

Irish Tearoom Mysteries



Druid on Arrival

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Excerpt from Chapter 2

“Mr. March?”

Penny turned at an unusual tone in Nessa’s voice. The bookshop owner was staring at the new arrival with something akin to awe saturating her features. She clutched a hardcover book to her chest, one Penny recognized. Their book club had read *So Scream the Stars* several months before. The book had not been a club favorite, though by the way Nessa was hugging the tome to her chest, it might have been their number-one pick of the year. Penny looked again at the newcomer. Unlike most of the tourists, he wore a tailored suit and a starched white shirt, open at the collar. His shoes shone as though freshly polished, and if she wasn’t mistaken, might have been made of Italian calfskin leather. Dark, overly gelled hair, steely gray eyes, a strong jaw, and lips that looked as if the slightly smug curve at the corners rarely vacated his face. It took only a moment before recognition struck her. The newcomer was Austin March, author of the in-her-opinion mediocre space opera, *So Scream the Stars*.

“Yes, dear lady,” Mr. March replied in what Penny couldn’t help but interpret as an overly dramatic and highly condescending tone. “And am I correct in assuming you to be the proprietor of this charming literary establishment?”

With an effort, Penny stopped her eyes from rolling toward the ceiling. Who talked like that for real?

Nessa, on the other hand, hurried around the cashier counter still clutching his book as if it were a flotation device in stormy waters.

“Mr. March, I’m honored to have you here,” she stammered, her blue eyes sparkling. “I heard you were visiting Ireland but didn’t dare to hope you would stop by my shop.”

“The honor is mine,” March replied with no discernible change in the patronizing expression. “And I see you have a copy of my latest.” He extended a hand toward Nessa’s book. “Would you like me to autograph it for you?”

“I—I’d love that.”

Penny watched her approach March with a teenager-like simper. Others circled around them as he produced a leather pouch from an inside coat pocket. From that he extracted a fountain pen. Even from her vantage point several yards away Penny clearly saw the pen was expensive looking, with a shiny black lacquer barrel etched with gold.

March glanced around the shop. “Is there someplace I may sit?”

“Oh, of course!” Nessa hurried to lead him to the back of the shop, where awestruck book shoppers quickly vacated the seats around the long table where book club, Luck of the Bookish, gathered to snack on goodies and drink tea while they discussed the month’s selection.

March removed his overcoat and handed it off without a glance to one of the people who’d arrived with him, which Penny could only think of as his entourage. He uncapped the pen with a flourish and glanced up at Nessa.

“You would like it personalized, I assume?”

“Yes, please.” Nessa folded her hands beneath her chin. “To Nessa Byrne, if you don’t mind. N-E-S-S-A B-Y-R-N-E.”

The author opened the book and wrote with a sweeping script. He then handed the signed book, still open, one of his

companions, who proceeded to dry the wet ink by blowing on it.

Another man, dark-haired and a few inches taller than March, spoke up from just behind the author's shoulder. "Perhaps Ms. Bryne has inventory she'd like you to sign?" He cast a questioning glance at Nessa, who was staring at the autograph as though she'd just been handed the queen's scepter.

"Oh, yes," she said breathlessly, as though hardly able to fathom her luck. "That would be brilliant."

She barely had time to turn toward the science fiction section when a half dozen men and women rushed to empty the shelves of Austin March books and pile them on the table before the author.

March beamed. "Quite a selection, Ms. Byrne. I'm humbled."

Penny bit back a snort. That haughty smile looked anything but humbled.

The dark-haired man picked up the top book from the stack, opened it to the title page and handed it to March, then readied the next. As the author signed, he passed each book to one of those who had entered with them. Their expressions eager, they huffed and puffed on the wet ink with enthusiasm, as if they'd been awarded the most important task of their lives. Fascinated, Penny watched the activity, which looked almost like a well-rehearsed assembly line.

The sleighbells jingled again. Three women entered, the last carrying a stack of books. Nessa glanced up and, to Penny's surprise, left the group surrounding March to approach the newcomers with a smile.

"Hello. What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Hi. I was in here yesterday," said a petite blonde. "I noticed you don't carry my book, so I brought you some." She set the stack of books on the counter.

Nessa looked skeptical. "Well, I don't—"

“They’re free,” the young woman rushed to say. “I’ve been carting them around Ireland, and figured...” She shrugged.

Penny stepped close enough to see the title. *Death of the Lizard Prince*, and beneath it in smaller lettering, *Catherine Collins*. She glanced again at the blonde. “Catherine? I didn’t recognize you without your costume.”

Yesterday she’d been wearing a wide leather headband with Celtic markings and had worn her hair pulled back starkly from her face. Today, golden locks framed her round face, giving her a softer, attractive appearance.

Catching sight of Penny, Catherine smiled. “Oh, hi. You’re the lady from the teashop.”

Before Penny could reply, a blast of laughter came from the back of the store. She turned to see March leaning back in his chair, watching them.

“Apparently you missed the training session for newbie authors.” His voice boomed through the shop. “They’re supposed to *buy* your books. You don’t give them away.”

Several of those surrounding March snickered, while a red stain crept over Catherine’s face.

“I just thought...” She cast a desperate glance at Nessa. “I mean, since you didn’t have any on the shelves.”

March didn’t give Nessa time to answer. “Did you stop to think there may be a reason for that?” He smirked at the woman seated next to him. “Like, it’s *boring*?”

One of Catherine’s dark-haired companions spoke up. “It’s not boring. It’s actually a really good book.”

Gratitude flashed onto Catherine’s face but dissolved when March spoke again.

“Says her *friend*.” He flourished his expensive pen and pointed the nib at Catherine. “Take it from me, sweetheart. Stop trying to foist your book on an unsuspecting public. Spend your time learning how to write, and they’ll seek you out.”

For one moment Penny thought the young woman may fire back a retort. But then her features crumpled, a prelude to tears. She whirled and ran out the door, her friends following closely on her heels.

The man standing beside March, the one who had suggested that he sign Nessa's inventory, looked troubled.

"Don't you think you were a little hard on her?" he asked as he opened the cover of another book and set it on the table before the author. "Have you even read her book?"

"Don't have to." March slid the volume toward him. "I saw her at the convention book signing. Her publisher is a second-rate operation, probably a vanity press. I'd bet my next advance she paid to have that book published and now she's hocking them like a vacuum cleaner salesman."

He returned to scribbling his autograph, though several of those around him fidgeted uncomfortably. One or two even sidled away.

Penny realized her hands had clenched into tight fists at some point during the conversation. Her nails had carved moon-shaped prints in her palms. What an arrogant jerk!

She marched to the sales counter and grabbed one of Catherine's books off the top of the stack, then announced in a loud voice, "I'll take this one, Nessa."

When she left, March' derisive laughter followed her out the door.



Penny sat in bed, propped up with pillows, and turned a page in *Death of the Lizard Prince*. To her surprise and delight, the book was beautifully written, and she found herself devouring the story of a young prince so disfigured by a fire that his skin looked like scales.

On the bedside table, her cell phone rang. Reluctantly she pulled herself out of the story and glanced at the screen.

Finn. He'd sent a text earlier breaking their date with a terse, "Can't make it. Explain later."

She snatched the phone. "Don't you know gentlemen shouldn't call ladies after eleven o'clock at night?" she chided.

"Ah, I'm that sorry, I am." His Irish accent always deepened when he was overly tired, and Penny immediately felt guilty for teasing him.

"I hope you know I'm joking," she told him. "Are you okay?"

A heavy sigh sounded in her ear. "It's been a long night. And it's not over yet."

She lay the book face-down on the mattress beside her. "I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?"

He heaved a humorless laugh. "Not unless you have a crystal ball that can identify a killer."

She sat straight up in bed, her spine stiff. "Someone's been killed?"

"Yeah, a tourist."

Relief washed through Penny's body, followed immediately by a stab of guilt. Though she was relieved the victim hadn't been someone she knew, especially one of her friends in Blarney Green, news of anyone being killed was alarming.

Finn went on. "The guy was on his way from town to the Leesiders Hotel. He took the path through that wooded area on the other side of the park, and someone jumped him. Cracked his skull. It was pretty ugly."

A shudder rippled through Penny's body. "I'm sure it was."

"Odd thing, though," Finn said. "The blow to the head killed him, but the killer didn't stop there. The victim had a fountain pen sticking straight out of his chest."

A fountain pen. A horrible certainty crept over Penny. She did know the victim after all. "Who was it?" she whispered, though she already knew the answer.

Finn paused. “I guess it won’t hurt to tell you. It’ll be all over town by morning anyway. From what I hear, the guy is famous in some circles. His name is—was—Austin March.”

End of Excerpt