ever to see again, come to that. And to say that ruined everything was the understatement of the year. She hadn't spoken to him in years. Or seen him since the day she'd turned eighteen.

Maybe the nursing contract had a get out clause. Maybe she could fabricate a family emergency and have to go back to England.

Her conscience thwacked her hard. That wouldn't be honest or right. No, she'd taken the job for the year, and she just prayed, several times, that God had a reason for all this. Plus which, she had no desire to go home. This was a fresh start. Perhaps the do over she'd longed for at one point.

Ulysses stomped to the truck, climbed in, and slammed the door hard enough to make the entire vehicle shake. He rested both arms on the steering wheel and buried his head in his hands.

An uncomfortable silence hung between them. Octavia finally broke it. "Well, this isn't at all awkward. You know we're being watched, right? He's

probably wondering why we're just sat here."

He brought his head up and nodded.

"Maybe you should move the truck. Have a nervous breakdown somewhere else."

"Joe..." His voice cracked and he coughed to clear it. "Joe asked why I hadn't said anything when we realised you were on the flight." He started the truck and slammed it into gear. "He's also now expecting you to live at my place and not at Doone House."

"Why?" Octavia glanced at him. That was the last thing she wanted. She didn't even want to be in the same room as him right now.

"Because you introduced yourself as my wife, present tense, and sharing a house is what married people do, especially on this island. You could have picked a better word."

"Like what? You want me to lie for you? Great pastor you are." The truck swerved as he pulled away. She grabbed tight hold of the handle in the door with one hand, bracing the other against the dashboard. "Try not to kill us."

"Why?" he hissed. "Wouldn't your father like that either?"

Not caring what her father would or wouldn't like in the slightest, Octavia bit her tongue and turned her gaze to the window. The landscape was plain and windswept. Nothing as far as the eye could see other than green grass, rock, and the blue horizon. "For your information, I said wife because it's true. We're still married, Ulysses." She tapped the rings on her finger.

"Great. Then I guess you're staying with me."

“No one will know if I don’t. I can stay at the clinic where I was expecting to live.”

Ulysses scoffed. “Oh, trust me. They’ll know. Everyone knows everything about everyone else here. There are no secrets on this island.”

Silence filled the truck again.

He cast a sideways glance at her. “Why are you here, Octavia?”

Octavia let out a deep breath. “The advert said the island wanted a nurse. I wanted a change of scene, and as far away from my father as possible, and this job fits the bill in both cases. I didn’t know you’d be here until I stepped off the plane.”

He snorted. “Guess God blindsided us both then. Does your family know where you are?”

“They know I’m in Scotland. The only person who knows exactly where I am is Kate, and she’s not telling a soul. I didn’t want to tell them where I was going at all but figured it’s far enough away they won’t come and visit. Besides which, Dad’s never really forgiven me for marrying you in the first place.”

He raised an eyebrow. “He hasn’t?”

“Nope. I should have left town a long time ago. Run away properly.” She braced a hand on the dashboard, the other gripped the door handle tightly as he swerved to avoid a stray sheep in the middle of the road.

“Sorry. The sheep get everywhere.” He glanced at her. “It’s a shame we didn’t run away nine years ago. Things would have been different.”

“We tried, remember?”