

Betraying Season

Chapter One

*March 1838
Cork, Ireland*

“Saints preserve us!”

The shocked cry and a wild jangle of harness yanked Pen Leland from her reverie. She gasped and looked up...and up. Two handsome gray carriage horses loomed, snorting and jerking as they stopped bare inches from her in the center of the cobbled street. One rolled its eyes and whinnied directly in her left ear.

She squeaked in alarm and leapt backwards...and into a puddle at the edge of the street that immediately saturated her new blue kid boots.

“I’m so sorry. I should pay more attention when crossing the street, shouldn’t I?” she panted to the driver of the gleaming maroon closed carriage when he had soothed his horses into silence. Poor man, he looked as shocked as she felt.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I’ll say ye should!” The silver-haired coachman crossed himself as he spoke, then pulled a red handkerchief from his coat and mopped his brow with it. “What were ye thinkin’ there, you shatter-witted—oh, pardon me.” Pen saw his expression change as he took in the fashionable cut and material of her cloak and bonnet. “Are ye all right then, miss? I didn’t mean—”

“No, it was my fault,” Pen apologized again as she gingerly stepped out of the puddle. Something felt unpleasantly wet and heavy around her ankles. Had the hem of her mantle gotten soaked as well as her boots? Drat! Ally would be cross if she’d ruined them already.

Pen’s former governess hadn’t liked the thought of her running out to the apothecary without escort, but she herself was in no condition to stir from her bed. And besides, it wasn’t as if this were London, where well-born young ladies did not go out unattended. But still, getting herself run down by a carriage her first week in Ireland wasn’t good form. Ally might decide she couldn’t go out alone here too, which would be simply horripilations.

“Are your horses all right?” she continued.

A small knot of passers-by had already gathered on the pavement behind her, necks craning. When they saw that there was no dying victim or bloody corpse, they dispersed,

looking mildly disappointed.

“Padraic, what was that? Why have we stopped?” called a woman’s voice, sharp and imperious, from the carriage’s open shutter.

“I’m sorry, yer ladyship. ’Twas a bit of a near thing with this young lady, but no harm’s done.” The coachman still looked white and scared, but Pen’s concern for his horses seemed to have calmed his anger.

“Who?” The carriage door opened and a woman looked out. “Padraic, you must be more careful!”

“It wasn’t his fault, ma’am. I stepped out into the street without looking.” Pen bowed slightly to the woman and got an impression of quiet opulence from her maroon shot-silk mantle, which matched the color of the coach itself so exactly that Pen found herself wondering if she had given paint samples to her modiste to match it. Her hat, in the new smaller, rounder shape, was as fashionable as Pen’s.

“By Danu’s veil! I don’t care if you want to destroy yourself, girl, but you might have chosen someone else’s carriage to throw yourself und—” The woman stopped abruptly as she met Pen’s eyes.

Pen had plastered her face with a contrite smile, the one she’d always used on Ally back in the schoolroom when she hadn’t finished her lessons for the day. But she felt it fade under the woman’s fierce scrutiny.

Her slanting eyes were a piercing pale green, like sea ice, arresting but so cold that Pen felt goosebumps rise on the back of her neck. The rest of her face was striking too, with aristocratic features that skated the slender line between elegance and boniness. Only fine creases at the corners of her mouth and eyes indicated age in her otherwise flawless complexion. It was a beautiful face, and a forbidding one. Pen took an involuntary step backwards—into the puddle again, unfortunately—as a cloud of perfume wafted over her like an actual breeze, musky with hints of clove and spice.

“I do beg your pardon—” she tried to say through a suddenly dry mouth. But as soon as she spoke, the woman’s face changed. All at once the frosty eyes glowed warm, and the thin lips curved into a kindly smile.

“Why, you poor child! I’m grateful you weren’t injured. Are you sure you’re all right?” The woman actually climbed out of the carriage and, taking Pen’s hand, surveyed her carefully.

“No, really, I’m fine. I’m sorry to have bothered you.” Pen stood still in surprise as the woman reached out to adjust her bonnet. It was an unexpectedly intimate gesture from a total stranger, especially one who had, seconds before, been looking at her as if she were a toad swimming in her teacup.

“You’re white as a ghost. Please, let me drive you home. What if you should grow faint from your shock?” She tugged gently on Pen’s hand.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that...” Pen trailed off. The woman’s gaze pinned her, making her feel like a gaffed salmon, waiting for the fisherman’s net.

“No, I insist. I am sure it will rain again any minute now.” The woman gestured to the small, heavily freckled boy who rode with the coachman, and who had watched the proceedings with open mouth. He leapt down from his perch and held the door open, staring expectantly at Pen.

“Where can I take you, my dear?” the woman asked.

Pen gave herself a mental shake. Though a brisk walk to clear her head would have been nice right now, not to mention giving her skirts and boots a chance to drip dry, she couldn’t refuse the legendary Irish kindness to strangers without being rude. Netted fish? Her imagination had been far too active lately. “To the Reverend Doctor Carrighar’s house in Upper Ogham Street, thank you.”

“Yes, of course.” The woman nodded as if she had known what address Pen would give and gestured her into the carriage. “Padraic?”

“Yes, mum. Upper Ogham.”

Pen started to settle on the back-facing seat but the woman motioned her to sit facing front, then seated herself opposite.

“Here I am, carrying you off in my carriage without introducing myself. I am Lady Keating, my dear. And you must be a visitor to Cork.” She leaned toward Pen and gave her a gracious, toothy smile. Only her teeth belied the perfection of the rest of her; they were unpleasantly large and yellow in that delicate face.

“I’m Penelope Leland, ma’am. I’m visiting Ireland with my former governess.” Pen wasn’t sure whether she cared for Lady Keating’s scent, overwhelming in the closed carriage; it was complex and exotic, but somehow disturbing. “She is married to Dr. Carrighar’s son.”

“How interesting. Yes, I am acquainted with the Carrighars. Which son?”

“The younger son. Michael.” Pen was surprised for a moment. Were the Carrighars that well known in Cork?

“I see.” Lady Keating’s fine brows drew down in thought. “Leland...” she murmured.

Pen answered her unspoken question. “My father is Viscount Atherston. We live at Mage’s Tutterow, in Hampshire.”

Lady Keating’s smile flashed. “What a charming name! I have not been in Hampshire for many years. In fact, I’ve not been to England since my son left Oxford.

Too busy here at home, alas. Are you enjoying your stay?”

Pen hesitated. How should she answer? Yes, because the country and the city alike were achingly beautiful and the people a delight? Or no, because her twin sister Persy—Persephone, really—was back at home, happily married after her first season, and not here to giggle and talk and share everything with?

“It is quite—” she began, but Lady Keating stopped her.

“I am detecting a bit of homesickness, aren’t I? Well, we must find some new friends to distract you. Come and take tea with me tomorrow, my dear. You shall tell me about your home and what you are learning here with your governess. Are you still in the schoolroom? I should have thought that a handsome young lady like yourself was past lessons.”

“I had my first season in London last spring, ma’am. But I wanted to continue my studies, and my family agreed that I should accompany my former governess to Ireland for a visit.”

“In London?” Lady Keating sat up straighter. “When were you presented?”

“In April, to Queen Adelaide. And again in July, at Vic—at Queen Victoria’s first Drawing Room.” Pen couldn’t keep the warmth from her voice. But it wouldn’t do to boast of their friendship. The order the Queen had created, DASH—Damsels At Service to Her Majesty, to reward Pen and Persy for saving her from an evil enchantment, was a secret. And besides, Persy was the one who had really saved Victoria. Pen still felt she didn’t deserve to wear the little jeweled figure of a spaniel with a star at the end of its tail that they had designed as DASH’s emblem, now tucked away in her handkerchief box.

“So you’ve seen her, then. How very interesting.” For a fleeting moment, Lady Keating’s face resumed that icy expression. It melted into a smile once more. “In that case, you must come and visit us tomorrow, and tell us all about it. Doireann and Niall—my daughter and son, of course—will be fascinated to hear your stories.”

The carriage slowed and drew to a halt, and Pen saw the blue-painted front door of the Carrigar’s house outside the window. But Lady Keating held her back.

“I shall send Padraic and the carriage for you. Will three o’clock do?”

Her voice was warm and pleasant. But Pen could hear the note of command underlying it, and thought about pleading a prior engagement. Why was this rather alarming woman being so friendly to her, a total stranger who had badly spooked her horses?

“Dr. Carrigar is an old acquaintance and highly esteemed in this city. It would give me great pleasure to make his guest feel welcome here,” Lady Keating continued, with a wistful smile.

Ah, so that was it. Having Dr. Carrighar's guest to tea would be a social coup. Well, why shouldn't she go? Lady Keating was probably just eager for London gossip. And it would be diverting to socialize a little, since Ally's condition was, of late, rather more miserable than 'interesting'. She would probably just spend tomorrow lying on the couch in the parlor again, a basin nearby in case her meager lunch of tea and toast made an unfortunate reappearance. Not surprisingly, her symptoms had kept them from undertaking any social engagements since their arrival.

"Thank you, Lady Keating. I should love to come."

"Wonderful! We shall see you at three, then." She glanced out the carriage window. "There, I told you it would rain again. Well, that's an Irish spring for you." She rapped on the shutter. "Sean! The umbrella for Miss Leland!"

Pen managed to climb the steps of the Carrighar's house without having her eye put out by the umbrella inexpertly wielded by the freckled boy, and paused to wave at the carriage. Just as the maid opened the door, she saw Lady Keating staring through the carriage window at her. There was a peculiar hint of satisfaction in her smile.

Niall Keating was reading by the drawing room fire when he heard his mother return from her round of visits. He slipped a ribbon into his place, then let the book carelessly drop to the floor as he yawned and stretched. The light was really too dim in here to read by, especially anything as long-winded (and in as small print) as a monograph on the effects of the new railroads on political stability in the German principalities. An interesting topic, though Niall cynically wondered if the author held stock in any rail companies. But what else did he have to do but read, stuck here in town under his mother's thumb? If she wouldn't listen to him, he'd have to take matters into his own—

"Niall! Doireann! I want you!" Mother called from the front hall.

Niall shrugged to himself and rose. He could picture her discarding her cloak, gloves, and bonnet like a python shedding its skin, knowing without a backward glance that one of the maids would be there to gather them up and take care of them. Niall never knew whether to be amused or disturbed by his mother's feudal behavior.

She breezed into the drawing room and stopped short when she saw him. Her eyes sparkled like polished peridots set in the carved ivory of her face. "Mo mhac," she cried, holding her hands out to him. "My son! Where is your wretched sister? I've news, important news! This might finally be the opportunity we've waited for!"

"His wretched sister is right here, dear Mother." Doireann stood with her back to the closed drawing room doors, wearing a malicious smirk. Niall knew she took great

delight in her ability to move noiselessly through the house, terrorizing new housemaids.

Lady Keating ignored her sarcastic emphasis. “Ring for tea, Niall darling, and come sit down. I think I’ve found a way out of the difficulties your sister has placed us in.”

Niall was about to ask what difficulties when he looked up at Doireann and saw her glare with cold green eyes nearly identical to their mother’s. Relations between the two women had been worse than usual lately. His mother and sister were coldly polite to each other most of the time, but they reminded him of boxers, constantly circling each other, looking for an opening. Mostly their bouts were private. Niall was grateful for that fact.

Mother ignored Doireann. “We are expecting a guest for tea tomorrow. A young lady who seems to possess all the qualifications your sister once had. As soon as I saw her I knew—”

“Qualifications!” spat Doireann, as if it were a rude word. “Is that what I am? A set of attributes for your use?”

A knock stopped her. One of the downstairs maids, her face carefully blank, came in with a tea tray that she set down on the table by the sofa. Niall murmured his thanks to her, but she had already turned toward the door.

Mother and Doireann didn’t even seem to notice her entrance; they sat rigid in their seats, eyes locked as if they still carried on their argument in words inaudible to others.

“Aren’t you one to talk about being used, Mother?” Doireann continued after the door had closed behind the maid. She smiled a soft, dangerous smile.

Mother grew very white and still. “How dare you!”

“Besides, I’m stronger than I was before.” Doireann tossed her black side curls proudly. “Is that what’s bothering you, mother dear? Having someone in the family who is as powerful as you?”

Unexpectedly, Lady Keating laughed. “As powerful as I? I am a Banmhaor Bande, and I doubt you’ll ever be my equal, even if you are my heir.” She stared at the teapot. It lifted itself and poured a thin brown stream of tea into a cup. The milk pitcher followed suit, and then the cup and its saucer drifted into her hand. The ancient ring that she wore on it, silver and green, seemed to glow faintly in the firelight.

Niall glanced at the door but it was safely closed. Why did Mother have to do things like that, especially here at the town house? It was one thing for her to be so careless at her own house at Bandry Court; all the servants there were used to demonstrations of their mistress’s unusual abilities, having worked there all their lives. How many times

had he asked her to think before she did things like pouring tea without touching the pot? It would hardly do for a servant to drop dead of shock. But with the mood she was in, Mother would probably not be willing to listen to him.

He concealed his irritation as he usually did, though it was getting harder and harder to do. “What exactly is so important about this guest?” he asked as he poured a cup of tea by more usual means and passed it to Doireann, who was glaring at the teapot so hard that it should have shattered.

Mother’s brow smoothed, and a smile Niall didn’t like crept across her face. “Yes, our guest.”

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