

## When Midnight Comes

a novella

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### Chapter 4

The anger felt good. Much better than the pain and the longing. Anger was hot and warmed the chill Lucia couldn't seem to dispel from her blood. But then why should she be able to? She was dead, after all; her earthly body but a loan until midnight came. Then her spirit would return to purgatory and her body, as they said, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Lucia didn't turn about to see if Jack followed her toward the location of his final wrong. She couldn't bear to look at him right now, to see again the need in his eyes that matched the need she hid in her heart. What was to come would be painful—for both of them.

Night approached—early, she thought, but winter approached as well, strangling daylight more and more with each passing day. The storm didn't help, darkening the sky faster than the sun's fading light.

Before they reached their destination, the storm came upon them with fury, the wind whipping Lucia's cloak, sending cold shafts of air up her skirt and ending the momentary warmth she'd treasured. Icy rain drenched her hair; thunder and lightning made her flinch and hurry along. This was how it had all begun so long ago. There had been a storm that night, too.

Jack appeared beside her, yanking the hood of her cloak up to shield her head, then placing a warm, helping hand at the small of her back. When Lucia would have pulled away, he grasped her elbow and held her firmly to his side.

"Don't be stubborn, Lucia, there is time enough to see what else I've done wrong. Let's get out of the storm."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "The place is right here."

Lucia ducked beneath the awning of an ancient brick building and opened the door. Heated air, ripe with the smell of last night's potatoes and cabbage, hit her in the face.

She smiled. Home at last.

Water dripped from her cloak onto the floor, the *plunk, plunk, plunk* thunderous in the silence that greeted them. Lucia turned to find Jack standing out in the rain. Droplets ran down his stark, white face, catching on his black eyelashes, hanging for a long second, then dripping onto his already soaked coat.

Lucia beckoned him inside. He backed away, shaking his head. "Not here," he whispered.

She had no time for soothing words or gentle persuasion. If Jack bolted now, all would be lost. So Lucia grabbed his hand and yanked with all her strength. Caught unaware, he stumbled into the rooming house.

The wind caught the door and slammed it shut behind him. Startled, he gasped and nearly yanked his hand from hers. She gentled her grasp, folding her fingers between his, reveling for a moment in the simple pleasure of palm meeting palm, but they did not have time to linger in the dark, dank entryway holding hands like two young lovers with their lives before them. Neither of them could lay claim to that any longer.

“Come along, Jack.” Her voice was sharper than she’d meant, but Jack did not notice. He stared upward, his gaze fastened on the gloom and murk that obscured the upper levels of the stairway. Shadows danced an evening waltz with the minute bit of light creeping in through a hole in the roof.

When she tugged on his hand, he looked up at her and gave a slight nod. He was ready, as was she. Together they climbed the stairs to the third floor, the warped wood creaking beneath their feet, the sound almost drowned out by the shriek of the wind through the cracks about the windows and the doors. One particularly high-pitched screech, sounding nearly human, brought a memory, unbidden to Lucia’s mind. Once she had screamed like that—in pain, in fear, in despair.

She pushed the sob that threatened back into her heart with all the others, then forced herself not to shake and shiver as she continued to climb the stairs at the side of the man who had brought her both the most joy and the most pain she had ever known.

The building had not changed much in ten years, becoming older and more run down, as buildings and people were wont to do. Immigrants able to afford a room of their own for their family still resided here, better off than many who lived six or more families to a cellar in the depths of the city. Families, making their way the best they could. Once she and Jack had been a family, and here they had lived.

Without a word between them, they stopped outside the room that had been theirs. Lucia let go of Jack’s hand to turn the doorknob. The door swung open to reveal an empty room.

Jack took a deep breath. “Is this necessary, Lucia?”

“You know it is.”

He let out the breath he’d held in wait for her answer, then stepped closer to her and slid his hand beneath her wet hair to curl about her neck. The familiarity of the gesture made tears well in her eyes. What she wouldn’t give for one more chance to love him.

“I’ll tell ye right now, I don’t regret what happened in this room.” His fingers tightened on her neck, and he shook her just once. “None of it, d’ ye hear?”

Before she could answer by word or gesture, he released her and turned to view another episode of his past.

Jack ran through the streets of the city, joy filling his heart. He had at last earned enough money to buy a second rooming house. Little by little he was making his way in the world. Someday Jack Keegan would be the richest man in Manhattan. Then no one would dare call him an Irish nobody again. He had but to work hard and never veer from his course. That was the wonder of America. Hard work was rewarded. Those who

knew what was important prospered. And Jack knew what was important in life—money, position, success. He would have them all one day soon.

He burst into the boardinghouse and pounded up the stairs, then let himself into the small room he shared with Lucia, surprised not to find her at home. Though he had returned earlier than usual, he had never known her to venture out this late in the day.

Jack removed his coat, frowning at the distant rumble of thunder. Where was she? Perhaps he should go searching before the storm hit.

Quiet voices from the other side of the door caught his attention. Wasn't that Lucia's voice? And the voice of a man? The joy in Jack's heart began to fade, though he could not put his finger on why. Who was she talking to? Where had she been?

Jack strode across the room and opened the door—just in time to see Timothy Monihan kiss Lucia full on the lips.

Jack froze. He could not breathe, could not think for the fury coursing through him. How dare Monihan touch her? She was a child. A child who was Jack's responsibility.

"Just what the hell d' ye think yer doin', Monihan?" he growled.

The two sprang apart, guilt plain upon their faces. Lucia would not look at him, staring instead at the hem of her blue gown, which peeked from beneath her ankle-length cloak. Monihan was not so shy. After the initial flush of embarrassment across his cheeks, he raised his chin, grabbed Lucia's hand, and looked Jack right in the eye.

"I'm doin' nothin' I should be ashamed of doin', Keegan. Unlike you."

Jack, who had been staring at their joined hands, a physical show of unity that made him realize this was not the first time they had met, nor likely the first time they had kissed, returned his gaze to Monihan's. Lucia made a soft sound of distress, which she silenced when Monihan pulled her closer to his side.

"And what might I have t' be ashamed of?"

"Keepin' her here with you. Ruinin' her reputation by livin' in sin."

Jack's mouth fell open. He had never heard such insanity in his life. Before he could answer, Monihan continued. "She swears yer not but brother and sister. Still, no one believes her but me." He glanced at Lucia, and some of the anger in his face faded as love took its place. "I love the girl and I believe whatever she says. T' tell ye true, I do not care if she's known ye. I do not care if she loves ye. Ye don't have it in ye t' love her back. Not in the way she needs."

Jack glanced at Lucia but could only see the top of her head as she continued to study her boots. She'd always been quiet, but never had she been this quiet, and especially when she was being discussed as if she weren't present to hear.

"Loves me? What are ye blatherin' about, Monihan?"

The young man made a disgusted sound deep in his throat. "Are ye so blind ye cannot see she cares for ye? Are ye so caught up in yer cursed ambition ye don't know a girl of sixteen should not be livin' with a man of twenty? Not unless she's his mistress. But she will hear none of it. She continues t' insist she cannot leave ye. Ye need her. But I think ye need no one but yerself and yer money. The time has come t' make her honest or leave her go."

Jack was having a hard time following the conversation. His mind kept floundering at the idea of Lucia with another man. Lucia having grown into a woman, loving him, as a woman loved a man, it seemed, and he had not noticed.

As Lucia turned her attention from the rapt contemplation of her boots toward her suitor, Jack took the opportunity to study her. She had always been small, her bones fine, her hands slim and elegant. Her face had matured, but the huge dark eyes, the high, exotic cheekbones, looked the same as on the day he had first found her. Beneath her coat, perhaps, lay the body of a woman, but Jack had to admit, he had never looked at her in such a way.

“I’ve asked her t’ marry me,” Monihan said.

Panic flashed through Jack’s mind. Marriage? He would lose her forever. “Now just a minute, she is but a child. Ye cannot marry her. I forbid it.”

Monihan dropped Lucia’s hand and turned to Jack with fists clenched. “Who are ye t’ forbid her a life of her own? Yer not her father, nor her brother. She says yer not her lover, but ye’ve not the guts t’ maker her yer wife. Ye have no rights t’ Lucia; she’s mine.”

Anger drowned Jack’s confusion. “She is not yers, nor mine, Monihan. She is her own. This’ll be her decision, and I’ll not have ye forcin’ her into anything.” Jack put his hand on Lucia’s shoulder. She started but did not look at him even then. “Is this what ye want, Lucia?” he asked gently, even though he wanted to shout and pound his fists against something, or someone, at the thought of losing her.

She took a deep breath, her shoulder rising and lowering beneath Jack’s fingers, and he tightened them for a moment, in support or supplication he knew not which. At last she looked at him, and in her eyes she saw the truth. She was a woman, and she loved him.

*Well, hell, he thought, what am I t’ do now?*

“Tell him, Lucia,” Tim urged. “Tell him ye will not stay here with him anymore. Come away with me now and I’ll marry ye tonight. The priest will waive the bans if I tell him what you’ve been through.”

Lucia didn’t spare her suitor a glance. Instead she stared into Jack’s eyes, waiting, hope alight in her face. Jack didn’t know what to say, what to do. He didn’t want her to go, but could he ask her to stay?

Jack turned away from what he saw in her face, turned his back on her need and her love. “Do what is best fer yerself, Lucia. All I want is fer ye t’ be happy.” He clattered down the stairs and out into the street, but not before he heard Lucia’s sob, a sound that broke the heart he did not want to have.

Jack wandered the streets, alone, lonely. He would have to get used to feeling thus. Soon his rooming house, his runners, and his ambition would be all he had. They should be enough. They would be enough.

The storm that had threatened hovered and rumbled but did not break. The air, unnaturally hot for October, seemed to pulse with warmth, electricity, and expectation. The tension within Jack mirrored the pressure of the waiting storm. He wanted to scream and run and do violence to anything in his path. Instead he walked and walked as the thunder rumbled and heat lightning flared over the ocean but did not drift toward the shore.

When he could no longer bear the presence of the storm, which seemed to mock him with its inability to explode, he returned to his room. Stepping inside, the quiet and the darkness gave voice to the state of his life. He would have to become accustomed to her absence.

Shunning a candle, he made his way to the narrow bed behind the curtain on his side of the room, stripped off his clothes, and lay down to stare at the night, which pulsed so loudly with silence he thought he might run mad.

And then he heard it, the steady cadence of her breathing. Jack jerked his head to the side but could not see her bed through the combination of darkness and the wall of his curtain and hers. But he did not need to see her to know the truth.

She had not left him! Joy filled his heart, and some of the mind-numbing tension faded. He relaxed and, listening to the soothing sound of her breath moving past her lips, he slept.

In the morning she smiled at him as she did every morning. Or was her smile different now? And if so, was it a change in him, in her, or in the nature of their relationship?

“I thought ye’d be gone,” he said.

Her smile froze, and he cursed himself for bringing up yesterday’s scene. “No,” she whispered, ducking her head, avoiding his gaze, “I could not leave you. We need each other.”

He considered the top of her head for a moment. He did need her, but was he being selfish, as Monihan said, to allow her to stay with him? He could not marry her. If he married Lucia, children would follow, each one dragging him further into the bog of poverty never to climb out. He could not bear to live like that, nor could he bear to sentence her to such a life. He wanted things to continue just as they were.

“Well, I’ll be going to work then,” he said, and with her nod he convinced himself things were just as they had been for so long.

But over the days that followed, as the storm continued to threaten but never broke and time moved from mid-October toward All Hallows Eve, Jack learned that nothing would ever be the same between them again. Jack learned what it was like to burn for something he could never have.

For every time he looked at her, he saw a woman where he had once seen a girl. Her smile made his breath catch in his throat; her scent made his arms trill with gooseflesh; her laugh made his chest ache. He didn’t even want to think about the sleep he lost every night, listening to her breathe and sigh a few feet away from him.

Then one night, when he had just fallen asleep, he heard her cry out, as she often did with nightmares. Before he came fully awake and realized what he was doing, he had yanked on his pants and crossed the room to stand beside her bed.

“*Mi madre, mi padre,*” she mumbled and shifted, then sighed a sigh of intense pain.

Jack swallowed the lump that sprang to his throat. Despite the lack of light, he could see tears tracking across her cheeks. She dreamt again of her parents.

Gently he put his hand to her shoulder. “Lucia, wake up. It’s but a dream.”

She came awake with a gasp, sitting up and taking his hand, pressing it between hers against her chest, partially bared by her shift. Her eyes, wide and wet, found his. Their gazes held.

Her hair, damp with sweat, clung to her forehead. He dropped to his knees, reaching out to push the loose, tangled strands from her face. Jack couldn’t seem to speak, to move, to do anything but stare into her face and feel the desire spreading

through his body, clouding his mind, making him want to bury his fingers in her hair, plunder her mouth with kisses, press her back onto the bed and make her his forever.

The thought broke the spell and he cursed, yanking his hand from hers and backing away, as if terrified of the sight of her.

“Jack?”

“Dammit, Lucia, can’t ye see what’s happening here? Monihan’s right. I’m a selfish bastard t’ keep ye with me.” He turned and stumbled back to his side of the room, pulling on the first shirt he found, shoving his feet into his shoes and heading for the door.

“Where are you going?”

He stopped with his fingers on the doorknob. “Out,” he snapped. “Before I do something we’ll both regret. I cannot be what ye want, Lucia, what ye need. Fer yer own good, go before I get back. Go t’ Monihan. He’ll love ye. I cannot.”

Before she could argue he jerked open the door and ran from the room, down the stairs, bursting out onto the silent street. The air still throbbed with the storm, just as his blood throbbed with Lucia. Jack ran until sweat filled his eyes, and still he ran some more. The streets were deserted, unusually so.

Then he remembered. Tonight was All Hallows Eve. The dead walked this night, or so they said. The immigrants who graced these streets, a superstitious lot, would stay inside to be safe, but he would rather be alone with the dead than alone with Lucia.

At last the storm hit the city, bringing relief from the heat and the strain of the waiting. Icy rain pelted Jack’s cheeks, froze his hair, soaked through his shirt, and ran down his collar. Yet he still wandered on. He would give Lucia time to gather her things, time to leave him forever. If he saw her again, he just might give in to his sudden and amazing desire to kiss her. To kiss her and so much more.

What ailed him? He had held Lucia in his arms, as one might hold a sister, yet now his treacherous mind had begun to think of her as something else entirely. Had he noticed in some secret part of his mind that Lucia had become a woman? Had he given her any indication that there might be a chance for a future between them as man and wife? Jack didn’t think so, but then how had she come to hope for such a thing?

When the night reached its darkest and the storm its most furious, Jack climbed the stairs. His steps were heavy, defeated, his body cold, wet, and bone-deep weary, yet the thought of entering their room and seeing it half empty almost made Jack return to the storm-scented night. As he reached the top of the second flight of stairs, the glow from beneath his doorway drew him forward. Shadows danced with the light, and he stared transfixed as they played upon the floor in front of his feet. Quietly, cautiously he crept forward, placed his hand on the knob, and opened the door.

Lucia stood at the washbasin, in her shift and nothing else. Her skin glistened with water; the golden droplets mirrored the flickering candlelight. When she turned and saw him in the doorway, her startled gasp sliced through the silence that hung heavy in the room. Jack’s breath caught in his throat at what she revealed when she turned his way.

Her breasts, high and firm and full, strained at the too-tight material of her shift. Captivated, he stared at them, watching as they rose and fell with every breath she took. He could see the outline of her nipples, round and red, enticing despite the white cotton that covered them. Unable to stop himself, Jack’s gaze wandered downward. The

lamplight shone through the thin material, outlining her waist, her hips, her thighs, all rounded and soft, just as a woman's should be.

His own breathing quickened, and the chill that had invaded his blood while he walked through the storm dissipated. The heat of his skin beneath his wet clothes seemed to cause steam to waft into his face.

"Jack?"

Her voice, familiar as his own, but unsure, a little frightened, brought him to his senses. What was he doing staring at her as if she were a whore purchased for his pleasure?

Jack nearly groaned, then cursed beneath his breath. He didn't even know himself anymore. When had his protective urges for Lucia changed to the urges of a man for a woman? He slammed the door behind him, making Lucia jump and grab for her robe, clutching the garment to her chin.

"I told ye t' be gone," he snarled, stalking across the room to hide behind the curtain that shielded his bed from hers. He yanked off his soaked shirt and grabbed a towel to dry himself.

"N-no." Her voice came from the other side of the cloth partition. Jack spun around and saw her silhouette, stark against the threadbare curtain. "I-I could not go," she said.

He could smell her on the steamy air, a combination of soap and a particular scent that was Lucia—summer-warmed earth and wild flowers. Jack pressed his face into the towel to stop the temptation from possessing his mind, praying his body would stop reacting to her in this new and unacceptable way.

Had the God he denied for so long decided to punish him at last? Or was Satan rewarding him for his selfishness and greed? He was no virgin, should know by now how to control his urges, yet the flare in his blood and the ache in his loins reminded him of the first time he had been with a woman.

Jack made the futile wish that he had never seen Lucia and Monihan kiss, never heard Monihan's accusations or looked at Lucia with the eyes of a man. Though he had hoped, he knew now they could never return to the way things had been.

"Jack?" Lucia said again, and the sound of her voice sent gooseflesh sliding down his arms.

He lowered the towel and briskly rubbed the chill away. "Aye?"

"We must talk. I do not want to marry Tim. I want to stay here." She took a deep breath, the shadow of her breasts rising, thrusting, begging him with their perfection just as her voice begged him with words. Her hand rose to her mouth, and she stroked her bottom lip with her thumb to relieve some of her distress. "I want to stay here with you."

He sat down on his bed, closed his eyes against all enticements, and said the words he knew must be said. "Ye cannot and well ye know it, girl. Monihan is right about one thing, I'm doin' ye harm by allowin' ye t' stay here. I had not realized, and I'm sorry fer it."

Before he knew what she was about, she drew aside the curtain. Jack's eyes snapped at the sound, then widened at the sight. She stood too close and too unclothed, her breasts level with the top of his head. He stared at the golden shade of flesh peaking

through a small hole in the fabric near her rib cage, his mouth, even with her belly, eased forward—

Jack bit back a curse and put his hand to his head. “Lucia, go away. Run away. Are ye crazy t’ come t’ me half-naked? I’m but a man, and I can see very well yer a woman now. Ye should not be here.”

“I belong nowhere but with you. Since the day you saved my life, took me in, raised me, I have belonged to you.”

“Don’t say that!” His voice was too loud, too ragged, too desperate, and Jack forced himself to take a calming breath and speak more quietly. “I told Monihan and I’ll tell ye, too—ye belong t’ no one but yerself, Lucia.”

“You said you wished me to go. But I cannot believe you would be so heartless. You wish for me to marry Tim and never see you again? Because he will not let me see you, Jack. Never. If I leave, everything we have shared, everything we have done, everything we have worked and lived for will be over. I will be Tim’s wife and you will be alone.”

Jack clenched his jaw to stop his treacherous tongue from begging her to stay. He had not realized until she said it how much he feared being alone in the world. His work and his ambition had kept him from making friends. He and Lucia had had only each other for most of their lives, and that had been enough. Jack hated to think of what his life would be like without her. Dark, lonely, joyless. Exactly what his life had been in Ireland before he escaped.

Her fingers touched his hair, smoothed back the ragged tresses he never seemed to remember to cut. Then she stepped forward, and the heat of her skin beneath the snow-white cotton warmed his cold lips. A fold of her chemise brushed his cheek and he was lost.

He pressed his lips to her belly. She gasped, and her fingers clenched in his hair, bringing him closer, holding him to her. He should have stopped right then. Could have, would have, if she hadn’t suddenly framed his face with her hands and tilted his head back so her dark, grave eyes peered down into his. “Ah, Jack, please do not send me away. You are all I have. All I have ever had. All I will ever want on this earth.”

Before he could think or reply, she leaned forward and pressed her mouth to his. Jack froze as the lust he’d held at bay ignited within him, sudden and impossible to resist, though he tried with the last vestige of decency he owned.

He stood, trying to hold her away, but she struggled to remain, sliding closer, pressing her barely covered breasts to his naked chest, twining her fingers in his hair and stroking her lips with her tongue. Not untutored in the art of kissing, her mouth moved against his with a skill that made his body harden and strain for release.

Then suddenly they were on his bed, mouth-to-mouth, chest-to-chest, hip-to-hip. She rained kisses across his face, and he reveled in the gentle urgency of her touch. They had loved each other so long, sweetly, innocently, wasn’t it natural their love had matured along with their bodies, their hearts, and their minds? He had not realized how very much he needed the touch of someone who loved him until he felt Lucia’s touch all the way to his wildly beating heart.

He tried very hard to be gentle, to go slow. But the passion they had hidden even from themselves soared out of control. She was a different person tonight from the sweet and solemn girl he had raised. A woman now, her instincts outweighed her innocence.

Her fingers fluttered over the naked length of his back, then around to his chest. He watched her explore him, learning the texture and the taste of his skin, and the seriousness of her expression, the concentration that creased her forehead, made him smile. In some ways she was very much the same.

Having known him all her life, she possessed no shyness in touching him. Her knuckles brushed the hardness beneath his trousers and he tensed. Her dark gaze shot up to his, gauging his reaction. Then, with a smile that was all woman, she curled her fingers about him and pressed her palm to his fullness, flexing and cupping in a rhythm she should not know.

He gritted his teeth and grasped her wrist, but she made a sound of denial and struggled to touch him again, pressing her mouth against his and using her tongue to drive him to distraction.

All his good intentions fled, and he tore her chemise in his desire to feel her firm, soft flesh in his hands. She sighed deep in her throat when his palms cupped and lifted her breasts and his thumbs stroked her nipples. He pulled his mouth from hers and leaned back to see if he had frightened her with his need. But her face reflected pleasure, her lips, red and swollen, mouthed his name, and when he lowered his mouth to her breasts her gasp of delight and the firm stroke of her fingers along his shaft showed she did not fear him.

He learned her tasted as she had learned his. He memorized the softness of her skin with the tips of his fingers. He made them both mad with desire, and when she begged him for what she did not understand, his trousers joined her chemise on the floor as he lifted himself above her.

They were both damp with sweat and breathless with the wonder of each other. He probed at her moist entrance, hesitant to hurt her, but her eyes opened, dazed, glazed, and she rose to meet him, breaking the barrier of her innocence herself, then pulling him all the way into her body.

He heard not a whisper of pain from her mouth; only his name and Italian endearments met his ears before he lost all sense of anything but the two of them. He slid in and out of her body in the rhythm as old as eternity. He had never felt so complete in his life. He who had always striven for the next mountain, to have more, more, more than what he already had, at last knew what it was like to possess for an instant all that was important in the world.

He held back his release while she tightened around him. Her breath caught in surprise and wonder as he sank himself h into her welcoming warmth one last time and rode the waves of her pleasure. Despite his loss of control in taking her innocence, a portion of his mind warned him before it was too late, and he pulled free of her body to shudder his release alone. He would not risk giving her a child and dooming them all to Hell on earth.

When they both lay spent and exhausted, Lucia cupped his head with her hands and lifted his face so she could stare into his eyes. She smiled a new smile—one that erased the ever-present sadness in her eyes.

“Ah, Jack. I knew I could not love you this much and be all alone in my love. I promise I will make you happy. Perhaps we can go west and work a farm. I have always loved the land. We can do anything together. I know we can. You will never regret marrying me, this I swear.”

Jack, who had been floating on a warm cloud of fulfillment and happiness, went cold with dread. A farm? He swallowed a sudden sickness at the back of his throat. He had farmed himself nearly to death in Ireland. He despised farming. And love? Marriage? He had but to remember his mother, her life and her death, to feel sick all over again at the prospect of either.

Lucia saw the truth in his face and the sadness returned. "You are not going to marry me." She did not question, she knew. She had always known him better than anyone.

Her gaze slid from his. She shoved at him, and Jack shifted so she could scramble free. The loss of her warmth made him shiver. Would he ever feel such warmth again?

Lucia picked up her shift and found it ruined. She stood there for a moment staring at the garment, transfixed. Her hair hung about her face, the black strands emphasizing the sudden paleness of her skin, her usual healthy, golden tinge replaced by a deathlike pallor. She cast the shift to the ground and began to laugh, a sound without mirth that caused Jack to sit up, alarmed.

"Lucia?" He did not know what else to say. He dare not ask her what was wrong. He knew all too well.

She told him anyway, standing naked with naught but her hair to cover the breasts he had so recently worshipped. "I am a fool. But then, you knew that. Most likely took advantage of that fact, just as Tim said you would. I defended you. I always have."

Jack's shame turned slowly to anger. He had not meant for this to happen. He had told her go to. Twice. Yet she had remained.

"I am only thinkin' of you. Yer too young t' be a wife. T' be a mother. I'll ruin ye."

Her eyes narrowed. "You already have."

Her quiet pronouncement fell between them, and Jack drowned shame with more anger. "Will ye be sayin' I seduced ye, then? Ye know that is not the case. Just because I cannot love ye nor marry ye does not mean I do not have feelings for ye. I'll take care of ye just as I always have. I swear."

She started to laugh again, and he resisted the urge to shake her until she stopped. That laugh grated on his ears, scraped along the tender thread of guilt within him. "I am sure you will always take care of me. But, I think, not as you always have." She glanced pointedly at the bed, then took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reached for the rosary that usually hung about her neck. The necklace was absent, most likely lying by the washbasin, and her hand fell back to her side as her eyes opened and stared into his. "I will be leaving you, Jack. If you decide to listen to your heart instead of the lure of your ambition and greed, I would be willing to see you again. If not, please do not come after me. I cannot bear to look at you and know you have so little respect for love and honor."

"Dammit, Lucia, how can ye walk away from what we just shared? This was more than a mere tumble and well ye know it."

"Yes, I do know it. But you, it seems, do not." She turned and walked to her side of the room, dressing quickly and throwing some clothes into a bag. Then she moved to the washbasin, picked up the rosary, and dropped the necklace over her head. The beads clicked together, sounding loud and hollow in the tense silence between them. She stopped with her hand on the door.

"Good-bye, Jack," she whispered without looking about.

The way she said good-bye, the finality, the despair, infuriated Jack. He needed her; he had always needed her. Just as his mother had needed his father, and she had died, old before her time, mourning the loss of yet another child, dirt poor and starving despite all the love and the need and the honor.

He could still hear his mother's voice begging her husband to stay, telling of her need and her love. Later, when Patrick had gone out to drink, Jack would hear her praying, begging God for the same thing. He could still feel the shame that had enveloped him every time she had begged, his disgust for her weakness at war with his love for her. Over her grave he had sworn never to beg for love, never to need anyone, and never to pray again.

"Go then," he spat, tearing himself from the memories. "I'll not stop ye. But don't expect me t' beg ye t' come back. If ye want me, then ye'll have t' take me on my terms, and ye'll have t' come back t' me."

His only answer was the closing of the door.

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