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By Midnight

A RAVENWOOD MYSTERY

MIA JAMES

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

Prologue

Spitalfields, East London, 1887

She was dying. He could feel her life slipping away between his fingers. He had tried to ignore the signs, tried to pretend it was just the night cold making her face so white, but now as they paused in the pool of gaslight he could see the grey circles under her eyes and the dark blood on her lips. He was no physician, but he still knew what it meant, he had seen it too many times before. Her flesh was hot to the touch and there were bruises flowering on her slender neck. Death had marked her; it was only a matter of time before he collected.

'I'm sorry,' she panted. 'Just a little rest and then I'll be fine.'

'Of course,' he said, setting her down in a doorway. 'As long as you need.'

The young man's handsome face was pinched, pained. *She looks so beautiful, even now*, he thought. *How can God take her away from me?* Suddenly he looked up, searching the dark alleyway behind them anxiously, his blue eyes scanning the thick, swirling fog, his nose flaring reflexively even though he could smell nothing above the rancid stench of London.

'They're coming,' he whispered to himself. 'We can't stay here.'

She moaned softly as he lifted her into his arms. Glancing around, he increased his pace, his cloak billowing behind them. He skidded and almost fell on the cobbles as he turned from the narrow side street into the main thoroughfare. It was still busy despite the late hour and he felt a little hope steal into his heart as he saw the tall grey spire stretching up towards the moon. If he could just reach the church, then, perhaps, there

was still a chance. God could not fail him. Veering across the street, dodging a carriage and ignoring the cursing driver, he charged up the steps.

'Open the door!' he shouted, his fist hammering on the heavy oak. 'For pity's sake, let us in!'

Still holding the girl tightly, he allowed himself to look back across the road. He could see nothing in the darkness, but he knew they would be here soon, their claws and teeth bared. Nothing would stop them from claiming their prize.

'Help us!' he yelled again, slamming his palm against the wood. 'In Christ's name!'

'And what do you know of Christ?' said a voice. The door creaked open a fraction and the black barrel of a pistol poked through the gap. 'Get away from here, you devil. I know what you are.'

The young man looked towards the door, his eyes blazing. 'I don't ask for sanctuary for myself,' he said. 'I ask for her.' He lifted the girl, the small silver crucifix around her neck glinting dully.

There was a long pause and then the pistol was withdrawn.

'Bring her in. Quickly.'

The cleric looked young, or as young as anyone could look in his line of work. His back was bent and his face creased, but his hair was not yet completely grey. He had the same smell of death about him as the girl did, he noted as he watched the priest bolt the door.

'This way,' said the priest, holding his lamp as high as he could. He opened the door to a small but cosy room lit by candles, a meagre fire burning in the grate. 'Here, put her on the cot.'

Once the girl was settled, the cleric turned his lamp up and held it close to her face. Her skin was sallow in the harsh light, her lips blue-tinged, sweat beading on her forehead. He shook his head. 'There's nothing we can do.'

The young man grasped the priest's arm, squeezing hard. 'There must be something – some prayer or incantation? Please,' he asked desperately.

The cleric spread his hands helplessly. 'She's too far gone. Only God can help her now.'

The young man turned to him, his gaze intense and unwavering. 'Then it's up to me.'

The cleric's eyes widened. 'No, no, I beg you!'

'What else can I do?' growled the man. 'I tried to save her, I tried to get her away from those demons, but she's dying. Dying!'

'Damn you!' cried the priest. 'This is a house of God.'

The man pushed the priest from the room. 'Then go and pray for us,' he hissed.

Locking the door behind the priest, he slowly knelt by the cot and gently brushed the girl's damp hair back from her face. The blood was bubbling in her throat now and her eyes were flickering open and shut.

'It's time, Lily. It's time,' he murmured, stroking her pale neck tenderly. 'Now we'll be together.'

He lowered his head, his lips parting as if for a kiss. Painfully yet determinedly, the girl turned her head.

'No,' she whispered. 'I can't. I *won't*.' A tear slid slowly down her face.

'But this is the only way,' he insisted, panic in his voice. 'Join me and you'll be cured. I can't bear to lose you.'

She gave a weak smile, her teeth stained pink with blood. 'What we have is special, my love,' she replied, her eyes clear and sure. 'Don't ruin it like this, with this evil.'

'What I did was for us,' he said softly, stroking her cold cheek.

'But if you do this, if you kill another human being, God will never forgive you and you will be lost for ever.' She saw his stricken face and tried to smile. 'We'll be together again, I promise you,' she said.

A crash echoed from the front of the church.

'They're here.'

'Don't,' she said, gripping his wrist fiercely. 'You're not like them. Promise me you'll stay strong.'

He nodded sadly. 'I promise. Only the one who made me like this – he will pay.'

'Then you will be free?'

'Yes, darling. And then we can be together.'

Suddenly she was wracked with a terrible coughing fit.

'Don't worry, our love will endure,' she gasped into his ear. 'I will be with you again.'

Her chest jerked upwards, once, twice, and then her limbs went rigid. Her eyelids trembled and her lips parted.

'I love you,' she whispered. And she was gone.

'NOOO!' he roared, pulling her body to him, clutching at her hair. 'NO!'

He lay like that for a few moments, his tears falling on her pale cheek, then he slowly rose. Outside, he could hear thuds and splintering wood. With one last look towards the bed, he threw off his cloak and opened the door.