

# **A Night of Forever**

**Night series**

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# Chapter 1

## Cumberland, England 1859

Who was Aidan Callaghan?

The eternal question that constantly nagged at Mary Ellen. Two months ago, her brother-in-law, Grayson, had announced that a friend would be visiting. Mary Ellen had expected an elderly, titled gent who'd needed to borrow money. Perhaps a businessman wanting to invest in Grayson's shipping company. Or perhaps even an obnoxiously demanding general friend from the war. She certainly hadn't expected Aidan, a young man who had slipped into their home quiet as a mouse, brooding and mysterious as any hero from a gothic novel.

She sighed and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. For an hour now she'd been reclining on a blanket hidden behind a brittle patch of dying daisies, a book in hand. Then he had arrived. One moment the bench under the maple had been empty. Five minutes later she'd looked up while turning a page and there he was, reading his own novel.

She hadn't dared to call out a greeting, or even stand to leave. That would only draw attention and she'd rather watch him unnoticed. Not that she studied him because she cared. No. Of course not. Aidan was too... too boring. Too... too serious looking...too quiet and much, much too much of a no one to pique her feminine interests. She'd decided years ago she would only marry a man with a cheerful disposition and, of course, deep pockets.

But she could admit, at least to herself, that Aidan Callaghan intrigued her.

Where had he come from? Who was his family? Where had he lived most of his life?

Other than Grayson, no one seemed to know the man. And getting information from Grayson was like getting her niece Hanna to eat cabbage. Impossible and frustrating.

Grayson and Aidan had met during the war, at a battle or something or another. Aidan had, apparently, saved Grayson's life. A dashing story indeed. She might have believed the rumor, if the man's personality wasn't so completely dull. He'd barely said a string of words to her since arriving those months ago. He mostly sat quietly in corners, merely watching their antics. And in a household of four females, there were plenty of antics.

A brown skirt suddenly appeared before her, blocking her view. "You're always staring at him," her younger sister Sally complained.

Mary Ellen resisted the urge to jerk her down, knowing Aidan had already seen them. Her hiding place had been uncovered. "Whatever do you mean?" Mary Ellen

pushed herself upright, feigning indifference. She hadn't heard her sister approach, for she'd been too involved in thinking about Aidan.

Sally plopped down beside her, the dress she wore settling around her coltish legs. At fifteen she wasn't quite an adult, although she seemed to think she was. "That man...Aidan."

Heat shot to Mary Ellen's face. "Am not." She lied, of course, and pulled her shawl around her shoulders to hide her flushed face. Utterly sinful. But how could she admit the truth? And the truth was thoughts of Aidan kept her up at night. When she met his gaze, she felt it all the way to her toes. It was as if her corset was suddenly too tight.

"Are so always staring." Sally leaned closer, her blue eyes wide with interest. "Are you in love with him?"

"Sally!" Mary Ellen glanced around, making sure no one had overheard. Her sister was at the prime age for romance. She still believed in happily ever after, silly chit. "Don't be a ninny!"

Even as she reprimanded her sister, she couldn't help but glance at Aidan. Sensing her attention, he lifted his head. Their gazes clashed. It was as if a bolt of lightning shot through her very being. Mary Ellen sucked in a sharp breath, but couldn't seem to look away. He hadn't heard their discussion. He was much too far away, yet she feared he had.

"Well, you are..." Sally's voice trailed off into a low murmur that Mary Ellen could barely hear over the roar of blood to her ears.

Was he attractive? Yes, she supposed there was something incredibly appealing about those fathomless light, blue eyes and dark, wavy hair. The charming way he tilted his head to the side when he was listening. The way he rubbed the back of his neck when he was bemused. The way his eyes sparkled and the corners crinkled when he was amused, even if his lips didn't lift into a smile. And she supposed most women would consider his silence and mysterious past rather intriguing.

But not she. Not at all.

She wasn't interested. He had no home. No title. And as far as she could deduce by the cut of his plain clothing, he had no money. She hadn't plotted and planned for a season in London only to marry some *nobody* before she'd had time to find a *somebody*. Only a handful of months and this spring she'd be in London, absorbing the *ton*. Searching for the very man who would be her husband. Why then, couldn't she blasted look away from Aidan?

A cool gust of fall wind swirled through the garden, bringing with the scent of decaying leaves. Aidan glanced down at his book, breaking eye contact. Mary Ellen could finally breathe once more. She tore her attention away, wondering what he read. Most likely something dull, such as farming techniques.

"Well?" Sally was looking at her expectantly, her large blue eyes full of mischief.

"Well, what?" Unable to take the pressure any longer, Mary Ellen surged to her feet and started toward the house, eager to escape the outdoors, escape Aidan's piercing attention and Sally's ridiculous questions. But mostly, eager to escape her own confusing reactions to the man.

"Well, will you ask him to dance tonight at the All Hallows Eve Ball?"

She clutched her shawl close. "Don't be ridiculous." Mary Ellen pushed the door wide and stepped into the warm kitchen. The roar of conversation and orders being shouted vibrated in the large, stone room. Gone was the quiet fall afternoon. "Women don't ask men to dance. Tisn't proper."

They weaved their way around a maid churning butter. In the air hung the welcoming scents of nutmeg and cinnamon.

"Well, will you dance with him if he asks to sign your card?" Sally stepped aside as a cook rushed by with biscuits on a tray.

Mary Ellen snatched a warm roll from the passing woman. Would he ask her? Why did the thought send a warm shiver of anticipation through her body?

"Oy!" The cook cried out, slapping her hand away from the biscuits. "Out wit ye two!"

Sally and Mary Ellen flushed with guilt and moved toward the door. The house practically buzzed with activity. The ball would, no doubt, be an enormous success, especially given the fact that balls rarely happened in their small shire. "I will have to accept his invitation to dance, should he ask. It would be rude to refuse."

They moved into the foyer, the maids busy filling vases with red roses from the greenhouse. Before Meg had married Grayson, they never would have had flowers in the fall. Yet another advantage of marrying wealthy.

"And if he asks you to marry him?"

Mary Ellen rolled her eyes. "He won't."

"I've seen him watching you."

Mary Ellen froze halfway up the curved staircase. She should have been horrified. At the very least, offended. Instead, she couldn't deny the odd sense of excitement that whispered through her. "No, he doesn't."

Sally nodded, completely serious. "Indeed. Often, you know. He watches you when no one is looking."

A heated rush of emotion swirled low in the pit of her belly. She was pleased, damn it all. She didn't want to be pleased. She had a plan, a plan to marry a man with a title and money, or at the very least, money. A man who smiled often and laughed loudly. A man who never took life seriously. Her plan most assuredly did not involve the poor and serious Aidan Callaghan.

"So, shall you agree to an engagement if he asks?"

Mary Ellen steeled her resolve and continued up the steps. "Not at all."

"Why ever not? I've heard many a women discuss him. He's rather handsome and mysterious."

Mary Ellen gritted her teeth, annoyed, although why, she wasn't sure. "No, I won't because I'm going to marry someone wealthy and titled."

"Mary Ellen, what a snob you are!" Meg stood in the middle of the hall, her belly swollen underneath her blue day dress.

Her older sister practically glowed with her pregnancy. Her face was rosy, her brown hair shined and her blue eyes sparkled with a happiness that Mary Ellen would have envied, had she not adored her. Standing next to Meg, Sally was her miniature version. Mary Ellen was the odd one out with her brilliant red hair.

Mary Ellen frowned. "Easy for you to say, Meg, you've married the only handsome and wealthy man in the vicinity."

Her sister sighed, taking Mary Ellen's hands in hers. "Dear, you no longer have to worry about money. You know that. Grayson would never see you suffer. You don't have to marry for wealth."

Mary Ellen glanced at the carpet runner, her cheeks flushing. "I know."

The problem was she wanted to marry. She had always desired a home of her own. A doting husband. Darling children. But she wouldn't settle for a man with little to offer. No, she'd already lived a life of poverty and she swore she was never returning to that gray and depressing state.

Meg released her hands and smiled. "So, perhaps you might possibly think of marrying for love?"

Mary Ellen gave her sister a tight smile. "Indeed."

"Good." Meg kissed her cheek. "Now, Sally dear, do help me down the steps. I must see that everything is in order for tonight's festivities. While I'm planning and plotting, you must find Hanna and keep her occupied. The child is bored and intent on making mischief."

Sally took Meg's arm and they started toward the steps. "Cook said if I look into a mirror tonight, I'll see the face of the man I'm to marry."

"Sally, that's pagan and sinful."

They started down the steps. "So is your celebration, but you're still having it!"

"Well, yes, but that's different."

"Meg, please let me attend tonight! I promise I'll behave."

"Darling, I told you, not this year. There will be much too much indulging in things a young lady dare not witness.

"Which is exactly why I want to go," Sally muttered.

Mary Ellen smiled.

"Perhaps next year," Meg replied.

"It's not fair..."

Mary Ellen watched the two until they disappeared into the foyer, taking their argument with them. Meg might have been fortunate enough to marry not only a rich man, but also one who adored her, but Mary Ellen was realistic.

She moved to the window at the end of the hall and glanced outside. A patchwork of fall colors—red, yellow and orange—quilted the landscape. And there, below in the garden, the bench was now empty. Aidan gone.

Mary Ellen sighed, leaning her forehead against the chill glass window. She knew that love and money didn't often go hand in hand. She would be silly to believe she could find both.

And if she had to choose, she would, undoubtedly, choose money.

For two months now Aidan had fantasized about Mary Ellen James. For two months nothing else had occupied his mind.

From the moment he'd stepped from the carriage, intending to visit his friend Grayson Bellamont for a much needed rest and had seen the man's sister-in-law with the flaming red hair, he'd been rather obsessed. Even now he was acutely aware of her hiding behind those daisies. He'd sensed her the moment he'd stepped outside. Drawn to her like a mongrel to a bone.

In the evening, he watched her as she pushed her green beans around her plate, pretending to eat them. He studied her while she read those gothic novels, her face showing her every emotion as she became fully immersed in the story.

He adored the way she constantly hummed. The way the light hit her hair and made her glow as if she held the very sun. He even adored the way she took such pains to take care of her gowns, smoothing the wrinkles and frowning over a mere speck of dirt.

Yes, the woman absolutely intrigued him.

Unfortunately, she was doing her damndest to pretend he didn't exist. Not that she was indifferent. No, he knew she was attracted to him, he could sense it, smell the desire. A scent that riled the beast deep within. Aidan's fingers curled around the book he held, his nails digging into the leather binding as he forced himself not to look her way.

Yes, she roused the beast within him when he'd taken such pains to conceal the animal. He could seduce her so easily, but he wouldn't. He wouldn't betray Grayson. Besides, he wasn't what she wanted. What she needed. She'd made that clear upon many occasions. Her words hadn't been meant for his ears, but he'd heard them all the same.

*"When I marry, he'll be rich and titled."*

The bitterness he felt at the words was so unlike him. But then again, so were the emotions he felt when she was near. Hell, it had been years since a female had piqued his interest, and a human female at that. Why here? Why now? And why couldn't he bloody stop thinking about her?

Aidan sensed Grayson before the man appeared in front of him, silent as a hawk swooping down on a field mouse. "Gray."

His friend paused under the maple, his pale face intense, his green eyes so knowing that it was hard for Aidan to meet his gaze. "Aidan. How do you fare?"

Aidan dropped the book to the bench, hoping Gray hadn't noticed the indents from his fingers, and glanced toward the house once more. Mary Ellen had disappeared inside with her younger sister Sally. It was as if the very sun had hidden behind a cloud.

"Well enough."

Obsessed, that's what he was. Yes, he'd smelled her scent the moment he'd stepped outside. And like that mongrel, he'd followed the scent to the bench. He'd seen her immediately, that red hair like a beacon even though she was half hidden amongst the flowers, watching him...always watching him although trying desperately not to.

*"You're always staring at him,"* her younger sister Sally had said, although Mary Ellen had denied the accusation. He wasn't what she wanted. What she needed. He had to constantly remind himself. But the animal inside didn't care. The animal only wanted her for his own.

Grayson glanced toward the brittle and brown patch of daisies where Aidan was focused. "What do you find so intriguing?"

Aidan bit back his laugh. "Nothing at all. Merely anxious to be in my own home." He doubted Grayson would think kindly on the fact that he was imagining seducing his sister-in-law. "How are preparations for the festival coming along?"

“Well, although I can’t claim to be involved. Meg is handling the affairs.” He glanced back at the house, a smile hovering upon his lips. The same smile he wore whenever he mentioned his wife.

How envious Aidan was of the man’s happiness.

Grayson settled beside him, resting his elbows on his knees. “I have a bad feeling about this festival.”

Aidan stiffened. Grayson’s instincts were usually spot on. “What do you mean?”

“You know as well as I that there are those who would see us harmed, if not worse. Those who do not accept our kind. After what happened here, with Meg...” He swallowed hard, the emotion evident, even though it had been years.

“It’s been some time since you were attacked,” Aidan reminded him.

Looking out upon the beautiful and peaceful gardens ripe with reds and yellows of autumn, it was hard to believe there was any evil in the world. But he knew better than anyone what lurked in the shadows. Hell, most would consider him part of that nightmare. Perhaps he was. His former fiancé certainly placed him in the same category as demons and devils.

“I’m sure all will be well,” Grayson said, although it was obvious by the tone of his voice that he was still uneasy. “Meg insisted upon the festival, claiming we must make friends with our neighbors if we are to live in peace. I think she merely wants more allies, should the time come when we need them. But when a woman is with child, it’s best to merely nod and agree.”

“And when she’s not with child?”

Grayson grinned and slid him a wry glance. “Same thing. Nod and agree.”

Aidan remembered that feeling with his fiancé. They’d been giddy with adoration, both trying to please the other, seeing no fault. But there had been one thing she couldn’t overlook. It hadn’t worked with his fiancé and it would never work with Mary Ellen. The longer he stayed here, the more the impossibility of it all tore at his insides.

“You haven’t fed in some time.” Grayson watched him closely, too closely. “You’re pale, your eyes too light in color.”

Aidan watched a red leaf skip and roll across the crushed stone path, chased by the autumn wind. “No, I haven’t.”

“Starving yourself will not change who you are. You need to feed, especially before the festival. All those warm bodies in one room will drive you mad.”

Aidan nodded, although he didn’t agree. He liked to suffer the pangs of hunger. A punishment of sorts for what he’d been born.

Grayson had no idea he’d already gone mad thinking about Mary Ellen, of what he could never have. He’d find no joy in feeding, although his body craved blood as a man in a desert would crave water.

“Before I take my leave, Meg wanted me to remind you that you are welcome to stay here as long as you’d like. Certainly until your cottage is repaired. Of course with four overly emotional females in residence, you might be better off sleeping in a rundown estate.

Aidan nodded, smiling. “Thank you. But I don’t wish to overstay my welcome. The house is almost complete. I shall move within a fortnight.”

Grayson slapped him on the back in a companionable way. “Good to know. You need your own home. A family.”

“A happily ever after?” Aidan replied blandly.

Grayson stood, grinning down at him. The man knew how ridiculous he sounded, but didn't give a shite. “It will happen. Look at me.”

Indeed. Grayson had the ideal life. A woman who didn't care what he truly was. Who loved him anyway. Could he ever find that?

“You're sure you'll be well enough tonight then? In a crowd?”

Aidan sighed. Was Grayson worried he'd go feral and feast upon the guests? “You know as well as I that I'm not a monster, Gray.” Although he had to admit, some would wholeheartedly disagree.

## Chapter 2

“Do you believe in ghosts, Miss James?”

Startled, Mary Ellen spun around, her mask tilting precariously with the movement. “How did you recognize me?” As she straightened her mask of blue silk, she realized what a silly question she'd asked, considering she was one of only two people in attendance with red hair. The other guest was forty and male.

Aidan shrugged. It was Aidan. Although he rarely spoke, she'd know the sound of his voice anywhere. He wore a simple black suit and a simple black mask, his overly long hair pulled back with a queue. Simply dressed, yet she couldn't deny there was an elegant ease about him. More than one woman had looked his way when he'd entered the ballroom an hour ago.

“Your walk. Your...”

She waited for one breathless moment, then, forgetting her good sense, prompted. “Yes?”

“Your scent.”

Heat shot through her body, curling down to her toes. She glanced around, wondering how the conversation could so quickly have taken a turn for the inappropriate. “Don't be ridiculous.”

She was annoyed. Annoyed that he could make her feel such sinful emotions. Annoyed that other woman found him so bloody attractive. Mostly annoyed that she couldn't have him as her own.

He wasn't smiling, but his face was completely serious, as usual. Half hidden in an alcove with windows that overlooked the back garden, she felt somewhat safe from prying eyes. But she certainly wasn't safe from the man.

Flushing, she studied the polished floorboards. “Are you saying, Mr. Callaghan, that I smell quite badly?”

He leaned against the wall, which brought him closer to her. “The opposite, in fact.”

No other explanation. He remained stubbornly silent, watchful. The man left her feeling quite odd. Time actually seemed to stand still when he was near, which was utterly ridiculous. There, in that alcove, hidden by red, velvet curtains, it almost felt as if they were the only two people in the world.



His gaze dropped to her lips, then lower to her neck, even lower still. How she wished she'd taken Meg's advice and worn the neckline of her blue, silk gown a little higher.

"You didn't answer my question," he said, meeting her gaze once again.

"What question?" Lord, she was confused. She couldn't think when he looked at her with such heat in his eyes. He wanted her. She knew the look of attraction. Had seen the same heated gaze in the lads around town. The difference was that their passionate glances hadn't stirred her blood.

"Ghosts, do you believe, as the ancient Celts did, that the world between the living and dead is thin this time of year? That spirits can come and go as they please?"

"Nonsense," she whispered. And it was nonsense, so why did a shiver of unease caress her skin?

He reached out and drew his fingers down her bare arm. "You're chilled."

"Your hands are cold."

He pulled back. "Yes. The autumn air." He looked away as if suddenly avoiding her gaze. How very odd he acted at times. Bemused, she glanced toward the floor where couples danced in brilliant gowns, their faces covered with masks that in reality did little to hide their identity. Why must he be so bloody mysterious? If she wanted a mystery, she'd read a gothic novel, for heaven's sake.

"I believe Meg is looking for me," she lied, searching the room for her sister.

Aidan smiled, a smile that said he didn't believe her in the least. Still, she didn't care what he thought. At least that's what she told herself as she dropped into a quick curtsy and left him. Skirting around a large vase of roses, Mary Ellen hastened her steps. How dare he be so bold? Telling her she smelled. Touching her that way. Overcome, she paused and closed her eyes, resting her hand on her arm where he'd touched her. She swore she could still feel the pressure of his hand.

"Mary Ellen," Meg called out, waddling toward her.

"Meg," Mary Ellen took her sister's hand. "Everyone will know who I am if you go around shouting my name."

Meg laughed, a merry sound that had more than one man looking her way, even though she was a good seven months with child. The blue mask of peacock feathers did little to hide Meg's beauty and her dark hair shimmered against the green dress she wore. "Darling, your red hair is like a bloody beacon. Everyone knows you already."

Mary Ellen sighed, realizing Meg was right. "What is it you need?"

"I'm headed upstairs. I know it's not right for me to retire before the guests do, but I want to check on Hanna and Sally." She stepped closer. "And my feet are bloody murdering me."

"I understand." Mary Ellen didn't dare complain, although she would feel her sister's absence. She didn't want to be left alone with guests more intent on making mischief than being polite. In London she would never have to deal with men who liked to grope, who drank to excess.

"Aidan," Meg called out.

Mary Ellen stiffened. How had she not known he was behind her? Her fingers curled into her silk skirts, resisting the urge to run.

"You'll look after Mary Ellen, won't you?"

He stepped up beside her and only then did she dare to glance at him. He was smiling, a completely mischievous looking smile that she'd never seen on him before. It worried her, that smile.

"Of course. I shall look after her as if she's my very own."

A small line formed between Meg's brows. She wasn't the only one to find his comment odd, wondering if there was a hidden meaning.

"Good." Meg glanced at Mary Ellen one last time, hesitating, then turned and made her way toward Grayson.

Although they were in a crowded ballroom, Mary Ellen felt completely alone with the man. The thought of Aidan hovering over her for the entire night sent icy panic through her veins. She had decided two months ago the best thing to do was to stay far away from him. If he wasn't near, she wouldn't experience those unsettling feelings. "I'm not a child. I'll do quite well on my own."

"Of course." His tone and features spoke only of sincerity, yet there was a definite sparkle to his light blue eyes, as if he knew the way of her thoughts and found her amusing.

Just what she needed. A nanny. A completely inappropriate nanny who made her think sinful thoughts. She turned, her skirts flaring wide and weaved her way through the crowds. Lawd, had more people arrived? Surely they hadn't invited this many.

The cool night air beckoned from the French doors, thrown wide to allow guests to come and go as they pleased.

She'd ignore him. Truly, it was the best course of action.

The heels of her slippers tapped against the slate stone patio, thumping in time to her heart beat. Did he follow? She wouldn't dare glance back, he might see it as an invitation to join her.

Outside wasn't much better. Many guests had escaped the stuffy indoors and were enjoying the festive night air. In the darkness, guests could indulge in their sinful side, hidden amongst the shadows. Perhaps an All Hallows Eve festival had been a bad idea after all. People would use any reason to indulge and a pagan festival was the perfect excuse.

Frowning, Mary Ellen moved across the patio and leaned her elbows on the marble railing. A large fire burned brightly in the middle of the lawn. Couples laughed and danced around the flickering flames, doing things they wouldn't dare in the light of day. There was no denying that the festive mood was much more raucous than normal. At the beginning of the festival, Meg had warned her to stay inside where she'd be protected. But Meg had abandoned her, leaving Mary Ellen in Aidan's sensual hands. Wasn't being out there better than being with him?

Blast it all, she needed air. She needed space. Yet, now, she wasn't so sure. Above, stars twinkled, a full moon shone brightly overhead, casting the area with an eerie yellow glow. A shiver of unease caressed her skin. As guests danced around flames that sent shadows and light across their masked faces, she couldn't help but think they rather resembled a Grimm's fairytale...or a nightmare.

Still, she couldn't return to that ballroom and Aidan.

"Behold, an angel fallen from heaven."

Startled by the sudden voice, Mary Ellen spun around. A tall man dressed in a black suit with a black mask stood at the bottom of the steps leading into the

garden, his wicked smile directed up at her. Mary Ellen frowned, confused by his boldness. Then he shifted and the light from the lantern hanging near the doors hit his golden blond hair... Mary Ellen's heart skipped a beat. Aidan was not the man for her, but Lord Worthing was indeed.

"I believe I know that beautiful auburn hair, that lovely figure." He moved up a step, his body fluid, almost like a cat... about to pounce.

Mary Ellen flushed, her grip tightening on the railing. "Lord Worthing, I feared we would never get the chance to talk tonight."

He grinned, those amber eyes sparkling behind his mask. He was so incredibly handsome, but blast it all, she couldn't help but compare his features to Aidan. Sadly, she found Worthing... lacking.

"I'll always find time for you."

A couple months ago those words would have had her swooning. Now... now they merely piqued her curiosity. Did his comments seem too rehearsed? His movements played out precisely?

"A stroll with an angel would do wonders for my soul." He held out his hand.

Mary Ellen bit her lower lip. Dare she? Damn it all, two months ago she would have jumped at the chance. She would not give up on her dreams now merely because Aidan had come along. She'd planned too long and too hard.

Mary Ellen moved down the steps, her legs wooden, her heart protesting with a thumping beat of denial. Reaching him, she slipped her gloved hand into his. Aidan hadn't worn gloves, although why that comparison came to mind, she hadn't the least idea.

Worthing leaned toward her, his breath warm on her ear. "The yews will provide us with privacy."

A cold shiver of unease whispered up her arms. Worthing started forward, leading her toward the line of tall trees.

*Don't go.*

A voice whispered somewhere nearby and at the same time, all around her. Mary Ellen paused, confused and glanced back at the house. No one was there. Only the dancers could be seen through the windows.

"My dear, what is it?"

"Nothing at all." Mary Ellen turned toward Worthing and smiled brightly up at him. "Shall we?"

"Indeed."

The sounds of revelry faded the further away they strolled, the shadows of the trees beckoning privacy. Brittle fall leaves crunched underfoot, sounding very much like the breaking of bones.

*"Whooo, whooo,"* an owl called.

At the sudden snap of branches from a nearby elm, Mary Ellen gasped.

"Fear not," Worthing said softly. "I shall protect you."

Did his breath smell of alcohol? Mary Ellen gave him a tight smile. Who, she wondered, would protect her from him? They stepped between a parallel line of tall yew trees and darkness surrounded them. Here, the yellow moon could not reach. Here, prying eyes would not see.

*"Do you believe in ghosts, Miss James?"* Aidan's voice whispered through her mind.

She was very much rethinking her position on spirits and the otherworld. "Perhaps we should return? The air holds a chill that I don't much care for."

Worthing pulled his hand free and wrapped his arm intimately around her waist. "I shall keep you warm."

She stiffened under his bold touch. Never had she cared much for men who pressed their advantage on unmarried women. Oh, she and Worthing had flirted, but she couldn't help but think his actions too bold. She barely knew him, after all. What had she been thinking when she'd decided he'd be the perfect husband? Why, just earlier in the evening she'd seen him whispering in Catherine Smith's ear.

Feeling somewhat frantic to escape his touch, she twirled away from him. "How do you truly know I'm Mary Ellen?" She took a few steps back, intending to move as far away from him as possible. "I could be anyone."

"A fairy in disguise?" He grinned, thrilled with the chase, as if she was a hen and he the fox. Disgusted, she glanced toward the trees. She could slip through the yews, head across the rose garden and be back at the house before anyone knew she'd been gone.

"Shall I dare to uncover the truth?" he taunted.

"You'll have to catch me first." She spun around and pushed between the green branches.

His delighted chuckle annoyed her. It was too high-pitched, too loud, too unlike Aidan's soft laughter. Damn him! Why must she think of Aidan now? The man was a constant thorn in her side.

Mary Ellen hid between two trees, watching with relief as Worthing headed in the opposite direction.

"Oh my little fairy, where are you?"

She rolled her eyes, stepped back onto the path and brushed her skirts free of any leaves. Worthing was most definitely not the man for her. But if not he, who then?

With a sigh she started toward the house, gravel crunching underfoot. Her slippers were soaked through with dew, most likely ruined, blast it all.

It was all Aidan's fault, really. If he hadn't induced such strange emotions within... if she wasn't intent on proving she didn't need a nanny...

A twig snapped from somewhere behind her. Mary Ellen froze. Blast, had Worthing found her already?

Mary Ellen pasted a smile upon her lips. "Why, Lord Worthing," she spun around. "You've already..."

Two men stood in the shadows of the yews, faces covered with black masks, clothing as dark a sin. She had no reason to suspect they were anyone other than guests. So why did a shiver of unease whisper over her skin?

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Neither one said a word.

Mary Ellen knew in that moment how right Meg had been.

She never should have left the house.

"Byron is so very romantic, don't you agree, Mr. Callaghan?"

Aidan was doing his best to ignore the woman in front of him, but she didn't quite see his disinterest. He'd rather stab himself repeatedly in the eyes than talk about poetry. Where the hell was Mary Ellen? He'd seen her slip outside moments ago. Had she left the patio? He moved to the open doors, knowing the woman followed... Miss Smith, or something or another.

The patio was empty.

"Or do you prefer other reading material?" Miss Smith asked, snapping at his heels like a pup after a meal. He hadn't expected Mary Ellen to leave the patio, but obviously she had. Under the glow of the moonlight he could see the impressions of her slippared feet in the grass. Not only her slippers. Larger prints as well. Male.

The animal inside him roared to life. She might not want him, but he had apparently claimed her as his own anyway.

"I, in fact," Miss Smith proclaimed. "Will read anything."

Aidan started down the stairs, his steps long and hurried.

"Will you be back, Mr. Callaghan?" Miss Smith called out.

He didn't bother to respond. Damn her, what was Mary Ellen thinking to go off with some drunken fool? He knew she was attempting to prove a point to him, but he'd never thought her to be this irrational.

The laughter of the guests dancing around the fire was barely audible. The only sound was his own blood roaring... surging... through his veins.

He knew there was an owl overhead without looking. Could hear Worthing calling for Mary Ellen near the rose garden. Knew there was a couple kissing passionately some ten feet from him, hidden under the branches of a maple tree.

None of that mattered. In the air was Mary Ellen's sweet scent. He closed his eyes briefly as he continued down the path, following her scent. A sudden scream interrupted the night sounds. A scream so soft and muffled that others wouldn't have heard the cry for help. But he heard.

*Mary Ellen.*

Aidan burst down the trail, uncaring who noticed his unnatural speed. The shadows between the yews morphed into human shapes. Two men, one woman. Mary Ellen struggled in the arms of her captors, doing her best to break free.

Aidan saw red. His fingers curled and he burst forward, so fast they didn't see him coming. He grabbed the first man by the shirt and tossed him aside, finding perverse satisfaction when he heard the thunk of the man hitting a tree.

A split second later he threw his fist forward, directly into the second man's face. The crack of bone was a most pleasing sound. Mary Ellen started to fall back with her captor. Aidan reached forward, jerking her safely into his arms.

"Aidan?" Mary Ellen blinked up at him, confused.

He understood her bemusement. It had all happened within a blink of an eye. No human could possibly understand what had just taken place. He knew by the scent, both men were dead. Their bodies broken by the pressure of his fists. He wanted to kill them all over again.

It was only when he cupped the sides of her face that he realized his hands were trembling. "Are you well?"

"Yes, but... but..." She was pale, shaking in his arms. Her mask had come off and lay upon the ground, while her hair tumbled in molten waves that curled down her back and over her shoulders. The sleeve of her dress was torn. Aidan

clenched his jaw so hard, he was surprised his molars didn't crack. He drew her close, holding her against his chest. For the first time, she welcomed his touch, his attention.

"You're hurt," he said softly.

"No, I'm fine. Merely surprised and confused, is all." She tried to turn to look at the men, but he held her close, not allowing her to divulge her curiosity. The scene would only disturb her.

"You're cold." She tilted her head back and looked into his eyes. "Always so cold."

If only she knew why. If only she realized how well she could warm him. No doubt, she'd run screaming toward the home. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "No... I..." She seemed flustered, unsure and she'd always been so sure. He found her sudden change endearing and even better, intriguing. "Yes?"

She swallowed hard and dared to look into his eyes. "Thank you, Aidan."

"Of course." How badly he wanted to taste her. How badly he wanted to pull her close, feed from her, have her completely, make her his. The beast within growled to life. "We should return."

With him, she was not much more protected than with the men who had attacked her. He started to lead her toward the patio, when she pulled away.

"But..."

He paused, glancing back at her. "What is it?"

"I don't understand." She tore her hand from his and wrapped her arms tightly around her chest. "You moved so quickly—"

"You were under duress. You're confused."

She frowned. "And your eyes, I could have sworn they glowed."

"The moonlight."

She stepped closer to him, as if searching for the truth. Hell, if he didn't want to admit it all. He was so damn tired of the secrets.

"And your—"

He grasped her upper arms and jerked her forward. Before she could protest, he pressed his chill lips to her soft, yielding mouth. Mary Ellen sank into his body, releasing a little moan that stirred his blood.

He couldn't help himself. She didn't belong to him, she never would. Yet, when she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her soft breasts to his hard chest, he knew he would take her there on the damp grass.

He was so consumed with the need to have her that by the time he heard the other men approach, it was too late.

## Chapter 3

The soft tap, tap, tap of dripping water woke Mary Ellen.

Slowly, she lifted her lashes, only to stare at cold, stone walls glistening with condensation. Where in the bloody hell was she?

With a groan, she shoved her hands into the stone floor and managed to sit upright. But the movement only sent her dark world spinning. She couldn't remember much... Aidan... Aidan had rescued her. But then, why was she here? Confused, she studied her surroundings. A large, dark space... the perimeters hidden within shadows. A shiver of unease raised the fine hairs on her neck.

A dungeon.

Mary Ellen surged to her feet, tripping. The hem of her skirt had come loose and was dragging behind her. Frustrated, she yanked on the material. Ruined. Utterly ruined. Whoever had done this would pay.

"Hello?" she cried out.

"Shhh," someone whispered from behind her.

Mary Ellen spun around, searching the darkness. "Aidan?"

"Keep quiet," he whispered. "Don't move."

"But..." A mixture of emotions held her captive. She felt ill, off balance.

He shifted, the softest of movements, but the sound was unexpected...metal scraping against stone.

"Are you chained?" she whispered furiously.

"Yes."

Fear swirled through her in a bitterly cold wave. "Why?"

He paused for one telling moment. "I don't know."

"Oh Aidan!" She rushed toward his voice.

"Don't!"

But she didn't listen, didn't stop until she collided with his hard, cold body. His familiar spicy scent put her somewhat at ease. A wonderful smell that overrode the stench of their dungeon. As she drew comfort from his being, he apparently did not glean comfort from her. His body was stiff under her touch. She didn't care one wit.

"What happened?" She followed the line of his broad shoulders, lower, down his muscled arms where they twisted behind his back. He wore only his shirtsleeves, his jacket either taken from him, or lost. Her fingers brushed thick, cold manacles that wrapped tightly around his wrists. Hopelessness and fear combined in a sickening combination. Who would do this to them and why?

"Come closer," he whispered. "Wrap your arms around my waist, as if we're embracing."

Mary Ellen didn't hesitate. Eager to feel his touch, she wrapped her arms around him and rested her cheek on his shoulder. He tilted his head toward her, his hair brushing her temple, his breath chill on her ear. As afraid as she was, she couldn't deny the shiver of heat that whispered through her body. She'd dreamt of being in Aidan's arms, but not exactly in this setting.

"We were captured. I don't know why, or who is responsible, but they're watching us."

Her instinct was to pull away and demand answers. As if sensing her confusion, he brought his leg forward, tucking his foot behind hers and keeping her close to him. "Stay put."

She swallowed hard, proud when her voice didn't quiver. "Where are they?"

"About twenty feet above. Along the far wall there are windows."

She slid a glance right. Sure enough, there was the faint outline of windows covered with metal bars. "Why? I don't understand any of this."

"Have you ever read about the gladiators from long ago?"

"From Rome?"

"Yes."

"Of course." Her father was a scholar, she knew lots of odd information.

"I have a feeling someone wants to reenact the games."

She didn't understand what he said, but she knew her feelings well enough to recognize panic. A panic she'd never felt before. A panic that froze her body in place, made her heart thunder so loudly it hurt.

Hinges screeched, a metal door opening from across the room. Mary Ellen spun around, searching the darkness, afraid of what she'd find.

"We're not alone," Aidan said.

Just as he said the words, a low groan whispered through the large dungeon... someone hurting... someone in pain.

Mary Ellen swallowed hard. "What's over there, Aidan?"

The groan turned into a low growl that vibrated the very stone walls, stirring the stale air. Mary Ellen stumbled back into Aidan's arms. A dog... or worse... something inhuman.

From the windows, a bell rang. "My friends," a man called from above. She knew he wasn't speaking to them, unless he had a very odd way of treating his friends. "Shall we begin the festivities?"

"I don't suppose he means charades and cards?"

Aidan didn't respond, merely yanked on the chains, trying to break free. She latched onto his left wrist, digging her fingernails into the hinge of the manacle, attempting to pry it loose. The only thing that broke was her nail.

"Perhaps I can speak with them. If they know I'm related to Grayson, they might ask for a ransom."

"They don't want money, my dear."

The growl across the room turned into a high-pitched cry. Mary Ellen froze, her stomach churning. "Whatever it is, it's coming."

Frantic, she wrapped her hands around the chain and placed her foot against the wall, pulling. It wouldn't budge. "Tis no use!"

Light burst to life, torches that lined the cell and sent leering shadows that leapt across the stone walls. Needing the comfort of his touch, Mary Ellen slipped her fingers through Aidan's. His hands were cold. So very cold.

Human shapes stood in windows, some men, some obviously women with their wide skirts. So many people. Ten? Fifteen? It was hard to tell. She tore her gaze away and focused on the far end of the room. Something hovered there in the shadows. A dark shape, snarling, growling.

"What is it?" she demanded. "A dog?"

"Of sorts."

What the hell did that mean? Frantic, Mary Ellen searched the shadowy space, looking for something... anything that might serve as a weapon.

"We've often wondered, debated even," their esteemed host spoke from behind the windows above, his voice echoing against the stone walls, "Who would win



between these two beasts, and now we'll know. To entice them further, we've thrown in a fair maiden. Gentlemen, place your bets."

The crowd murmured their approval and Mary Ellen realized that there was only one maiden here. She tightened her grip on Aidan's hand, but he wouldn't look at her, his face turned away, focused on those windows. "What's happening? What does he mean?"

"It's my fault," he whispered. "Mine."

"No, don't say that."

"You don't understand." He dropped his gaze to the ground. "I'm not what you think I am, Mary Ellen."

Frustrated, she cupped the sides of his face. "Then what are you?"

He lifted his gaze. Those beautiful blue eyes glowed with an eerie light she'd never seen before. "I'm a vampire."

She didn't scream. That was good. It was what they were expecting. But Mary Ellen was stronger than she looked. He'd known that about her almost immediately and it was part of the reason why she intrigued him so.

She did pale, her body swaying as if she might faint. Perhaps that would be better. She wouldn't witness the horror that was about to unfold.

"You can't be serious," Mary Ellen whispered. She didn't laugh, or scoff. She didn't even get angry, instead she merely stared at him in bewildered confusion because she knew, deep down, she knew there was something different about him.

"I'm quite serious." He jerked again on his chains. If he had fed even a week ago, he'd be strong enough to break the bonds. Damn his pride. They'd known all along what he was and they'd reinforced the chains, doubling their strength.

"I... I don't even know what that means!" Mary Ellen cried.

Instead of fearing him, like most sane women would, she latched onto the front of his shirtsleeves, her beautiful face a mere breath away from his. Oddly, he felt very much like tasting her lips at that moment. With a groan, she gave him a little shake, as if knowing the way of his thoughts.

How could he explain what he was? It meant that most people thought of him as an animal. But not Mary Ellen, no, because at the moment she understood there were worse things than he...such as the people in those windows.

A bell rang from above. Suddenly the chains holding him captive loosened. They fell to the ground with a clank, his arms finally freed. Aidan clenched his fists, bringing life back to his hands as he searched the darkness for the beast that was to come.

"What's happening?" Mary Ellen spun around, studying the dark shadows where the torchlight couldn't reach. Shadows where low growls erupted.

Aiden stepped in front of Mary Ellen. He didn't dare tell her the truth. "We're about to find out."

It was a werewolf. Even if he hadn't seen the man transforming, even if he hadn't heard the growls, he knew the scent. The scent fed the beast within him, anger simmering below the surface. He'd fought a werewolf before and easily come out the victor, but he'd been rested and fed.

He slid his gaze upward toward the windows; five women, ten men, all watching eagerly while drinking... his nostrils flared... red wine. Their excitement was

almost palpable. Disgusted, Aidan turned his attention toward the werewolf. The beast hadn't completely transformed.

"Dear God," Mary Ellen whispered, following his line of vision. "Is that a man or a wolf?"

"Both."

She held up her hands. "No, absolutely not. Vampires and now... now... this? I refuse to believe such nonsense." She spun around and slammed her fists against the metal door. "Hello? Excuse me, but there's been a mistake, if you could just open the door..."

The shout of laughter was audible even to human ears. Mary Ellen turned, her face flushed with horror and embarrassment. She was providing them with the entertainment they desired and expected. He wanted to kill them all for laughing at her. And he would. But first... he had a werewolf to destroy.

"Think about it," he whispered, biding time while the beast inside him took control. "Your brother-in-law—"

"What about Grayson?"

His blood began to simmer in his veins. "He's pale, tends to avoid daylight." He kept his gaze pinned to the wolf as the monster inside him crawled and clawed to the surface.

"You're saying...you're saying Grayson is a vampire?"

He nodded, feeling his teeth lengthen.

"I don't believe you."

"Will you believe this?" He lifted his lips into a snarl, his canine teeth long and pointed.

Mary Ellen swallowed hard, staring at his mouth. "Meg—"

"Knows," he hissed.

She jumped, startled by the sound of his voice. Yet, still Mary Ellen shook her head in denial. "She doesn't! She wouldn't marry him!"

Anger fought with control. "She knows and it doesn't matter to her. Some people believe in love, not money and connections."

She flushed, her lower lip trembling. "Are you really discussing my ideas on marriage now, of all times?"

"No, merely making an absurd comment so you wouldn't notice the werewolf stalking us."

"How dare..." Her eyes went from narrowed with fury to wide with shock. "The what?"

Aidan pushed Mary Ellen to the side and burst forward. They met in the middle of the dungeon. He slammed into the wolf, his fingers curling into the thick, gray fur. They hit the ground with a thump that would have killed a human. The man had transformed completely. He was gone, and the beast wouldn't be able to control himself. The battle would be a fight to the death.

The wolf twisted in his arms, his muzzle snapping at Aidan's throat. Lord, the animal was strong, or he was weak. *Shite*, this wasn't going to be easy. Sweat broke out on Aidan's forehead.

"I know you're human form is in there," Aidan tried, gripping the beast around his thick neck. "Fight it, damn you. We don't have to kill each other."

A sharp sting ripped across his thigh, claws tearing through his trousers and flesh. Aidan hissed in a breath, the pain turning to a throbbing ache.

Above, he could hear cheers from the crowd, urging them onward. They'd placed bets on who would win. He wasn't about to lose. Losing would mean Mary Ellen's death, or worse, she'd be turned into a werewolf.

Aidan shoved his feet into the animal's belly and pushed away. They rolled apart, time to recoup and study the situation, time to regain their breaths. Aidan stumbled, barely able to put pressure on his injured leg. Damn it all, why hadn't he fed? The beast leaned back on his haunches, watching him through yellow eyes, drool slipping from his muzzle and pooling on the stone floor. He was preparing to attack.

He didn't give a damn about himself. He had to keep the beast away from Mary Ellen. He might not change with a bite from the wolf, for vampires were immune, but she wasn't.

They burst toward each other at the same time, once again slamming together in the middle of the dungeon. Aidan kicked at the beast's foreleg and heard the distinct sound of a bone cracking. A yelp of pain that told him he'd hit his mark. The beast was lame. Aidan flipped the animal over. He felt a moment's remorse as he stared into the animal's snarling muzzle, then reached toward its thick neck. With his remaining strength, he turned the large head until he heard the snap of bones.

The wolf stilled. The group upstairs grew quiet, then suddenly burst into raucous clapping. Aidan ignored them all. He didn't care. Only one person held his interest. Slowly, he turned. Mary Ellen stood against the far wall, her eyes huge and luminous with shock and fear.

He stumbled toward her, grimacing every time his lame leg hit the stone floor. He'd seen it before...that utter look of terror. He'd sworn he'd never see that look upon Mary Ellen's face, for she would never know the truth. She knew now. "Mary Ellen—"

"Two beasts then!" the man above shouted.

Aidan froze, jerking his gaze toward those windows. No. He hadn't the strength for two werewolves.

"Aiden!" Mary Ellen rushed toward him. She didn't stop until she hurled her warm body into his arms. Relief was bitterly sweet. He gripped her tight, breathing in her sweet scent. For this one moment he would soak in her essence and pretend all was well.

"You're hurt!" She pushed back and cupped the sides of his face, the fear was replaced with worry. Actual tears trembled on her lower lashes.

Dear God, she cared. The human within him swelled with hope. "I...I'll be well enough in an hour or so."

Those eyes, those beautiful cornflower blue eyes watched him with what could only be called affection. "Truly?"

He nodded, unable to say more for a lump of emotion clogged his throat.

She glanced up at the windows, heedless to the effect she had on him. "Then, I do believe it's time to escape."

Aidan laughed. "Yes."

But how to escape? The two doors were bolted from the outside. The windows a good twenty feet above. If he jumped and make it, could he break the bars? But he knew the answer to his problems even before the beast inside him whispered the word, *blood*.

Aidan swallowed hard and lowered his gaze to the pulse thumping in Mary Ellen's neck. That smooth, pale throat. The beast inside him roared to life.

"What is it?" she asked.

Their gazes clashed and he saw something shift there, in her eyes...a knowing. "There's only one way out of this."

She didn't speak for one long moment. "Tell me."

"I have to feed."

Fear and resignation mixed in her gaze. "On what?"

"You."

## Chapter 4

She gave a nervous laugh and took a step back. "You're jesting."

How he wished he was. How he wished this was a joke, or nightmare. Sadly, it was his life. "They're bringing in two more werewolves. I don't have the energy to fight and kill them. I haven't fed in weeks."

"Fed?" her voice squeaked.

He took a step closer, she took a step back. "I'm injured."

She swallowed hard and looked at him exactly as he'd expected... like he was a monster. He didn't have time for her human sensibilities. "Damn it, Mary Ellen, either I feed from you, or we both die."

She narrowed her eyes, annoyance flashing in those heavenly blues. "Well, when you say it that way." She was furious and for some odd reason he found her dramatic nature amusing. "You've... you've ruined any chance I might have at a decent marriage with Worthing."

"I saved you!"

"Oh yes, saved! Because this is so much better than being chased by a ridiculous man in a garden." She brushed her hair over her left shoulder. "You've ruined my gown."

His gaze found the pale column of her throat and his heart slammed wildly in his chest. "How, exactly, did I do that?"

"You're at least responsible! Don't try to deny it." She tilted her head back, closing her eyes like some virgin about to be sacrificed. "And now you want to drink my blood." She sighed long and loud. "Well, fine. Do it. But you better not kill me."

Aidan wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or shake her. Instead he gripped her shoulders and jerked her forward. She squeaked, closing her eyes more tightly. Lord, she smelled good, like cinnamon and apples.

He lowered his head to her neck, breathed deeply and for one brief moment savored the moment. The murmured conversation above was barely noticeable over the rapid thump of her heart. They were curious there, above, wondering

what he was planning. They'd know soon enough. Aidan flicked his tongue over his pointed teeth, testing their sharpness. Taking in a deep breath, he lowered his head to her neck. His teeth pierced the flesh easily.

Mary Ellen gasped, stiffening in his arms.

Her warm, sweet blood flooded his mouth, danced across his tongue. Complete euphoria washed over him, through him, pulsing in his veins. He'd dreamt of her taste, he'd stayed up at nights thinking about her, but never had he imagined this. Everything and everyone faded. He no longer heard the excited murmurs of the crowd above them. No longer cared that they were trapped in a dungeon. He only cared about Mary Ellen... having her completely and utterly. The loud thump of her heart, his heart... as one.

The beast inside him erupted. Took control of his body, his emotions and needs. He wanted more. Had to have more. Vaguely he was aware of Mary Ellen sinking into him, her body going limp. The human part of him knew he needed to stop... she couldn't take much more blood loss. But he was hungry... so damn hungry.

Her blood rushed through his body, filling his form with warm life, giving him strength. And then she sighed... a soft sigh that pierced his cold heart. Aidan jerked back. The tiny holes in her neck stood out in stark contrast to her pale neck. Guilt and relief struggled for dominance. The strength that rushed through him on a heated wave pulsed in time with his heartbeat... her heartbeat, he wasn't sure who the pulse belonged to. Mary Ellen's lashes fluttered up, her hazy gaze so completely trusting of him. The guilt he felt was almost unbearable.

*Shite*, he'd fed too long. "Easy now," he said, his voice catching with an emotion he didn't dare contemplate.

She nodded. "Did it work?"

"Yes." He hated himself more at that moment than he ever had before. This woman hadn't been disgusted by him, she hadn't shied away. She'd been a warrior, offering herself for the greater good. And he'd practically taken her soul. Gently, he settled her against the stone wall. "You stay put."

"Yes," she whispered. "I'll just sit here." She slid down the wall, landing in a heap of blue silk. Seeing her small body huddled on the floor left him aching.

"Mary Ellen," he whispered, kneeling. "I'm so—"

The door across the room screeched open. Aidan jumped to his feet and spun around. Through the black pit, two werewolves sauntered inside, their noses to the ground, scenting out their prey.

The door fell back into place with a thud that stirred the dust on the floor. As one they lifted their heads, finding Mary Ellen's scent almost immediately. Their eerie yellow eyes locked on her. They were prime, ready to mate and she was their target.

Aidan smiled a slow, wicked smile. The man in charge, watching them from above like some god, had made one stupid mistake. Two werewolves in their prime would kill each other for a mate. Aidan wouldn't have to do a bloody thing but sit back and wait for the winner, who would no doubt be tired and injured.

The wolves turned on each other quicker than he'd expected, their snarls and cries of pain vibrating through the stone room. Not bothered by their fight, Aidan turned his attention to the windows above. The people were in clear focus, now that he'd fed. His body no longer ached, the injury healed. They looked so utterly

normal. Who knew they were a mad, blood thirsty lot? Not even the women, in their fine silk clothes, looked horrified by the violence. Their excitement was practically tangible.

Twenty feet above. The steel bars would be easy enough to break now that he'd fed. The jump... he narrowed his eyes... he should be able to make it.

He didn't need to look back at Mary Ellen to check her welfare. He could sense her, feel her breath, hear her heartbeat... slow... so slow. Panic urged him into action.

Aidan ran directly at the far corner, so fast he knew he was a blur and was for once, thankful for his abilities. His foot hit the corner, about five feet up. Aidan pushed off and focused on those iron bars covering the windows.

He gripped the bars and looked directly into their pale English faces. Each and every one. For a moment they were too shocked to make a sound. Quickly enough, the women screamed, the small group of silk dresses and suits stumbling back in their haste to escape. The sound of shattering glass resonated through the cell as they dropped their flutes of wine.

"No need to retreat. Don't worry." The man in charge tried to calm their fears. "There is no possible way he can escape. The bars have been tested."

Aidan focused on him. The ringleader. He pierced the man's soul with his gaze and relished when the man shivered. He could hear the rapid beat of his heart, practically taste his fear. His bald head glistened with sweat, his swollen belly pushing against the seams of his black jacket as he panted.

Growling low in his throat, Aidan gripped the bars harder and pulled them apart. The screech of metal interrupted the snarling wolves below. The bars parted easily under his strength, far enough that he could fit through. The feminine screams turned high pitched. Fear vibrated the very air around him. He would see they all paid. But not now. No, he had more important things to worry about.

Aiden released his hold and fell, landing in a crouched position on the ground. Slowly, he lifted his head, focusing on the wolves. One was lying upon the ground, bleeding, still. The other was limping its way toward Mary Ellen. She drew her knees to her chest, her face pale in the torchlight, her whimper piercing his heart.

With a cry of outrage, Aiden burst forward, teeth bared. He hit the wolf before the animal sensed him coming. The beast rolled to its side, taking Aiden with him. Crushed beneath his weight would have killed a lesser man, but Aidan wasn't exactly human. Aiden shoved his palms into the animal's side. The wolf flew across the room, hitting the stone wall with a thump. The animal cried out, sliding to the ground.

Aidan jumped to his feet. "Mary Ellen, now!" He held out his hand.

She stumbled upright, her body quivering with fear and exhaustion, but her eyes were trusting, so damn trusting. He reached her in one step, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her up hard against him. The werewolf was regaining his feet, his gaze locked to them.

Aidan glanced up at the windows, the spectators were long gone, leaving behind only a trail of terror and regret.

"Hold tight," Aidan said. "It's going to get interesting."

Mary Ellen wrapped her arms around his neck as he burst forward.

As Aidan raced forward, headed toward the wall, Mary Ellen faded into darkness. It wasn't until the cool night air whispered lovingly over her face, that she stirred. How very odd she felt, floating between darkness and light. She knew Aidan still held her, she could sense his presence and breathed in his spicy scent. She knew that somehow they had escaped certain death, yet couldn't manage to dredge up enough energy to care.

"Mary Ellen, open your eyes."

The pressure of Aidan's arms lessened and she felt her body sliding down his hard form. An odd heat filled her veins, a need to be closer to him. Her feet hit the ground and she opened her eyes. His beautiful blue gaze watched her as if he cared. Did he care? Was Sally right? Or had he merely saved her because she was Grayson's sister-in-law?

He reached over her shoulder and pushed open the door to a large cottage.

"Where are we?" she asked, her voice soft, weak. Why was she so weak?

"You need to regain your strength." He scooped her up, cradling her against his chest and carried her into a foyer. A dingy, dusty place, but even she could tell that with a little polish, it would be rather pretty with the curved oaken staircase and wooden floors.

She had little time to study the cottage before Aidan carried her up the stairs. Mary Ellen rested her head on his shoulder, and sank into him, trusting the man. "Where are you taking me?"

Down a long corridor he made his way. "So many questions." He smiled down at her, a kind, soft smile that belied the beast she'd seen in that dungeon. What was he? Angel or Devil?

At the end of the hall he stepped into a large bedchamber. Although the room was rather empty, the space was clean, the bed made, as if someone had lived here, or was planning to. "Who lives here?"

"I will, soon."

Surprised, she didn't fight him when he laid her upon the large, four-poster bed. Did that mean he'd be leaving them? She felt completely angry and bereft at the thought. How dare he abandon her!

"Now, lay back," he demanded when she struggled to sit up. "You've lost a lot of blood."

Lost blood? To him, she realized with a start. Mary Ellen sank into the bed. He'd fed on her. Her blood was in his body. She should have been disgusted, so why was she oddly touched? Why did she feel closer to him than no woman should feel toward a man she wasn't married to?

He settled on the bed beside her, his thigh touching hers and even though their clothing separated their skin, she felt his touch all the way to her toes. Gently, he brushed the hair from her forehead. Chills and heat swirled through her body, pooling into an aching need low in her gut. This man wasn't meek and passive. This man would fight for her. Most importantly, this man would fight for life. He would not be bowed down with hardship.

"Mary Ellen, I need you to do something for me."

Odd thoughts swirled through her head as the bed lulled her into its softness. Her lashes drifted down, her eyes so bloody tired. Her body cold, numb, so she wasn't sure where she began and ended.

“Mary Ellen,” he snapped.

“Hmm?” she managed.

Warm hands cupped the sides of her face. “Listen to me, Mary Ellen. Please, keep your eyes open.”

But her lashes felt so heavy, her mind buzzing with numbness. “You’re so warm.” She turned her face into his hand.

“Because of your blood. Our bodies warm when we feed.”

“Oh,” she whispered, too tired to react properly to that odd statement. “I just need a little nap, all right?”

“No, not all right. Listen to me. I took too much blood.” She didn’t miss the way his voice caught with what could only be emotion. “You need to do something for me, all right?”

“Right,” she murmured, wanting so badly to listen to him, to understand the emotion she swore she heard in his voice.

He lifted his arm and put his wrist to his mouth, using his teeth, he scraped a line across the pale skin. Brilliant red blood welled from the wound. Aghast, Mary Ellen used her remaining strength in an attempt to sit upright. “What are you doing? Stop!” The movement was too much. The entire room spun and Aidan faded from view. She felt his strong hands pushing her back into the mattress.

“Drink.”

She lifted her lashes, his wounded arm in front of her, an offering of sorts. A strange offering. She wasn’t sure if she should be disgusted, or honored.

“Will drinking your blood turn me into one of you?” she managed.

“A vampire? No. A person is born this way.” He cupped the back of her head with his uninjured arm.

“I see.” But she didn’t see, she didn’t understand anything other than, for some reason, Aidan wanted her to drink his blood.

He sighed. “You must drink, do you understand? You must, in order to regain your strength.”

She nodded, but her eyelids were growing so heavy, her lashes fluttering down. Something warm pressed to her lips. The coppery taste of blood raced across her tongue, but somehow different...almost sweet. Her cravings stirred and she eagerly swept her tongue across Aidan’s wrist. His blood. Her blood. A desperation surged through her, a need for more.

Her fingers found his arms and she gripped his wrist, bringing him closer. Aidan’s blood pulsed through her body, filling her soul, bringing her back to life. Her very fingers and toes tingled with awareness as if she was coming back from a long, deep sleep. She could feel his heart pound against her, inside her, everywhere.

As warmth filled her soul, sated, she pulled back, falling into the pillows. Dust particles floated like flakes of silver on moonbeams coming in through the open windows. Aidan’s lovely face peered down at her, marble in the moonlight. She had never seen anyone so beautiful. Unable to resist, she reached out and smoothed her fingers down the side of his face, marveling over the feel of a new growth of whiskers on his cheeks.

“You’re better?” he asked, his gaze filled with concern...and something else...something that made her insides practically melt.



“Yes.”

He swallowed hard, his gaze searching her eyes. “Mary Ellen, there are things I need to explain—”

She latched onto his shirt and pulled him forward, pressing her lips to his. She didn’t want an explanation, she wanted him. What could he possibly need to explain? His warm body sank into her, molding to her form as if they fit together like puzzle pieces. When his velvet tongue slipped between her lips, she opened for him, deepening the kiss.

With a groan that stirred her lust, he wedged his knee between her thighs, spreading her legs as wide as her skirts would allow. How had she never taken the time to soak in his spicy scent? How had she not noticed how muscled his body was underneath the layers of his clothing? And how had she not noticed how truly brave he was?

Because she’d kept her distance and she knew why now... she was afraid of falling for the man. A man with no connections, no family, no money. Afraid she’d end up poor and miserable.

Money no longer mattered. She was no longer fighting her attraction. It didn’t matter that she had lived in poverty most of her life and had sworn never to again. It didn’t matter that her eldest sister had died in childbirth after eloping with a poor Irishman. None of that mattered but him. *Aiden*. The man who had risked his life for her. The man who had given her his blood.

His warm hands moved up her legs, bunching the material of her skirts.

“Clothing, all these layers,” she muttered against his mouth. “Are completely overrated.”

Chuckling, he pushed himself up and ripped the shirt from his torso, tossing the poor garment to the floor. His chest was wide, carved muscle sprinkled with dark hair. Unable to resist, Mary Ellen sat up and ran her hands over his skin, spreading her fingers through the crisp hair while he worked the buttons on the back of her bodice.

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted this?” he whispered into her ear, a soft breath that tickled the loose tendrils.

His words brought tears of regret to her eyes. How stupid she’d been. He wanted her. She wanted him. She’d just taken longer to admit her feelings. Blast it all, she couldn’t hold back her feelings any longer. Her bodice came loose and he tossed it to the floor where his shirt lay. When his hands moved to her corset, her fingers boldly found the clasp of his trousers, their hands in a frantic race.

“I’ve dreamt about you night after night,” he whispered.

Her corset came undone and was tossed to the pile of clothing on the floor.

“I think about you during the day.” His hands cupped her breasts, her nipples beaded and hard through the thin fabric of her shift.

Mary Ellen moaned as a heated flush rushed through her body and pooled in that feminine spot between her legs. She’d been attracted to men before, but never like this. Every impure thought she’d had toward Aiden since meeting him, every feeling she’d tried to keep at bay, surged through her body in a dizzying whirl that left her breathless.

“You’re so lovely.” His mouth caught hers once more as his hands found the smooth skin where her stockings ended. He had her garters undone with a flick of

his fingers. As his hand moved toward that nest of curls shielding her femininity, he deepened the kiss.

His fingers found her wet and ready. Mary Ellen gasped, arching her back and taking his fingers deeper. Entranced in a state of utter bliss, she didn't protest when he drew the silk stockings down her legs. Nothing but her shift remained.

She knew she should have been embarrassed, but God help her, she only wanted more of him, all of him. Mary Ellen reached for the waistband of his trousers and pulled them down his hips far enough that the hard bulge she'd felt pressing to her thighs sprang loose. Tentatively, she reached for him. His body was like pure stone, muscles carved from marble. He was a work of art, to be admired. She drew her fingers down his shaft, marveling over the hard velvet feel of him.

"You're going to kill me with your sweetness." With a groan, he lowered himself, his body pressing her into the bed. Their gazes met and held, his eyes intense, so intense. "I know I shouldn't do this. I'm a bloody bastard for taking advantage of you, but I don't care. I want you, and you will be mine."

His words brought a heated thrill through her form. He pressed his lips to hers in a searing kiss as his hands dragged her shift down her body. The hair on his chest tickled her nipples. Hard and soft, the stark contrast of their bodies was completely erotic. His hands moved up her thighs to the curls hiding her femininity.

"So lovely," he whispered as his finger slipped between her damp folds. "So ready."

When his thumb found the sensitive nub, Mary Ellen cried out, arching her back. Pleasure after pleasure rippled through her.

"Say you want me," he demanded.

"Yes, please, Aidan. Please." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, adoring the way the moonlight hit the angles of his fierce face. A lock of dark hair had fallen across his forehead, but did little to soften his features. How could she have ever thought he was dull and weak?

"Tell me you'll be mine forever."

A shiver of awareness moved through her body. She knew he meant the words. She knew by agreeing she was bonding herself to him forever. God help her, she wanted to. "Yes."

He shoved his knee between her smooth thighs. His erection pressed to her folds, the shaft like warm velvet against her sensitive skin. She couldn't think straight when he touched her that way, when he whispered words of endearment into her ears. The ache that flared to life was almost unbearable. Mary Ellen arched her back, rubbing his erection between her thighs. She hadn't a clue what she was doing, but when Aidan groaned, she knew she was doing something right.

Aidan shifted and she felt the thick tip of his cock press between her folds. "I love you, Mary Ellen," he said against her lips. "I've loved you since the first day I saw you."

For some reason, perhaps it was the intensity in his gaze, or the fact that she wanted to so badly, but she actually believed him.

Aiden thrust forward, surging into her. Mary Ellen gasped as she felt the brief sting of pain. In her haste to have him completely, she'd forgotten the fact that it would hurt.

"You're mine, Mary Ellen," Aidan whispered against her mouth. "Now and forever."

And he was hers. She could feel his blood coursing through her being. Feel his heart throbbing against her chest. Aidan was hers. Completely and utterly.

He rocked his hips forward and any pain vanished. Aching need erupted deep within and Mary Ellen dug her nails into his back. "Yes, Aidan, please!"

His large hands moved up her thighs, cradling her backside and bringing her closer to his body. "I love the way you pay such close attention to your clothing and hair as if you treasure your garments and ribbons."

She was barely aware of the words he said, only knew she wanted him to say more, touch her more, kiss her more. Mary Ellen pressed her lips to his shoulder tasting his salty skin.

He lifted his hips and thrust into her again. The ache inside her flared to life, desperate for release. "I love the way you only read romantic poetry and gothic books, needing your happily ever after."

She groaned beneath him, wrapping her legs around his, bringing him deeper still.

Aidan lifted his hips. "I love that you never want to hear bad news and leave the room if someone enters with a dark topic." He thrust into her again. Pleasure rippled through her womb. Mary Ellen cried out.

Aidan lifted his hips, his grip on her buttocks tightening. "And I love that you spend your days making sure the neighbors have enough clothing and food for winter." He pressed a soft, gentle kiss to her lips. "But most of all, I love you."

He thrust into her one last time and Mary Ellen burst into a million white stars, spinning, twisting, floating through a reality she never, ever wanted to leave.

## **Epilogue**

### **Three Months Later**

"You look lovely." Meg gently smoothed the skirt of Mary Ellen's dress.

The cream-colored gown Mary Ellen wore with the silk material and capped sleeves that hung off her shoulders wasn't ideal for winter weather, but she didn't mind. When she'd seen the material she'd had to have it. The gown shimmered and glowed in the lamplight and complimented her red hair. The pearls at her throat and entwined in her curly locks were simple, but stunning.

"You were married in the evening," Mary Ellen said softly, watching her sister in the mirror. She'd always been close to Meg, but felt even closer to her now. Meg understood what it was like to be married to a man like Aidan.

Meg paused. "Yes." The blue gown she wore was cinched in at the waist, showing her lovely figure.

"As I will be."

Meg nodded. "Yes."

They were silent for one long moment, lost in thought. So many emotions swirled through Mary Ellen, she wasn't sure which to grasp onto. Nervousness. Excitement. Hope. Perhaps even a little fear, for everything was so bloody perfect.

Meg stepped in front of her sister and cupped her bare shoulders. "You don't have to do this."

The words were like ice water to her senses. The thought of not marrying Aidan was unbearable. "I want to."

Meg smiled and nodded. "I knew he loved you the moment he first saw you. Remember?"

Mary Ellen flushed, embarrassed that she hadn't known the true man when he'd first arrived. "He'd stepped from the carriage and I thought he looked rather destitute, sad, lonely. Then his gaze met mine and I felt some inexplicable emotion all the way to my soul. I knew then there was more to him, hidden deep within, I merely refused to acknowledge it."

Meg grinned. "He's not a duke, or a lord of any kind. Although, he is quite well off since investing in Grayson's shipping company."

"It's not about titles or money. It never was, you know." She smoothed down her dress, frowning when she saw a wrinkle. "All this time I thought I wanted someone financially secure. But it wasn't about money. No, it was about being secure in a different way."

"How so?" Meg settled on the edge of a wingback chair that flanked her fireplace. They were in Aidan's room at his cottage. He'd thought she'd want to be married at Grayson's large estate, but no. She'd wanted to start their life together here... where they belonged.

"Papa, as lovely as he is, wasn't there for us, Meg."

Meg frowned and looked at the newly polished floorboards. "I know."

"He let his sorrow get the better of him. We couldn't count on Papa." She settled in the chair next to Meg's, staring into the leaping flames in the fireplace. "I don't blame him, but I never wanted to marry a man..." She didn't finish, the words were too disloyal.

Meg smiled and patted her cheek. "I understand."

And she did. Of course she did. They were sisters, but they were also best of friends and they'd gone through more than most sisters.

Mary Ellen stood, fearful of more wrinkles. "It was never about the money."

Meg stood as well and drew her close into a warm embrace. "I'm so happy that you'll be close by. Only a stroll away."

"I as well."

All too soon Meg drew back. "Now, I must go check on baby Violet before the wedding. You're all right, then?"

Mary Ellen grinned. "Yes, very well."

Meg left, closing the door softly behind her. Finally alone, Mary Ellen let the moment sweep over her. Anticipation coursed through her very being, a giddy happiness that flared through her soul. She would marry Aiden. For the last three months he'd courted her. Brought her flowers, trinkets and chocolates until she'd had a large collection of gifts that any woman would envy. He'd insisted on a

courtship, but she'd only wanted him. Now, finally, she would have him completely.

A warm whispered warning said she was no longer alone. She didn't need to turn to know who stood behind her. With a smile, she leaned back into Aidan's solid warmth. "You're not supposed to see me until the wedding."

"I had to." He brushed her hair aside and pressed a kiss to her neck. Hot and cold chills danced over her skin. "Tell me."

"Hmm?" She turned to face him and wrapped her arms around his neck. He looked rather dapper and handsome in his black suit, but how badly she wanted to take that clothing off him. Would the guests notice if they were a tad late to the ceremony?

"You said you didn't truly need someone with money." He cupped the sides of her face. "What do you need then?"

His face was serious, so serious. She reached out, smoothing her hands over his cheek, soothing his obvious worry. "Someone who won't abandon me when life is difficult. Someone who will fight for me. Someone who will love me unconditionally."

He smiled that sweet smile that always made her heart warm with life. "I think I can manage that."

She reached up on tiptoe, intending to press her lips to his mouth, but Aidan pulled back, resting his hands on her hips as if to keep her at arm's length. "I can't think when you're touching me and I need to talk to you."

Confused, she allowed him to move away, even though his absence produced a physical pain. "What is it?"

She tried not to worry when he paced to the windows, overlooking the dreary winter evening. The sky hung low with gray clouds, the landscape browns and yellows, but inside their cottage, it was merry and warm.

"There's something I need to tell you." He paused at the windows by the bed. The very bed where they'd made love for the first time. The very bed where they'd admitted they cared.

"You're making me nervous, Aidan. What is it?"

He turned to face her, his features uncommonly pale. "When you feed from someone... when you fed from me..."

She stepped hesitantly toward him. "Yes?"

"Damn it, Mary Ellen." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Feeding from me might have made you think you felt things you didn't really feel."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

He closed his eyes and curled his fingers into fists. The emotion that crossed his face was almost painful to watch. "You don't really love me. I wasn't going to tell you. I wanted you so badly..."

The words were shocking, certainly, but also confusing. "Is that it? Is that what has you worried?" She didn't wait for his response, but laughed. "Oh Aidan."

He frowned at her, obviously not finding her response amusing. Eager to smooth the pain from his features, she rushed toward him. "You silly man, I loved you even before I fed from you! I was just too daft to admit it."

He was still frowning, but she didn't miss the hope that flared to life in those blue eyes. "Are you sure?"

She threw her arms around his neck, leaning into his hard body. “Positive.”

His lips found hers in a possessive kiss that left her weak.

A soft knock sounded on the door. “Mary Ellen! Grandpapa is here to perform the ceremony. Are you ready?” Hanna’s sweet voice called out.

Mary Ellen grinned up at Aiden. “What say you? Are you prepared to be shackled to me forever? After all, your forever is a rather long time.”

He brushed a curl over her shoulder and pressed a kiss to her neck. “Forever and ever.”

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