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*Ireland, January 7, 1839*

The land lived and breathed and stirred his soul; he knew it as intimately as he knew himself. And yet as Rían Kelly crested the hill and stared in horror at the valley below, he did not recognize the place of his birth and the village that had been his home throughout all of his twenty-seven years.

He dismounted a horse as black as his own raven locks and saw his bewilderment and fatigue reflected in the steed's eye. Draping the reins loosely over the horse's neck, he tried not to think about the froth that dangled from the animal's mouth or his need for water and food and rest when there was none to be had.

They had ridden hard through the night on a journey that should not have taken more than a few hours. It was impossible to believe, in fact, that only the day before he stopped on this very hill to gaze at his beloved Cait. He struggled to find her house now as he remembered the last time he'd seen her; he'd kissed her good-bye and held her in his arms as he promised to return before nightfall.

For some reason, something had gnawed at him as he left her and he'd stopped and looked back to find her standing outside the stone house she shared with her mother. Her image had seared into his brain like a physical imprint that would never leave him. She'd stood in the front yard, her slender arms draped over the gate. Her hair was straight and long; parted in the middle, she kept the warm brown locks on either side of her face braided. On that day, she'd pulled the braids back, where they were joined at the nape of her neck and allowed to cascade over her thick tresses. The wind had nipped at the simple ivory

dress she wore, causing it to billow while the sun's rays had warmed her hair to a chestnut shine.

He'd had a sudden impulse to return to her, to scoop her into his arms, to feel her slender, firm body beneath that dress and to weave his hand into those braids until they came undone. He'd wanted to look into her blue-gray eyes once more; eyes that mirrored the stormy waters that surrounded all that was Ireland.

Instead, he waved. And when she blew him a kiss in return, he'd clicked his heels and turned his steed and headed toward Dublin.

The weather had been unseasonably warm; the sun's welcomed emergence rapidly melting a heavy snow that had occurred only the day before. But the wind had steadily increased as he neared his destination, bringing with it much colder air.

Mere minutes had passed before he was racing back down the steps of the building housing the Dublin Metropolitan Police Headquarters, desperate to reach his horse and frantic to return to Cait before it was too late.

He'd barely climbed atop his steed and clicked his heels when a storm the likes of which he had never witnessed before slammed into the city.

His horse was thrown into the side of a building, Rían's leg nearly crushed as it lay pinned between the animal and the stonework. Then the wind whipped again, lifting them both into the street where they were scuttled along like God's hand was at their backs.

He heard a thundering crash behind him and as he peered over his shoulder, he watched in horror as a church steeple dissected itself from its roof and spun through the air until it became impaled in a building a block away. Windows were similarly disengaging themselves, flying through the air as if possessed by demons before smashing into people and buildings. A tree became uprooted directly in their path and had his steed not risen onto his hind legs in panic, the roots might have clipped his muzzle.

Rián tried vainly to rein in the terrified animal but whether it was racing at full speed or the wind was catapulting them along, the effect was the same: they were unable to stop or even to slow themselves. He had no choice but to hang on with every bit of strength he possessed or risk being blown into the sky with all manner of debris.

Screams assaulted him from every angle and yet he never saw the sources of the cries; they seemed to be completely disembodied.

Then the sky turned as black as midnight and a torrent of rain smashed into them. He spotted a stable and managed to steer them toward it before the roof lifted cleanly off and spun above them with such violence that it was torn into a thousand pieces that sailed in all directions.

Somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind an inner voice directed him to move inland. He struggled to get a clear sense of where he was and where he needed to go but streets that had been familiar only moments earlier were now totally unrecognizable.

He didn't know how he managed to get out of the city. A sense of duty urged him to return; as a county inspector, he knew every hand would be needed to assist the survivors. But a stronger, more urgent voice spurred him onward toward home.

The winds and the torrential rains clawed at him and the night sky soon encompassed him. He found himself in a living hell of rising waters, downed trees and whole villages swept away.

From the best he could gauge, the storm overtook him sometime around the midnight hour. Buffeted from all directions, he was no longer able to distinguish between east and west and he had no choice but to trust in his horse to bring him home.

When the first vestiges of light arrived, it found him soaked to the bone, shivering and spent. And as his horse moved steadily onward with a driven sense to outrun the

horrors, Ríán stared around him with mounting alarm. Creeks he had passed only a day earlier had morphed into raging rivers they could not cross; and as the waters grew before his eyes, so did the debris they carried—clothing, roofing, furniture, crops. And then the bodies came, bloated and lifeless: horses, livestock and an occasional person sailing past them so quickly he could not snare it.

And he didn't know what he might have done if he'd managed to. He saw no other living human beings; no families searching for loved ones, no one assessing the damage around them.

He felt like it was the end of the world.

And now he stood on the last hill before the village, his energy drained beyond human endurance, staring into the valley where his home once stood—and where Cait had waved good-bye.

He scrutinized the terrain as if she might magically appear before him. It no longer mattered if every village between him and Dublin was wiped off the face of the earth. It only mattered that Cait was alive, she was well and she was waiting for him.

His eyes landed on the village church. It had been built near the top of another hill and now it towered, lonely and desolate, above a seething river that had not existed a day prior. Though he wanted nothing more than to sleep for days on end, he managed to place one foot in front of the other until he was slowly, painstakingly, making his way toward the lone structure. His horse followed though he would have understood if he'd simply collapsed. Perhaps it thought a warm dry stable, fresh water and good hay was awaiting it at the end of their journey; but Ríán knew the stable was destroyed, the water was polluted and dry hay was too much to ask.

When he spotted Father Fitzpatrick, he thought his eyes were deceiving him. Then others came into view: men, women and children of the village, gathered together on the steps of the church; lamenting the memories, the

livelihoods and the futures that were swept away with the waters below.

When they in turn spotted him, they rushed at him like one massive being. They all spoke at once, as if one lone county inspector had the power to change the course of their lives.

He ignored their pleas, their cries for help and their desperation. He had only one thought; only one mission that had driven him home without rest.

“Where is Cait?” he asked time and again, only to be met with silence, stunned eyes and traumatized expressions. “Where is Cait?”

He felt a strong hand on his shoulder, squeezing it tightly. As he turned in that direction, he peered into Father Fitzpatrick’s tired, lined face.

He shook his head and Rían tried not to hear the words he spoke. “No one has seen Cait, Rían,” he stated in a tone so flat, it was as if the emotions had been wrenched from him and only a void remained.

“That cannot mean she’s not still alive,” Rían insisted, turning to peer below.

The villagers gathered in silence around him as they peered toward Cait’s home but not even the roof or stone walls had survived to peek through the waters.

He forced himself to form another question. “Was there a stranger spotted before the storm?”

He turned to look in each of their faces. Their eyes told him they understood his question. It was the reason he’d left for Dublin. Four women had been murdered in recent days; four women who each bore the same description: long brown hair, gentle eyes, slender, petite and in their twenties.

And it was the reason he had raced from the Dublin Metropolitan Police Headquarters within minutes of arriving. They had not sent a dispatch to him, urging him to Dublin for crucial information on the cases. They’d known nothing about the string of murders.

Which meant he'd been sent on a wild goose chase as a monstrous storm bore down upon them. He'd unwittingly left the villagers to fend for themselves. And he'd left his beloved Cait alone with a killer.