

CHAPTER 4

LORAH PUNCHED THE feather-filled pillow restlessly as she rolled over, trying to find a comfortable spot in the over-sized bed.

“Tis terrible soft,” she muttered to herself. She wasn’t used to the luxury of a down-filled pillow and mattress. At home she would have been sleeping, alongside Alice, on a tick stuffed with straw and dried grass. Though scratchy, it was firm and didn’t engulf her like this pillow was. “Tis hot enough on this sticky night without being smothered by a bed full of duck and chicken feathers!”

Mrs. Fitzpatrick had insisted that Lorah stay the night after the long day she and the doctor had just finished.

“Come in, Lorah,” she had said when they finally arrived back at the house. “It is too late for you to be going home, and besides, there is bad weather approaching.”

The sound of thunder rumbling in the distance and the threatening banks of dark, ominous looking clouds racing across the sky had certainly promised a nasty storm. Concerned that her mam would be worried, and missing her after being away for five days, Lorah had held on tightly to her cloth bag. Shaking her head she had said, “Me mam will fret if I don’t go home. `Tis kind of you, to be sure, but I be thinking that I should away to me home afore the storm comes.”

Seeing her anxiety, Mrs. Fitzpatrick had placed an arm around Lorah’s shoulders and gently drawn her into the house. “Nonsense, my dear child! Because it was getting late and you and the doctor weren’t back yet, I sent Lizzie Mahood over to tell your mother that you would spend the night here. There is no need for you to worry.”

Now, as the storm rapidly approached, Lorah had to admit that she hadn’t been looking forward to the long walk home through the darkened forest.

As she rolled over, punching the pillow once more, a loud explosion startled her. Thunder boomed and jagged flashes of lightning lit up the room. The only thing missing was the rain. She pulled the colourful patchwork quilt up over her head and sank deep into the ocean of softness, trying to shut out the bright bursts of lightning and the noise of the impending storm.

Another blast of thunder sounded directly overhead. This followed by the snapping noise of branches breaking just outside the window. Then ... crack! The bed shook and the china jug and basin on the wooden washstand wobbled. Throwing back the quilt, she leapt out of bed. Her

heart thumped against her rib cage. She crossed over to the window and looked out. The constant flashes of lightning were turning the night sky into day, illuminating everything in sight.

Across the road, in front of the hotel, the once majestic maple tree, with its canopy of leaf laden branches, was now split in two, torn right down the middle of its thick trunk.

“Mercy me,” she cried, leaning out over the windowsill to get a better look.

With the next flash of lightning, Lorah could see the burn marks left along the jagged, torn edges of the tree’s trunk. More bright flashes coming in quick succession continued to light up the damage.

Somewhere in the distance a dog howled mournfully. Another one answered. Then a loud fear-filled yelp echoed through the trees following an ear-splitting explosion of thunder. The tremendous noise sent Lorah scurrying back to the safety of the feather bed. She lay quivering, watching nature’s display of fireworks bursting across the sky. It reminded her of the St. Patrick’s Day celebration back in Cork. Eventually she relaxed a little and drifted off into a fitful sleep.

Shortly, she was awakened by a loud whooshing sound. Her pulse racing, she sat upright and listened intently. There it was again. Whoosh! It sounded like a violent windstorm rushing by the window. The room suddenly changed from darkness to an eerie orange and yellow. The curtains blew, billowing like sails on a ship. Then, Lorah caught the smell of smoke.

Leaping from the bed once more, she rushed to the window and looked out. “Dear Lord,” she cried, making the sign of the cross. Behind the hotel, flames were rapidly climbing the trees, licking at the branches. The sounds of crackling and spitting became louder as the flames quickly devoured the tinder-dry pine needles and leaves.

Lorah stared transfixed at the fiery sight before her. The sounds of horses snorting and neighing accompanied by the noise of hooves pawing and kicking the sides of the stable, brought her back to reality. “Mercy me! The horses!”

She spun around and ran across the room. Flinging open the door she collided with Mrs. Fitzpatrick, who was rushing down the hallway, her long flannel nightgown flapping about her legs.

“There be a fire over behind the hotel,” shouted Lorah as she charged after Mrs. Fitzpatrick. “I fear that the horses may be trapped. We must do something.”

As she spoke, the church bells began pealing, letting the villagers know that something was amiss and their help needed.

Lorah hastily returned to her room, pulled on her dress and then dashed down the stairs behind the doctor who was struggling to put on his spectacles. "We have to get Dolly out of the stables," Lorah shouted, as she ran outside.

Summoned by the church bells, villagers were everywhere. A group of men and boys had formed a long line across the road from the stable to the pond behind the blacksmith's forge. Buckets of water passed from hand to hand. Someone yelled, "Faster men, faster!"

Lorah ran across the road past Mrs Potts who was furiously pumping water into an iron pot from the pump outside the hotel. On she ran, dodging people pouring out of the hotel carrying buckets and pots of water. As she approached the livery stable she was startled to see that some of the cedar shingles on the roof were on fire. Then she realized that the fire had already fully engulfed two shanties further up the hill and now flames were devouring the dry vegetation and the back wall of the stables!

The sound of petrified horses filled her ears as she tugged open the large wooden doors. A group of men ran past her. Some began opening stable doors to free the horses. Others dragged out harnesses and bridles, their lines like snakes slithering silently across the dirt floor.

"Get out of here!" yelled a voice to her right. She turned and saw Tom, the blacksmith's son, his face blackened by the smoke. "Get out!" he repeated and slapped Dolly hard on the hindquarters chasing her towards the barn door.

Lorah pressed herself against a stable wall as Dolly careened past in a panic. As she started to leave she heard the crackle of burning wood. Looking up she saw that the roof timbers were ablaze. She dove for the door and fled outside.

The night had been long and exhausting. The livery stable had burned down. Homes had been lost. The villagers were fatigued from fighting the fire. Too tired to go home, they all lay, like blackened corpses, scattered over the ground. Most of the horses were safe and rounded up. Unfortunately, one horse had died when it refused to leave its stable. Lorah shuddered, thinking of the horrifying noise the trapped horse had made. She hoped that it didn't suffer too long.

After seeing that Dolly was safe, Lorah had turned her attention to the families from the two shanties that had burned to the ground. Luckily all had escaped the blazing inferno, but not without a few burns from trying to rescue what little they could of their meagre belongings. "Come, sit down while I away to the doctor's to find something to help ease them burns," she said to a young woman who was cradling her crying baby. Gently brushing her hand across the woman's smoky, tear-stained cheek, she hurried off to the doctor's house.

On returning, Lorah lavishly applied ointment, made from marsh-mallow flowers and elm, to the burns. She bathed stinging, sore eyes with a weak boric acid solution and handed out cups of honey and water to ease throats, sore from the smoke still swirling in the air.

Dawn was breaking as Lorah slowly crossed the road back to the doctor's house. She was so tired. Her hair was straggly and smelled of smoke. Her dress, blackened and rumpled, was a mess. She looked as dishevelled as she felt.

After a delicious breakfast of apple pancakes and maple syrup, she thanked the Fitzpatricks and said goodbye. She needed to go home. She needed to see her mam and to change out of her dirty clothes.

Closing the garden gate, she began to walk slowly through the village towards home. Deep in thought, she didn't notice someone walking towards her until she heard a sneeze. Looking up, she saw a lone figure. Lorah assumed that this must be Annabelle Ponsonby, the girl that she had already heard much about from the gossip around the village. *No one else in Maplegrove would dress in such finery this early in the day ... if at all*, she thought. The girl stopped in front of Lorah.

"Well!" huffed the young girl. Her large, doe-like, dark brown eyes were riveted on Lorah's soot smudged clothes. Twirling the handle of her parasol slowly around, she continued to stare in silence at Lorah's appearance. Lorah was angry. She was tired and in no frame of mind to be scrutinized in such a distasteful fashion by this snobbish girl. Unlike some of the other villagers, she had tried to keep an open mind about Annabelle, since this was the first time they met. But now she was beginning to understand what they had been saying.

"Are *you* the Miss O'Grady I've heard so much about?"

"Aye, and I be thinking that you must be the young lady who be living in that big house yonder on the hill. 'Tis for sure we have all been curious as to who would be living in the new house that was being built."

Flipping back her light brown ringlets with a well-manicured hand, the girl smiled a slow, disdainful smile. "That's correct. My mama and I live there. Goodness knows why papa had to choose such a boring place to come to, and then leave us while he returns to Fort Henry in Kingston."

"So why did yer family settle here then instead of being close to yer father?"

The girl looked shocked that Lorah would query her. With a sigh she replied, "Mama's sister, my aunt, lives close by in Scottsvale. Mama wished to be near her after my uncle died."

"'Tis sorry I be for yer uncle's passing," Lorah answered with genuine concern.

“Yes, well,” continued Annabelle, tossing back her curls, “that doesn’t solve *my* problem! Nothing happens here, no theatre, no balls, nothing at all! And I have no friends. There are only poor, badly dressed, uninteresting immigrants who have never done anything with their lives!” While she was talking, her eyes were on Lorah’s soiled dress.

Furious, Lorah answered sharply “’Tis a fact we be poor, but at least we have manners!” She couldn’t help herself. She was enraged. “And we all care about our neighbours. Why just last night nearly everyone was helping to put out the fire yonder.” She pointed back towards the livery stable. Wisps of smoke were still drifting overhead around the burned timbers.

“Was Brendan there?”

“Oh aye, he be always ready to lend a hand.” *How can Brendan like someone who is so rude?* thought Lorah. She was trying very hard to mind her tongue, remembering that her mam always said that kind words were far more powerful than arguing, when you felt ready to explode. Now, looking into the eyes of this girl who considered Lorah to be inferior, she was surprised to find out that she felt sorry for her. *She will be very unhappy, thought Lorah, not because of being bored, but if she has such grand ideas and no manners, ’tis for sure she will be having no friends.*

Annabelle Ponsonby looked at the scorched ground and burned timbers and just shrugged her shoulders. Passing a lace cuffed sleeve across her brow, she gave the impression that the whole ordeal of the night’s events were quite trivial and certainly didn’t concern her.

Lorah was infuriated by the girl’s lack of concern. She couldn’t wait to get away from this insensitive person who obviously thought of nobody but herself. “’Twas nice to meet you Miss Ponsonby,” she said, trying to remain calm and courteous. “Now I must away to me home. It’s been a long night.”