

WHEN MIDNIGHT COMES

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Chapter One

New York City, 1869

Jack Keegan wandered the streets of his youth. He had come a long way from his boyhood days in this immigrant ghetto of New York City. He'd come even farther from the land of his birth.

Ireland. He remembered her well. A land of beauty so deep and mystical the memory made him ache. A land of ugliness so stark and painful he could still hear the howls of the hungry and the tears of the dying. Especially here, on this dark street where children starved in a land of plenty.

How long since he had said good-bye to this place? To his past? To her?

A lifetime. Where was she now? Was she well? Was she happy? Had she forgotten him? Despite his angry words and desperate need, he had never forgotten her. Despite his wealth and power and position, he was still a child of this place, a child of Ireland.

The mouth of a long, dark alley gaped before him. Jack took a deep breath, welcoming the burn of midnight air in to his chest, then stepped into his past. The smell remained the same – dirt, damp, death, and decay. In the depths of the darkness he heard scuffles and shuffles.

Rats. Dogs. People. Hiding from the unknown. For a moment he saw himself as they must see him, out of place here. A swell ripe for the picking.

A scrape from behind made Jack pause, then slowly turn. A boy, or perhaps a young man, small for his age

most likely, growth stunted by starvation and depravation. The silver hint of a moon revealed the hopeless glint to the boy's eyes and Jack tensed. He had been hopeless once and knew how desperate one became. This child could have been him twenty years ago, except for the knife. Jack had never relied on a knife to get what he wanted. He had cheated and he had stolen, but his wits had been his weapon.

"No need for that, son. I'll give ye what I've got."

The brogue Jack had fought so long and so hard to erase from his voice returned without warning. The boy's eyes narrowed with suspicion and his fingers tightened on the knife.

"Here, boy." Jack reached into his pocket. Without ever making a sound the child sprang forward, plunging the knife into Jack's chest.

As Jack fell, he heard someone screaming his name from a very long way away. Jack recognized the voice – a voice that had haunted him for the past ten years.

"Lucia," he whispered.

And then he died.

* * *

"Jack!"

Lucia Casale clutched her chest, feeling the slice of the knife deep into her own heart. They had been one person, one heart and one soul. Jack had turned away from her, but she had never turned away from him. Even in this purgatory where she existed, paying penance for sins she refused to acknowledge, she was still one with the man she had always, would always, love.

Once he had saved her from certain death, had kept her safe and warm and given her life. She must now try to do the same for him.

Her world was a gray place without substance. Lost and lonely souls haunted the murky mist, and she ran by each one without a word. She ran until her aching heart threatened to burst, and then she ran some more. At last she reached the place where the one who had power over them all could be found.

"Buon giorno!" she called. "Hello?"

The gray mist separated and he appeared, a tall, gentle-eyed man who reminded Lucia of her long-dead father.

"Lucia." He sighed. "What is it now?"

"Jack. He's dying."

"He's already dead, and on his way to..." He stopped, looked downward. Lucia winced. "Why would you want to help a man like him? A man who turned his back on your love? A man without faith, or hope, or charity. A selfish man who cares nothing for what is important and everything for what is not."

Lucia ignored his assessment of Jack. She understood Jack better than anyone. She knew his soul, and it was not as black as it appeared. Desperate, she tried again.

"You have to do something."

He was shaking his head even before she finished her plea. "You know I can do nothing."

"You're a saint and yet you can do nothing?"

St. Peter's lips tightened at her borderline blasphemy, but he was used to her irreverence. During

her lifetime she had been one of the faithful. But she had lost her faith and with it her chance to enter the realm beyond the gate he guarded.

“You know what I can do, and what you must do.”

“Then you will help him?”

St. Peter’s warm brown eyes saddened. “Not me.” He held out his hand. From his fingers dangled a worn, beaded necklace.

Lucia reached out and took the offering. With a deep sigh she fell to her knees and did what she had sworn never to do again. Her fingers trembled as they touched her forehead, her heart, shoulder to shoulder before she began: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth...”

Her voice echoed throughout the realm of purgatory. Her plea reached toward heaven and was heard.

Blasting heat, the stench of sulfur, crying, screaming, moaning.

Jack awakened into the darkest darkness he had ever known. Not a speck of light penetrated the cloak of black surrounding him. He reached out and felt nothing. He stood, but the absence of sight made him stumble and sway.

Where was he? What had happened?

He remembered walking away from his office in Manhattan, all the way to the ghetto of his youth. And then...

The alley. The child. The knife.

Lucia’s voice.

"Well, hell," he muttered.

"Got it on the first try, boyo."

Jack started and bumped into the owner of the voice, who stood directly behind him. The scalding heat of the unknown being's flesh made him back away. He did not want to touch that person again, nor be touched by him.

"Who's there?"

"Who d' ye think, Jackie, me boyo?"

Horror flooded Jack. He had thought never to hear that voice again in his lifetime. But then, his lifetime seemed to be over. "Da?"

I never said ye weren't a smart lad."

"Wh-what are ye doin' here?" Jack winced at his stutter, a certain sign of fear, and the return of his brogue, which made him again the child this man had terrorized.

"And did ye think I'd be anywhere else?"

True. If anyone belongs in Hell, that someone is Patrick Keegan.

"I didn't know ye were dead."

"And why would ye, runnin' away from mother Ireland as ye did. And ye but nine years old. I thank the good Lord yer mother went t' heaven long before ye left. It would have broken her heart t' find ye gone, yer bein' the only one of our eight t' live."

Jack refused to give voice to the grief and the guilt his father's words brought him. He had loved his mother, but her devotion to the drunken, mean-spirited bastard she'd married had killed his respect for her long before she'd died, the year before he'd run off. She had always adored Jack, lavishing all her love on the one child

who had managed to survive and thrive in their miserable world.

Beaten down by his father's scorn and his fists, Jack had been lifted up by his mother's love. He had begged her to leave Patrick, but she had clung to her stubborn belief in the sanctity of marriage. Her son's refusal to honor his father and pray for the man's soul had put a wall between them that could not be breached. She had died giving birth to her eighth child, the seventh to die, before Jack had been able to make things right between them. He'd lasted a year working alongside Patrick on their tenant farm, and then he had run to the land of promise – America.

Jack had not prayed since childhood. Throughout his life he had refused to believe in his mother's version of Heaven and Hell, reward and damnation, but from where he stood now, his mother had been right.

"Ye always despised me for killin' yer sainted mother with me base lust. Ye never understood what makes a man, but then ye were just as boy at the time. And what did I always tell ye, Jackie?"

"That I'd be just like you in the end. But I'm not," Jack said, with the same belligerent denial he had always used when talking to his father.

"Yer not? I see ye in the same place as me. And this is the end of the line, boyo."

He was not like his father. He was a successful, rich respected man. He had not married young and driven the woman he loved to an early grave.

A flash of Lucia's face the last time he'd seen her entered his mind – sad eyes, angry mouth – he had lost

her, but at least he had not killed her. He had much to regret in his life, but staying away from Lucia was not one of those things. He had, at that one point in time, acted selflessly.

“So, I’ll be tellin’ ye how Hell works, Jackie. It’s you and me, forever. Right here in this room. Explorin’ father and son joys, as it were. Joys we didn’t get t’ share on the earth.”

Panic flared in Jack’s mind. Eternity with his father? Had he been as bad as all that?

“Wait,” he blurted, grasping at anything to keep his father at bay. “What about Satan, the devil, hellfire, and brimstone? Where’s that?”

“A myth, me boy. Just a myth. Hell is eternity with the one who frightens ye the most.”

“Wait,” Jack said again. “I doubt yer frightened of me. So why are ye here?”

Patrick laughed. “The miracle of Hell, boyo. I can be here, with you, forever. But me soul, the part of me that fears and loves and hates, is with the one I fear the most. Me own dear father.” Patrick clapped his hands, then laughed like a fiend. “Enough talkin’, let’s get started.”

Before Jack’s father could touch him a scuffle and the wet, sucking slide of a footfall nearby froze them both. Jack tensed as fierce heat slid across his face.

“What’s that?” Jack whispered.

His father sighed. “The boss.”

“Jack Keegan.”

The voice made Jack shiver, though the heat intensified until sweat ran into his eyes. He didn’t want

to answer that voice, but when a hand shot out of the blackness and cuffed him along the ear so hard reality wavered, he croaked, "Aye."

"You can't stay here."

"Now wait a minute, sir," Patrick said. "He's here; I'm here. I've been waitin' a long time for this. Don't be tellin' me there's a mistake."

"He doesn't belong here. Or at least he doesn't yet. We have rules. Standards. Only truly black souls, like yourself, Pat, are gifted with eternal damnation. Jack has done wicked things, but he did not do them with evil intent. He did them to survive."

"So?"

An angry sigh hissed through the room, and flames lit the air for just a moment. But that moment was enough for Jack to see into the eyes of "the boss," and he knew he had to get out of there any way he could.

"Someone is praying for him. And if someone's praying for him, he isn't all bad. They want to see him upstairs."

The moist, sucking sound came again, and Jack fought not to cringe from the sizzling, acrid scent that burned the inside of his nostrils and made his eyes water. "But if you fail in the quest they give you, Jack Keegan, remember this place. Remember me."

A large, rough, pain-giving hand grabbed Jack by the chin and held him still. Sour, whiskey-pickled breath hit him in the face. "And me," said the voice of his father.

Just as quickly as he had been in the darkest of dark places, Jack suddenly blinked in the lightest of light. A breeze the temperature of springtime brushed his face; he

smelled flowers and freshly baked bread. He heard singing, laughter, and bells.

When his vision cleared, he looked up, up, up the heights of the tallest gates he'd ever seen. He couldn't see the top, which disappeared into white clouds that matched the sheen of the gates. When he brought his gaze back down, his eyes widened at the sight of a man standing in front of him. Tall, thin, with long brown hair and mild brown eyes, his face was unlined, but his gaze held the wisdom of centuries.

"Jack Keegan."

Though the words were not a question, Jack felt a need to answer. "Yes." He was glad to hear his accent had disappeared along with some of his terror.

"I am called Peter."

"Of course you are. That would be St. Peter? At the gates of heaven?"

Peter smiled. "Yes."

"Are you going to let me in?"

The smile faded. "I'm afraid not."

"Then why am I here?"

Peter glanced upward, as if listening to a voice Jack could not hear. Then his gaze returned to Jack's face.

"We have rules. Standards."

"I heard that – ah – down there."

Peter's mouth twisted into a grimace, as if he'd just tasted a very sour lemon. "Yes, I suppose you did. Let me explain. You aren't bad enough to stay there, nor good enough to enter here."

"Send me back to my life."

"Death doesn't work that way."

"I never heard it worked this way either."

"And have you heard from many how it works?"

Jack stared at the saint for a long moment. Peter had a point. "I suppose I haven't at that."

Peter acknowledged Jack's words with a slight bow of his head. "Allow me to continue. Someone has prayed for you. Prayed you be allowed a second chance."

Relief flowed through Jack. "Wonderful. If I get back soon enough, I can be in my office before anyone ever notices I'm gone."

Peter's sigh was long and aggrieved. "Second chances do not come so easily. You cannot just return to your life and go on being the way you've been. You must repent. You must learn right from wrong. You must change."

"There's nothing wrong with me." The belligerent tone returned against Jack's will as he recalled all the times his father had labeled him worthless through and through.

Peter raised one dark eyebrow. "Isn't there?"

"No. I'm rich. I'm respected. I'm happy."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"And do you recall how you came to be who and what you are?"

"I worked for it."

"At the expense of others."

Jack couldn't look Peter in the eye any longer, so he looked away. "What are you saying?"

"A human being is the sum of the choices he makes. Some good, some bad, some right, some wrong. You will

be given the chance to view three wrongs you have done to others in your lifetime. A chance to learn how your choices affected others and yourself. A chance to save your soul."

"How?"

"All Hallows Eve is tonight."

Jack glanced back at the saint and frowned. "What does All Hallows Eve have to do with anything?"

"On All Hallows Eve, the line between the living and the dead is at its thinnest. When midnight comes, return to the place I will send you. If you have learned wrong from right and come to understand what is truly of value, you will be given a second chance on earth."

"And if I don't?" Jack held his breath.

"You will wander the earth, alone, with but a lantern for company until you beg to be allowed the release of Hell."

His pent-up breath came out in a rush as Jack recalled the wet, sliding step of "the boss" and the heated touch of his father's fingers on his face. He swallowed the sizzling lump at the base of his throat. "I don't think I'll ever beg for that."

Peter merely raised his eyebrows and did not comment.

"God be with you, Jack Keegan," he said, and with a wave of his hand the gates of Heaven disappeared, and Jack stood in the midst of a graveyard at dawn.

He looked down at himself. He wore the same clothes of the night before, black frock coat, trousers, black shoes shined to a gloss, and black tie still tied about his neck. But the similarities did not astound him so

much as the differences. His crisp, white shirt was as white as it had been when he dressed for the office the previous morning. No sign of a stab wound or the blood that must have flowed. His watch and chain were gone, as were his cuff links, tiepin, and hat.

Had he suffered some kind of memory loss, then been robbed while unconscious? Could he have dreamed all that happened to him during the night?

Jack let out a sigh of relief. His father's touch and "the boss" had been but a nightmare. He would visit his personal physician before going into the office this morning and make sure he suffered no ill effects from spending a night in the open.

Glancing around, Jack saw he stood in a graveyard attached to one of the Catholic churches in the Italian ghetto. From here he knew his way home.

Shoving his hands into his pockets to warm them, Jack started toward the gate and almost immediately paused.

Where had the fog come from? The pink hint of dawn stretched across the eastern horizon, but in the graveyard the sun's rays did not penetrate the damp gloom. The gray mist swirled about the gravestones and rolled across the dew-sprinkled grass in his direction. Jack glanced down at his feet as the murky vapor washed over them. He shivered with sudden cold and glanced up just as a shrouded figure stepped from the dense fog and lifted a lantern.

The words of St. Peter came back to haunt him. "You will wander forever with but a lantern for company."

Jack shook his head. That had been a dream, a nightmare, nothing more. Then the figure raised its free hand to push back the hood of the cloak.

"Buon giorno, Jack," Lucia said.

He forgot everything but the flood of memories her presence brought to mind.