



MOLLY'S REVENGE



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KAY D. RIZZO



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CHAPTER ONE



CHANGES AT THE MANOR

SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD MOLLY MAGUIRE TWIRLED across the field of Irish clover. Her green gingham skirt and layers of hand-embroidered petticoats billowed like a dandelion seed in the wind. Overhead the sun peeked through clouds; the earlier storm had moved on to the horizon. The girl lifted her face toward the sky and began to sing.

“I’ll give to you a paper of pins,
And that’s the way our love begins,
If you will marry me, me, me,
If you will marry me.”

The breeze carried her lilting soprano voice across the fields between the Pembroke estate and the edge of town. When a capricious gust of wind loosened the satin ribbons beneath her chin, her poke bonnet swirled high above her head. Laughing, the girl gave chase. As she did, a riot of ebony curls broke free from the confines of the whalebone combs on each side of her head, and danced about her shoulders in wild array.

Abandoning society’s rules for a proper young lady, Molly executed a graceful somersault, righted herself, and quickly straightened her many layers of skirts. Only then did she hope that no one had witnessed her impulsive schoolgirl behavior. At that moment, the words to one of her father’s favorite Bible verses popped unbidden into her mind. “*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.*” Somehow the verse seemed

appropriate on such a beautiful day.

Over and over, the wind played tag with Molly's bonnet, letting it land and then flit out of the pursuing girl's reach. After several attempts, she caught one of the ribbons. Holding on against a determined gust, she turned her face toward the breeze and laughed. "Aha! I win!" For that one brief moment, she felt as free as the child she'd been when she first came to live at the manor. But the moment passed. Molly sighed and stepped into the shadows hovering about the cold stone manor house.

The Pembroke manor house cast an imposing gloom on the green fields alongside the river Shannon. As grand as the towering gray building appeared to passersby and villagers, it both fascinated and repelled the daughter of Ian Maguire, the late part-time Quaker lay preacher and full-time horse groom for the estate. The same was true of the lady of the manor.

Lady Glenola Pembroke, a diminutive wisp of a woman, reigned supreme over the tiny hamlet and the surrounding countryside in southern Ireland. Bedecked in the latest Parisian fashions, the woman became the center of attention whenever she rode to town. As her black phaeton passed, women curtsied. Field workers and shopkeepers paused and removed their hats out of respect.

Tales of bravery during the Cromwell invasion of southern Ireland, along with numerous other legends of heroism, had reinforced the stature of the local nobility in the eyes of the community. A spooked mare, a runaway phaeton, and Molly's father's brave rescue of Lady Pembroke had joined the family's lore. That Ian Maguire had been trampled beneath the horse's hooves only added to the vivid retelling of the yarn at the pubs and teahouse in town. Grateful for saving the life of his wife, Lord Pembroke hired Molly's mother, Enid, to be chief cook for the manor.

Before Ian Maguire's body was cold in the ground, Lord Pembroke had moved Widow Maguire and her twelve-year-old daughter, Molly, out of their one-room, thatched-roof cottage and into the manor house.

The estate had been in the Pembroke family for more than three hundred years. The current Lady Pembroke, the youngest daughter of an impoverished English baronet, came to the manor as a bride of eighteen. The aging Irish baron married the English lass, hoping the union

would produce a bevy of doe-eyed daughters and rakishly handsome sons whom he could parade before friends and family in London. Alas, twenty years had passed and no children filled the empty chambers; no heirs graced the family tree that was artfully stenciled onto one of the library walls.

Instead of the sound of children's laughter, a haunting silence filled the musty rooms off of the manor's silent corridors. Giant portraits of long-dead Pembrookes lined the walls of the great room, which had been designed to hold parties and luxurious banquets. The dining salon smelled of beeswax and turpentine. Twenty-two empty black oak Jacobean carved chairs guarded the massive, highly polished mahogany dining table. The tapestry hanging over the cavernous fireplace depicted the bloody battle of 1650 against the Cromwell invasion.

"God has cursed me among women," the grand lady lamented to anyone who might listen.

When Molly and her mother joined the household staff, their benefactor's wife latched on to the twelve-year-old with the deep-set eyes the color of the waters that lapped the shores surrounding the isle. If Lady Pembroke couldn't birth a daughter, she would turn the peasant girl into a lady of distinction and promise. The grand lady dreamed of the day she could parade Molly, as a trophy of her gracious benevolence, before her London friends. Once there, Molly would steal the heart of a titled young swain and return with him to Ireland to fill the Pembroke manor with the babies that Lord and Lady Pembroke could not produce.

That Molly's father had taught the girl to read and to do figures both surprised and pleased the titled woman. That the child had a unique gift with numbers pleased Lord Pembroke, a man who could never master the simplest of mathematical concepts. On Molly's thirteenth birthday, the aging aristocrat put the girl's talents to work balancing the estate's ledgers.

By her fifteenth birthday, Molly knew more about the Pembrookes' financial affairs than did their personal solicitor, Sir Thomas Malloy. As a result, the girl worried over the trend of unwise extravagance by the lord and lady of the manor. With a famine in the land deepening, how long could such reckless spending continue?

Yet, whenever she approached Lord Pembroke about the manor's

bleak financial picture, the old man's reply was always the same. "Please, Molly, don't bother me with figures. Numbers only confuse me." As the withered old man spoke, his brow would wrinkle. Wheezing between every two words, he repeatedly reminded her, "I'll take a French cravat to tie or a piece of horseflesh to judge over tabulating a column of numbers any day."

Most days Lady Pembroke spent a couple of hours in her private sitting room, instructing Molly about the intricacies of proper decorum for a lady entering London society. The girl learned how to glide into a room like a lady, how to flirt with one's fan, which fork to use when dining on lobster, and how to sit properly while wearing multiple layers of petticoats and a hoopskirt.

While most of the rooms in the manor were dark and shadowy, sunlight filled Lady Pembroke's sitting room even on rainy days. Some unknown artist had scattered tiny yellow and blue flowers across the walls. Gilt-framed paintings of angelic nymphs cavorting in English gardens added to the room's charm. On shelves across from the windows, a collection of delicate Venetian glass animals sparkled in the sunlight. The delicate aroma of lemon verbena permeated the air. The lady's tight, springy curls would bounce excitedly about her face as she mangled excerpts from Bach, Beethoven, and Handel on the mahogany fortepiano.

At the end of each day's lesson, the lady would give a reading assignment from an English author such as Chaucer, Pepys, or Shakespeare for Molly to read. While Molly enjoyed reading about brave knights and ladies from England's glorious past, the art of numbers made more sense to the girl than most people and their goings-on. Her one exception was a leather-bound book of sonnets by William Shakespeare.

Because Lady Pembroke habitually slept until noon, Molly spent her mornings in the library, working on the estate's books. As the giant grandfather clock in the hall gonged eleven, Lord Pembroke would peek around an edge of the library's double doors and grin. "Heigh-ho, little girl," he would say. "How are ye doin'? Isn't it time ye got a wee bit of sunshine?"

Then he would hobble into the room with his silver-headed cane, always pausing in front of the massive mahogany desk to catch his breath. While no one but Molly seemed to notice, she knew that nei-

ther the man's deep, bone-wracking cough nor his wife's reckless spending could continue forever.

From Cork to Londonderry, Ireland's Second Potato Famine had struck peasants and farmers alike. While the commoners scratched for every morsel of food they could find, Lady Pembroke dined on succulent roasts and on rich pastries. While the babies and young children in the neighboring communities grew pale and listless from the lack of proper nutrition, the lady of the manor commissioned Parisian fashion designers to create ball gowns of lace-trimmed satin. The woman imported new settees upholstered in silk brocade for the seldom-used morning room, while the lord of the manor added thoroughbred horses and luxury carriages to his stable. Lady Pembroke lavished more on Molly's gowns than any girl could ever wear.

It wasn't that Lady Pembroke didn't care about her people, Molly reasoned. The woman never noticed others' needs as long as hers were being met. And no one dared bring the current situation to her attention.

Not so with Molly's mother, Enid. While the head cook couldn't openly criticize her mistress's behavior, she was concerned that Molly would forget her Quaker father's values of thrift and simplicity. To instill a touch of reality in the young girl, Enid received permission from Lord Pembroke to take food leftover from the weekend's feasts, on Monday mornings before the lady awakened, to town to the Widow's Mite, a charity organization with which Molly's father had been involved. At the soup kitchen, the mother and daughter would prepare and serve hot meals to the hungry of the community.

Enid considered this to be Molly's and her special time together. On the walk to and from the manor, the mother would remind her daughter of her father's philosophy of living.

"Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, . . . and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself," she would say. "Jesus said this is the essence of God's law. Scripture says that 'inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' What an honor it is to prepare and serve food in the name of the King of the universe, to see God's approval in three-year-old Kaitlin Conners's dimpled grin!"

Molly would recall her mother's admonitions as she ladled hot turnip

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soup into a wooden bowl for Doyle, the odorous town drunk with the scraggly beard. And when scruffy little boys with matted hair and runny noses threw their arms around her waist in gratitude for the food she gave them, Molly forced herself to picture each one wearing the emaciated face of Jesus as depicted in the dusty religious tomes found in the Pembroke library.

Reaching the estate property while returning from town, Enid continued to the manor to prepare the luncheon meal for the lord and lady of the house, but the girl detoured to the stables to enjoy her favorite hour of the entire week. The stable odor revived Molly's fading memories of her father and their special times together. That she could ride Bettybelle, her favorite mount, delighted her. That she could spend time with Tavis Lloyd, the flaxen-haired young groom trained by Molly's father before his untimely death, was what she called the "dumpling in her soup."

The loss of Ian Maguire had created a bond between Molly and the young man. Tavis had come to the stables as a gangly fifteen-year-old orphan. Molly's father had taught him how to care for a stable of thoroughbreds, mentoring him to become an expert groom for the estate. And while working with the horses, Ian Maguire taught by word and by example what it meant to be a follower of the Christ, as the older man called his Savior.

After her father's death, the twelve-year-old girl trailed after the young man like an enamored pup. In her eyes, the young man was an Adonis and a medieval knight rolled into one package. And Tavis, sympathetically tolerating her adoration, paraded his knowledge of horses and life in general before her.

That Tavis had a sweetheart in town named Deidre didn't deter Molly's admiration. Thus, by default, Tavis became Molly's test subject for Lady Pembroke's instruction in the feminine art of charm and allurements. (Years later, the girl blushed when she recalled the day she first fluttered her Spanish lace fan at him and batted her eyelashes.)

Instead of being captivated by her attempt to flirt, the boy frowned. Thinking he missed her cue, Molly batted her eyes a second time and cast him a coy, teasing smile over the ruffled fan. His scowl deepened.

"What's wrong, Molly? Do you have a blinker in your eye?"

"No!" Frustrated and humiliated, she whirled about and stomped

back toward the manor. Her dramatic exit ended when her shoe became caught in her skirt hem, throwing her facedown in a mud puddle. Tavis hurried to help her to her feet. "Are you all right?"

The area of Molly's face not dripping with mud flamed a brilliant red. Fiery darts shot from her eyes. "Of course, I am all right! Why shouldn't I be?" Tears streaked down her muddy cheeks. She shook her arm free from his grasp and stalked toward the safety of the manor, leaving the confused young man scratching his head.

Similar attempts to practice on Tavis the lessons in seduction she'd learned failed just as horribly until Molly decided Lady Pembroke's techniques might attract aristocrats in London, but they definitely did not work on horse grooms and Irish farm boys!

"Tavis? Tavis, where are you?" she called. "Is Bettybelle ready to ride?"

"I'm in here." His voice came from the tack room. "And no, I haven't had time to saddle her this morning."

Molly eyed a shiny, black English barouche with silver festoons parked at the carriage house door. She frowned. "Don't tell me Lord Pembroke has purchased another carriage," the girl mumbled beneath her breath. "Or do we have a visitor? No one ever visits the manor unannounced."

As she passed two of the stalls on the left, a matched pair of thoroughbred Arabian horses caught her eye. Their magnificent coats, manes, and tails were freshly brushed. Molly bounded into the tack room. "What's going on? Who owns those beautiful horses?"

Tavis looked up from the silver buckles he was polishing on a harness. "Lord Pembroke's son, the Baron and Baroness of High Wycombe." His frown deepened as he rubbed the shiny surfaces.

"Really?" Molly blinked in surprise. "I thought the Pembrookes had no children."

"They don't, at least the missus doesn't. The baron is the son from Lord Pembroke's first marriage. The woman died in childbirth, so I've been told." Tavis placed the harness on a hook. "The baron's money came to him through his wife's lineage, not through Lord Pembroke."

"Really? What are they like?"

"What you'd expect—London nobility." After spitting out the words in disgust, Tavis lowered his voice. "Take my word for it, little

pigeon; this day will not end well. The baroness diminishes Lady Pembroke's fancy airs to the affectations of a wealthy merchant's spouse. You better get up to the manor and change into your fancy garb before the mistress calls for you. I'm sure she'll show you off before her guests."

Molly glanced down at her green gingham skirt. *This will not do*, the girl thought. She swung her bonnet as she dashed across the barnyard toward the manor. "I hope you're wrong about an ill wind blowing," she called to Tavis over her shoulder.

In the doorway to the kitchen, Molly paused to catch her breath. A tall, thin middle-aged stranger wearing a morning coat and dark gray trousers emerged from behind the door. He ran an insolent gaze from her face down to her walking boots and back again to her tousled curls. His upper lip curled with disgust. "Molly Maguire, I presume?"

"Er, yes, sir!" The girl's hands shook as she brushed her ebony curls out of her face.

The stranger bristled. "I am not a sir!"

"Oh, sorry sir, er, I mean . . ." She blushed and shot a quick glance toward the kitchen staircase that led to the third floor and to the security of the room she shared with her mother.

The man glared down at her as he would a cockroach crawling across the floor. His left eyebrow arched. "Molly Maguire, you may refer to me as Lord Pembroke." He studied her comely face until the girl reddened under his penetrating gaze. "So ye are the bonny lass to whom my father has entrusted the books of the manor."

"Uh, yes, sir, er, sorry, sir, er, Lord Pembroke." She dropped her hands to the sides of her skirt and executed a nervous curtsy.

"Go to your room and change into more appropriate garb. And please, wash the perspiration from your face. I'll expect you to be in the library in a quarter hour. I need to discover the havoc you have wreaked in my father's books and how much money you've bilked from my stepmother!"

At the word *havoc*, Molly's face flushed. At the word *bilked*, her mouth dropped open and then quickly clamped shut. That she might be skimming money from the Pembroke's till burned her to the quick. Fortunately, her parents had taught her that arguing with a person of title can only lead to trouble. "Yes, Lord Pembroke," she mumbled.

Molly could feel the baron's icy gaze follow her up the staircase.

When she'd rounded the corner at the top of the third floor landing, the girl opened the door to her room and tossed her bonnet on to the bed. Her hands shook as she threw open the doors of the armoire in the corner of the room. At the sound of a knock on the bedroom door, the girl froze.

"Miss Molly? Miss Molly? Do you need any help?" It was Anne, Lady Pembroke's personal maid and Molly's best friend.

Relief flooded through the girl. "Oh, yes, please come in."

A buxom fifteen-year-old with a crop of freckles and strawberry blond hair entered the room. "I thought you might. I was in the kitchen when the baron—" Anne removed a gown with a yellow and blue flowered pattern from the armoire. "Tightening your corset by yourself would be an impossible task. Also ye should tie back your hair from your face with a blue or yellow ribbon. Ye will want to emphasize your girlish innocence."

Molly bristled. "Innocence? I am innocent! I've done nothing wrong."

"I'm sorry." The girl dropped the confining garment over Molly's tangled curls. "I know that and ye know that, but Mr. Fancy Britches doesn't, so don't argue! Today is the time to use those feminine wiles Lady Pembroke has been teaching you."

Molly planted her hands on her hips and held her breath as Anne tightened the drawstrings of her corset. "Tighter, girl, tighter!" Anne coaxed. "You are lucky you weren't here this morning. Lord Pembroke and his hoity-toity wife have caused nothing but trouble since they arrived—shouting orders to the staff and insulting poor Lord Pembroke for his lax operation of everything from the stables to the kitchen staff. Even milady—awakened before ten this morning, if you can believe it—has been in a worrisome snit after meeting the baron." Anne lowered a dress over Molly's head and fastened the closures at the waist.

Anne grabbed Molly's hairbrush from the bureau. "Your hair looks like you were caught in a whirlwind. Whatever did you do? Run in the rain?" The maid continued her report on the morning's harried events since the couple arrived. "When the baron learned that your mother wouldn't take the time to inventory the larder before serving lunch, he ranted and raved. Your mother apologized and asked him which he would prefer she do first—count the jars of fruit in the cellar or prepare

a cheese quiche for the baron and his guests. You would have been proud of her.”

Molly smirked. Even a baron withered before Enid's calm, self-controlled logic.

“Of course, he reversed his orders in favor of the meal.” Anne giggled. “She's adding dumplings to a stew as we speak.”

Anne drew back the top and sides of Molly's dark hair and tied them in place with a yellow ribbon. After applying a puff of powder to Molly's cheeks, the chambermaid stepped back and announced, “There! Ye look ready to greet even the grumpiest of barons.”

Molly examined herself in the mirror above the bureau. The blue of her eyes appeared darker than usual, barely hiding the storm lingering somewhere in their depths. “I may look better, but I surely don't feel any better.”

Anne waved a knowing finger under Molly's nose. “Have you done the best job you could with the Pembrookes' finances? Have you tried to cheat the Pembrookes out of anything that is theirs?”

Molly shook her head. “Then you mustn't let the baron intimidate you. You must go into the library with your head held high, just like Lady Pembroke has taught you to do.”

Molly gulped. “That's easier said than done.”

“That's how I became milady's personal maid. I listened and learned. I know who I am; I'm good at what I do; and I never let her forget it!” Anne gave a sharp nod to punctuate her words.

Molly examined her reflection in the mirror a second time and took a deep breath. “I'll try—”

Anne's eyes flashed with irritation. “No! You won't just try; you will do it. If you don't, the baron will eat you alive. He'll blame you for any real or imagined errors he uncovers, including an out of place inkblot or a smudge in the margins. Ye must do it. Understand?”

Despite the knot growing in her stomach, Molly grinned. She'd never known Anne to display such fire.

The maid gave Molly a shove toward the door. “Get down there and prove to the man that we're not a bunch of country bumpkins!”

Molly chuckled as she straightened her spine and descended the main staircase. The girl glided down the long corridor to the library. Recalling Lady Pembroke's instruction on the importance of making a

dramatic entrance, she paused at the carved oak doors before rapping lightly.

“Come in,” the baron called. His voice contained an edge of irritation.

Molly took a deep breath, squared her shoulder, and said, “Lord Pembroke, sir?”

Seated at the massive mahogany desk where she spent most mornings, he bade her enter the room without glancing up from the open ledger. “Don’t dawdle, lass! Come in! Come in!”

Molly crossed the Persian carpet and paused in front of the desk. The man glanced up from the page he’d been examining. A pince-nez attached to a brown cord pinched the tip of his long, bony nose. A deep frown creased his brow. “Ye can’t see the numbers from over there, girl. Walk around the desk.”

She obeyed, stopping at one side of his winged-back desk chair.

“*Tsk!* Pull up a side chair and sit down! Do I have to tell you everything? Frankly, I can’t imagine how such an uneducated lass as you appear to be kept such tidy ledgers! But I must confess your records appear to be accurate.” The baron babbled on about the neatness of her columns of recorded numbers while she slid one of the armless side chairs next to him and sat down. “When my father told me he had a seventeen-year-old lass keeping his books, I had heart palpitations. But I must admit I am pleasantly surprised. I only wish you could have prevented my stepmother and my dear old dad from living so extravagantly.”

“That is not my job, sir, er, Lord Pembroke.”

“No, of course not.” He glanced over at her for the first time, carefully noting her hair and dress. “But by the looks of your notations, ye certainly have benefitted from Lady Pembroke’s largess with numerous dresses, petticoats, shawls, cloaks, hats—”

Molly bristled. “Whatever she purchased for me was her idea. I never asked her for anything.”

“Oh, I know! I know! The woman and her insane notion that she could pass off a common lass like you off as London aristocracy!” He clicked his tongue in disgust. “Besides, her purchases for you pale before the mountain of expenditures she made for herself.” Again he paused to express groans of displeasure. “But then, to be fair, my father did his own

damage to the family fortune as well, purchasing thoroughbred horses, and, by the looks of the carriage parked in the carriage house, a new brougham every year. Was there no one to curtail their extravagance?"

Molly stared down at her hands folded in her lap. Many times she'd brought the problem to the attention of Lord Pembroke, only to be waved away like a worrisome child.

"And how long has he had this cough of his? By the looks of the records, he's not called the local physician to the manor in over a year."

Irked at hearing anyone criticize the kindly old man, Molly stiffened. "Milord has had a cough since his bout with pneumonia two winters ago. Otherwise the Pembrookes have been incredibly robust." Feeling awkward discussing the health of her employer and friend with a stranger, she added, "Perhaps you should talk with him regarding his health."

"Ah, do I detect a note of loyalty from you, lass?" The man readjusted his spectacles. "Of course, you are right. You are a mere servant in his house."

Mere servant? By the way the Pembrookes treated her, Molly hardly felt like a servant. But she had to admit the man was right about her station—a servant she was.

"For the sake of my father's health and for the sake of his dwindling finances, my wife and I will be making some major changes around here. But for now, you are dismissed."

Molly started in surprise. "I thought you wished to go over the books with me."

"I've seen all I need to see. You've done an exceptional job, Molly Maguire, above and beyond your station. I must confess I couldn't find even a smudge or an inkblot on any page. While your services are appreciated, from here on out, I will control the financial records of the manor. You may go."

Startled by his abrupt dismissal, she rose to her feet and gave a short curtsy. Before she reached the door, Lord Pembroke added, "Please pass on the word to the rest of the manor staff that tonight at seven, they are to assemble in the great room. At that time, my wife and I will announce the changes we intend to make." When Molly failed to respond as quickly as the man expected, he waved her away. "Go! Go!"