

Kiss Me, I'm Irish

by

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Time For Love

Book One

Kiss Me, I'm Irish
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*And in their courses make that round
In meadows and in marshes found,
Of them so called the Fairy Ground,
Of which they have the keeping.*

Michael Drayton, *Nymphidia: the Court of Fairy*

Chapter One

Emily Musgrave had plenty of time to think over her banishment.

Plenty of time to see her miserable expression reflected in the greasy glass windows of the carriage and four which bore her to an even more miserable future in a nunnery. Rain buffeted the carriage, causing the lantern light to flicker, which only added to the gloom of the stormy Cornish night.

A memory of Lady Tremaine's wizened little face rose before her. Emily's ears still rang with her great-aunt's glacial announcement. *Our family has always been Church of England, but never say the Catholic church is not convenient when one needs to tuck a wayward girl away in a convent. And that's what you are Emily. Wayward.*

How easily the older woman had said the words, as if her niece's world was not being pulled down around her head. Emily rubbed the locket at her throat, warming the gold, wondering what her beloved mother would've said about the proceedings had she been alive.

Of course, mama had rather I not been smoking a cheeroot with Jem the Irish stable boy. And then there was the gin. 'Blue Ruin' as Jem had called it. If that weren't enough, her indiscretions were discovered by her cousin. By then, Emily had also been succumbing to Jem's amorous embraces.

Emily frowned in the lowering darkness. It had just started to get interesting when they'd been interrupted. Warmed by the spirits, she'd allowed Jem's hands to roam a bit. When he'd planted a wet kiss on her lips, she'd succumbed to a fit of the giggles. Jem had taken that as acquiescence and had become more animated in his affections. By the time she'd stopped snickering, she'd actually found herself enjoying the activities. Alas, there was not to be a repeat.

Her maiden cousin—poor relations always did have an out-sized morality—had written a hasty missive to the strict Lady Tremaine, Dowager Baroness of Barham. Emily had soon been parceled off to that lady's fashionable Berkley Square address for etiquette training and a Season wherewith a suitable husband would be found, forever stamping out Emily's apparent predilection for falling Off The Path.

Lady Tremaine had often hinted darkly about a family Flaw which must be eradicated. Emily wasn't sure if the Flaw referred to the smoking, the drinking, or the Irish. My lady had a particular prejudice against the Irish. Charming they may be, she'd said in sepulcher tones, their great sin was in being poor. Even the Irish peerage apparently had pockets to let. Only a rich suitor—a duke even—would do for her grandniece.

I didn't want to marry an Irishman; I just wanted to kiss one. Emily bit her lip. *Don't want much to marry a duke either, or anyone for that matter.* She'd rather spend her days reading adventures in novels, since adventure wasn't likely to occur in the quiet rooms of the manse she shared with her cousin and a small army of servants.

But according to Lady Tremaine, marriage was her duty. To remain a spinster was to fly in the face of Providence. So for the next year, Emily had worn a backboard, entertained dancing tutors, endured modiste fittings, suffered comportment sessions...all sprinkled with French, Italian, and watercolor lessons. An entire year was spent never allowing her spine to touch the back of a chair, of pouring tea with a swanlike arm, of listening with absorption to the gentlemen while keeping her thoughts to herself. She'd persevered and even managed to please her high-stickler hostess.

Until Lord St. Wiggan.

The aging Scotsman suitor had a brogue so broad his words sounded like the barking of an asthmatic pug. How could she bear his wine and snuff-stained stock, false calves and lack of teeth? But

he was of the peerage and rich, vastly so. Apparently the Scottish had fared better than the Irish. Lady Tremaine heartily approved the match, accepted his permission to pay his addresses, and expected her now-biddable granddaughter to repay the horrid expense of the season by marrying well.

Emily rebelled in the only way she knew how. She seduced Donnelly, my lady's Irish footman.

She couldn't be entirely faulted on her choice of the opposite gender. It was the curse of the Irish with their sparkling eyes and indecent grins. And dimples. Oh, those dimples. And Donnelly had seemed perfectly willing at the time. His enthusiasm however had waned when they were discovered by Lady Tremaine and Lord St. Wiggan. The scene that followed was unpleasant to say the least. Poor Donnelly had been cast off without a character and Emily sentenced to the convent.

She felt terrible about the footman. Perhaps she deserved her grim future. Emily wasn't sure what living in a convent would be like, but she was fairly certain it would involve immense discomfort. They probably wouldn't allow her to read her stock of Minerva Press novels hidden in her brass-bound trunks. She suspected there would also be a distinct lack of jaunty music, sweetmeats, and appealing young men to flirt with. No doubt her time would be spent tripping on uneven flagstones while bent over with the weight of good works and silence.

And she'd be just as lonely as ever.

Emily touched her locket again, comforted somewhat by the familiar shape. Inside were braided strands of hair from both her parents, whom she missed desperately. Had they lived, perhaps she would've turned out better.

Perhaps she wouldn't be wayward.

The carriage gave a sudden lurch, slamming Emily up against the wooden panels of the carriage. No upholstered padding cushioned the blow—a well-appointed equipage was not something a girl like her deserved. Massaging her shoulder, she tried to glance out the dirty windows, but could see nothing except windswept rain, which alone seemed to bear her ever toward Our Lady of the Portal.

The whinnying of the horses was followed by another lurch. Emily gripped the strap, wondering what was going on. In the next moment, the carriage shuddered to a stop. Men shouted outside. Could it be highwaymen? In Cornwall? Near a convent?

She rubbed the glass with her fist and pressed her nose up against the surface. Deep shadows flickered outside. Emily's heart pounded with apprehension. If it was a highwayman, she'd soon be pulled from the interior and searched. Her hand went to her locket—her only item of value. Of course, she had a small velvet purse of gold for the nuns, but all she cared about was her necklace. Perhaps after the highwaymen robbed her, they'd steal her virtue before killing her. Her ragged body would be found in a ditch. When Lady Tremaine got word, she'd be cast into the depths of guilt for pushing her niece to such desperate actions.

Or one could hope. Emily shook away the melodramatic thought.

More likely the reason was something mundane. Perhaps one of the horses had thrown a shoe. Or a carriage wheel had broken. They could end up sitting for hours, sunk in the mud, waiting on repairs. She sucked in a breath as a new thought occurred. Perhaps she didn't have to resign herself to the nunnery after all! This was her chance to escape! Surely she could be as brave as the heroines in her books. They would not sit passively by when an opportunity such as this presented itself. Heart hammering, Emily knew she had to move quickly amidst the confusion. She snuffed out the interior lantern and swallowed hard, her mind playing out possible scenarios. When she had mustered her courage, she eased open the door. The howling storm careened into her body, nearly forcing the door shut. Emily yanked the hood of her black traveling cape over her head and slid from the carriage with careful movements.

As her feet connected to the slippery ground, she tried to discern the activity around her. Through darkness, rain, and mist, she realized the driver and a footman were struggling to control one of the horses, which reared and plunged, its screams frightful in the roar of the wind. She noticed one of the carriage wheels stuck out at an odd angle. At least she wouldn't be running into highwaymen.

Emily craned her head back and saw the tearing clouds rushing across the inky sky. She could just make out the evening star. The far-off glimmer sparked something within her, glinting with the enticement of refusing to succumb to her fate. She glanced back to the side of the carriage where the door swung in the wind.

Taking a deep breath, Emily eased along the side of the carriage toward the back, praying she wouldn't be noticed. She peered into the wet murkiness, seeing a blacker blackness not far off the road. It must be a wood. After the many stages from London to Cornwall, they'd stopped briefly at her estate to gather some belongings, so she might not be too far from home. Could she escape through the forest and slip back into her own room—into her own bed this very night? Or should she meekly accept her lot and moulder in a cloister for the rest of her days?

The temptation of freedom proved too strong, and with a quick look over her shoulder, she dashed toward the woods. Emily ran with the wind at her back, certain at any moment one of the coachman would follow in outraged pursuit. The cold air burned in her lungs. Fear forced her legs faster. Soon the slick mud and rocks of the road gave way to springy turf. By the time her lungs were fit to burst, she encountered pine needles and moss. *At last!*

Emily breathed in the refreshing pine scent as the trees drew her in, shielding her from the worst of the storm. Hearing no shouts behind her, she slowed and took care in stepping over roots and rocks by feel, her arms outstretched before her. The ground beneath became squishy, alerting her to the presence of a nearby bog. Testing each step first, Emily arrived at a large stone. She leaned against it gratefully, panting from her exertions.

I did it! I took the initiative!

But had she truly escaped her fate? Time would tell. Already the cold seeped through her garment, stealing into her bones. Spurious bravery apparently did not keep one warm. She struggled to see her surroundings, but it was too dark to envision much more than suggestions of trees. No sense in wandering further into the forest. Shivering with more than the cold, Emily took a few steps around the bulk of the large rock, using it as a preliminary shield should she hear footsteps of the coachmen. Her foot slipped on a root and she pitched forward, smacking her head against another stone. Tears sprang to her eyes as pain shuddered through her skull. After catching her breath, Emily put out her hands and discovered there was more than one large rock. Clambering to her feet, she ran her fingertips in an arc and realized she was in some kind of stone formation.

Her heart panged with dread. Emily didn't remember any such formation in her home wood. She must be closer to the convent than she first surmised. She widened her eyes in the darkness, willing them to see, but all she could make out were varying degrees of shadow. Stone circles were to be avoided, but she needed the protection of a good hiding place at the moment should the coachmen be in pursuit. Emily bit her lip, fear beginning to course through her veins. *Perhaps I should've stayed in the carriage. What good will it do to become lost and exposed to the elements only to die a slow, horrendous death? Or draw down some enchanted mischief on my head?*

Emily cursed her penchant for overly dramatic thoughts—due most likely to those novels she loved so much. She firmed her lips. *I am a grown woman, well out of the schoolroom, and mistress of my emotions.*

Unfortunately her pulse and chattering teeth did not respond to her attempt at rationale.

Emily opened her eyes wider, only to remember it made no difference in regards to her vision. “When will this storm blow itself out?” she muttered. “If only I could *see* to find my way home.”

A faint light flickered above. Was it the star she'd seen earlier? But the light was not stationary. Emily dropped to the ground with a gasp, certain it was an approaching lantern from the coach. They were searching for her! Had they heard her mumbled plea? But as she stared myopically at the light, she realized it was tiny and right overhead. Terror seized her. This was worse than any stern coachman!

The light was surely a piskey!

She'd grown up hearing the stories of Cornish piskeys and their enticing slock-lights—she'd

even fancied seeing the creatures herself when she was younger. Bogs and stone circles...oh, she should have known this was a bad idea! Her body began to shake.

Calm yourself. It's surely just a glow worm hanging from a tree. Emily squinted at the shining object. *Except glow worms aren't blue.* The light bounced around, growing stronger. Soon Emily became aware of a tinny sound. *Bells! Worse and worse!* If it was a piskey—and some were malicious—she could be piskey-led, disappearing forever into the forest, wandering in circles in a fog of confusion. Remnants of the old lore tickled her memory. Unless her cloak was on inside out! Emily scrambled to her feet and tore the damp cloak from her body. Fumbling blindly and gasping for breath, she struggled to turn it inside out before putting it back on.

Once the cloak was back around her shoulders, she crouched low, miserable and terrified, shivering from the wet seeping through the thin cotton of her dress. Her fingers automatically went to her locket. Emily wanted to cry out to the piskey—if that's what it was—to tell it to go away, but she pressed her lips together, not wanting to vex the creature. They could be very capricious. Her eyes followed the bouncing light as her respiration increased. A dry carriage on the way to a convent suddenly didn't seem so horrible.

The light dove for her chest. Emily jumped up to avoid it, her heart careening in her chest. She stumbled backwards. Her heel hit a snag and she pinwheeled back, falling.

And falling.