

When Midnight Comes

a novella

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Chapter Three

Lucia cast a furtive glance back at Jack. He was lost in thought. She took a deep, soothing breath. Good. There was so much he needed to learn, and very little time to learn it. If he refused to see the truth, all would be lost.

Her part in Jack's task was going to be much harder than she had thought. Lucia had believed that while her love for Jack had not died with her nine years ago, her adoration of him had. That while her heart cried out for him, her mind despised him. She was finding her beliefs less true with every moment she spent in his presence.

Selfish, greedy, manipulative, he did not understand what was truly important on this earth. But he was her Jack. The hero of her childhood, the prince of her adolescence, the bane of her womanhood. She had lived with him for longer than she'd lived with her parents, having lost both of them to ship fever on the trip from Italy to America. She had reached the shores of the New World alone, her single asset and understanding of the language drilled into her by her mother in the months before they escaped the political unrest of their homeland. She had been alone until Jack found her. No matter what he had done, she would always owe him her life, and so much more. She believed there existed an innate goodness in Jack that all of his machinations could not kill. It was that goodness she had to uncover in order to save his soul.

But first she had to find a way to stop the treacherous need within her to touch him, just once, with love. Jack had always needed her love, even when they were children. Though he was the sharpest, toughest runner on the streets, when they were together he had been the gentlest of boys. They had often slept holding hands, and when she had a nightmare, he had allowed her to crawl in to bed next to him, and he had held her until the dawn. She had never been cold or frightened once Jack came into her life. After she left him, she had been nothing but.

"Where now?" he asked.

Lucia started and tore herself free of her memories to find Jack had torn free of his. She stopped and waited for him to catch up to her. For a long moment she relished her chance to just look at him once again.

The years had changed him little. Stronger and taller, his midnight blue eyes still held a soul-deep hunger that would never die. His face, always beautiful to her, had matured, making him beautiful, no doubt, to many women. She frowned at the stab of jealousy. Such emotions were not for her any longer.

"Lucia? Are you alright?"

“Fine,” she said, a bit too sharply. “It is getting on to mid-day. We must continue.”

The location of his second wrong was not very far away. They had lived their youth in the Irish section of the city. Lucia had always felt out of place there and had wandered often to the Italian section just to hear the language of her parents. But she had been out of place there too—an Italian girl raised by an Irish boy who remembered the language of home but little else.

The only place she’d ever belonged was with Jack, and she had left him of her own free will. He had not come for her, though she’d hoped he might until the day she died. She had been too stubborn, too proud, to go back to him after their last encounter. She still loved him, but she could not forgive him for taking from her all she had to give and never looking back.

Lucia stopped and gestured to the road, dotted with all manner of refuse. Since the city fathers had banned the pigs that used to wander the streets eating the garbage, the mess had gotten out of hand.

Lucia glanced at Jack. His nose wrinkled with distaste. He had obviously not been on these streets lately, but then, why would he be? He lived now in a luxurious house to the north. He only worked near the ghetto, and even then, she was sure, he never ventured outside. Except last night, to be robbed and killed. The very fact that he had allowed himself to die in such a way showed the changes in Jack. Once he would have seen the lad’s intention well before the act.

“Remember?” she asked, sweeping out her hand to indicate the filthy gutter before them.

Jack took a step back, as though afraid that if he touched the film he might return to the days when he had not even noticed it there. His face revealed his confusion even before he spoke. “Should I?”

Lucia sighed. How could he forget such momentous occurrences? But then, most people did not realize at the time of such happenings their significance in the grand scheme of their lives.

“Watch,” she said, and like the last time, the past came alive before their eyes.

Jack, now sixteen and lean with growth, ran for home. He had worked from dawn until the sun had long set. Lucia would be waiting, done with her day’s sewing of piecework for the ready-made clothing manufacturer who employed her. He wished she did not have to toil so long and so hard for so little. But she insisted on making her way so she would not be a complete burden to him. As if she could ever be that. Lucia’s adoration and unconditional love were his only warmth in a world that constantly tried to drag him back into poverty.

Jack slipped his hand into his jacket, curling his fingers around the money he carried.

Payday.

Soon he would have enough money to finance his dream of owning his own boardinghouse, employing his own set of runners. He could not exist forever in the ghetto. He’d rather be dead than poor for the rest of his life.

A scuffle, a cry, and a thump from around the corner just ahead made Jack pause, then approach cautiously. He peered around the building just in time to see a young man,

about his own age, raise a knife and plunge the weapon into his victim, who lay half in the street. Surprise made Jack shout, "Hey, what d'ye think yer doin'!"

The youth spun around, fear ripe in his eyes that stared from a gaunt, desperate face. One look at Jack and he ran for his life. Jack hurried over to the injured man, who still breathed, but not for long. He knelt, and the man grasped his arm in a surprisingly strong grip for the dying. Blood soaked Jack's sleeve, and he pulled back, repelled.

"I'll get the police," he said, but the man shook his head and motioned Jack closer. He tried to speak, but nothing came from his mouth but a pink spray of spittle. The man sank back, patting his pocket, his hands as frantic as the expression in his eyes. Then he tried to struggle upward again but failed, slumping into the garbage lining the street. His eyes stared sightless at the moon.

Jack reached into the pocket the man had been so concerned about and pulled out a wad of bills so thick his heart turned over in shock. A movement from a nearby storefront and the distant but approaching whistle of the police brought Jack to his senses. He had a dead man at his feet, a wad of money in his hands, and blood all over his jacket. With a last look into the dead man's face, Jack shoved the cash into his coat and ran away.

The past disappeared, and Jack stood next to Lucia at the place where the unknown man had died. The afternoon had darkened, and Jack threw a quick glance at the sky, half afraid he had been lost in his past for too long and midnight approached too soon. But instead of encroaching night, he saw encroaching storm clouds and heard the distant bellow of thunder. The earlier chill of the fog-shrouded morning had disappeared with the advent of sunlight, but now, with the loss of that light, the chill returned and settled deep in Jack's bones. He shivered and tugged his coat closed.

He had been scared that night, more scared than he could ever recall being. At least on this earth.

So many things could have happened. He could have arrived a few minutes earlier and been the one with the knife in his chest. He could have arrived a few minutes later and lost the money that had helped bring him the success he now enjoyed. He could have waited too long and been hung for a murder he had not committed. But what had he done wrong?

Jack looked at Lucia. "I tried to help him."

Lucia still stared at the gutter where the man had died nearly fourteen years ago. "Thou shalt not steal, Jack," was all she said.

Jack shook his head, confused. "He was dead. He pointed me to that money. He wanted me to have it. For helping him."

"You always could find an excuse for your behavior. That does not change what you did."

"What was I supposed to do? He was dead. The money was there. I used that money to buy my first boardinghouse."

"Where you proceeded to lie and cheat and steal from your countrymen at an even greater rate than Davey Delaney."

"You benefited from it, too, Lucia. You didn't have to work your fingers raw sewing for someone else's gain."

She flinched and hunched her shoulders, the dark cloak shifting forward to swirl about her ankles. Taking a deep breath—for patience or strength, he didn't know which—she turned and stared at the storefront behind them. The storefront where he'd heard a sound that night.

Jack reached for her shoulder, amazed to see that his fingers trembled with the need to touch her. Before he could, she turned. Her gaze fell to his hand, then shifted to his eyes. What he saw there made Jack lower his arm slowly back to his side. When had she begun to fear him?

He tucked his treacherous hands, which ached to take her in his arms and soothe away her fear, into his pockets, then he rocked back on his heels and stared at the now abandoned storefront. "So what did I do wrong?"

"The man had a son. A little boy who hid right there." She pointed to the storefront. "He wanted you to use the money to help the child. When you ran away, so did the child. He lived on the streets, almost starved, and eventually became a murderer and a thief just like the man who killed his father, just like you, Jack."

"I'm not a murderer."

"But you are a thief, despite the expensive clothes and the society parties."

Jack closed his eyes against the unaccustomed shame that washed over him. He had always done what he had to do to survive and to thrive. He had not paused to feel guilt or regret. Lucia had never before said a word of recrimination to him about the way he made his living. She'd known what he did and how he did it. Still she had adored him. Somehow her adoration had made everything he'd done all right in Jack's mind.

"I'll find the boy," he offered. "I'll give back what I took and then some. Will that make everything all right again?"

Lucia sighed, long and aggrieved, and looked at him as if he were muck upon her shoe. "You cannot change what he's endured by giving him money." She spat the last word from her mouth like a sour pill. "*You* have to change, Jack. You have to learn what is important in life. God will not give you the precious gift of a second chance to have you waste it as you wasted the first one." Her fingers crept up, pushing aside the heavy cloak to reveal a gray, shapeless dress decorated only by the rosary around her neck.

She had always worn that rosary, he recalled. It had been her mother's. Jack's gaze strayed to her hand as she worked the beads, the elegant, slim fingers moving in a rhythm he no longer remembered. Lucia only fingered the beads when she wanted something desperately.

"You will wander like the jack of the lantern in the legends of old," she said, the cool, quiet tone of her voice warmed by the cadence of her native language. "With but a lantern for company, alone, lonely, never finding warmth or love on this earth." She stared into his face, searching, and his anger turned to dismay at the heartbreak in her eyes. "Until the end of time you will wander, or until you beg for Hell, whichever comes first. And believe me, Jack, you will want to die. You will do anything to get free of this earth, because being alone and unloved is the worst punishment any of us could ever dream of."

He reached out and grabbed her wrist before she could move away. Her hand worked on the beads, making the fine bones beneath his fingers twist and shift. Her eyes widened and her lips parted. Fascinated, he watched her breath quicken, coming in little

puffs of steam, warm and moist against the cool approach of the storm, faster and faster, through open, russet lips.

“You sound as if you know of what you speak, Lucia. Tell me, what happened to you after you left me? Did you wander this earth alone and unloved until you wished for death? You had but to knock on my door and I’d have taken you back in. You were a part of me. Since we were children we were together. How could ye leave me when I needed ye so much?”

For a moment her eyes softened, and he glimpsed the girl he had always known behind the impassive face and eerie, calm voice. She tugged on the wrist he still held imprisoned, and he released her. Her fingertips scraped against the stubble on his jaw. She had always touched him thus, right before they kissed. Jack began to lower his lips to hers, bringing his face close enough for her to—

Crack!

Her palm connected with his cheek, bringing tears to his eyes. Jack straightened, putting his fingers to his burning face as he stared at her. Her dark eyes snapped fury such as he had never seen in them before.

“It is always about you, is it not? What you need. When you need it.” She turned, the ankle-length black material of her cloak billowing out like a thundercloud behind her. The sky rumbled, giving sound to the illusion. She stamped past the few amazed onlookers, who had stopped in their midday rush when the pretty Italian girl had slapped the Irish swell, without a second glance. When she realized he wasn’t beside her, she stopped, put her hands on her hips, and turned to glare. “Come along now, Jack Keegan, and I will show you your final wrong. Then you can see why what you need does not matter to me any longer.”

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