

HEART OF MIDNIGHT

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Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. HEART OF MIDNIGHT has been rated NC17, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

Chapter 1

1903, Lasënbourg

Catriona shifted in the coach's seat, feeling the strain on her buttocks from the long ride since they got off the train in Munich. "Are we nearly there, Miss Otto?"

"Cease your prattle."

Her mouth dropped open at the sharp rebuke from the older woman. Catriona frowned, wondering what she had done to stir Miss Otto's ire. The companion had seemed like charm itself from the moment she arrived at her relatives' home in London to see Catriona to the special school. As the journey wore on, she had become less pleasant.

Perhaps she had asked too many questions. Her curiosity might have grated on the other woman's nerves. She bit her tongue, forcing back the sharp comment about Miss Otto acting as her eyes. Instead, Catriona smoothed her woolen skirt and shifted yet again, seeking a comfortable spot on the hard seat. The horses traversed the terrain at a brisk pace, rocking the carriage from side to side. She would be relieved when they arrived in the capitol, Stossburg, and her companion left her at the school.

She sighed and gave up trying to find a comfortable way to sit. Her thoughts wandered from the unpleasant journey to what awaited her at the small school in the heart of Lasënbourg. Aunt Victoria had assured her she would relearn everything she had so easily known before the accident claimed her vision. Uncle Frederick hadn't said much of anything, but she was used to that.

During the year circumstances had forced her to live with them, the only time he spoke to her was to remind her to be grateful to them for taking her in and to tell her how expensive she was to maintain. Her mouth twisted as she mused she must be,

considering her relatives had already frittered away a large sum of her inheritance, mostly on her spoiled cousin Prudence.

Catriona was under no illusion that they were sending her to the school because it was in her best interests. They simply wanted her out of the way.

She stiffened as the horses stepped onto a different texture. It sounded like their shoes now rang out against cobblestone, rather than hard earth. She could also hear the bustle of a crowd and smell the underlying stench always present in a city. She risked incurring Miss Otto's wrath again. "Have we arrived in Stossburg, Miss Otto?"

"Yes," she said, and didn't bother to expand on her answer.

She hid a grimace at the woman's abruptness. During their ride through London and traveling via ship from England to Germany, Miss Otto had occasionally provided a visual commentary. Again, she wondered what had caused the woman to change so drastically in the last few hours.

The carriage ride lasted another ten or fifteen minutes, during which time Catriona repositioned her hat by touch and tried to banish the case of nerves twisting her stomach into knots. Her aunt had assured her of the school's fine reputation, letting her know it only accepted young women from the best families. Aunt Victoria had hinted there was trouble getting them to take her, but Catriona had ignored her aunt's implied insult.

She had grown a thick skin to their derogatory comments, having heard them so plentifully in the past thirteen months. Catriona knew a great deal of their bitterness sprang from the fact she was still more beautiful than their plain daughter could ever be, even without her sight. Part of it she attributed to sourness that she had survived the accident when her parents hadn't. If she had only had the good grace to perish along with her parents, their burdens would have eased.

Catriona sighed, reminding herself of her vow not to think of the Bonners again. This school was a new start for her. She had to focus on the positive, for she had dwelled in the dark pit of her memories long enough. She might go mad if she

continued to live in darkness. She wanted to return to the self-assured woman she had been before the accident.

However, it was difficult to escape when darkness would be her companion for the rest of her life. It was impossible to forget when the knowledge pressed on her from the moment she opened her eyes in the morning—and saw nothing—until she eventually fell into a restless sleep at night.

The carriage drew to a stop near a noisy crowd, rich with bawdy singing, raised voices, and angry words. She lifted the curtain covering the window and smelled alcohol fumes, although she didn't know if she could have done so before losing her sight. Her other senses had sharpened to compensate, but it was little compensation. "Where are we, Miss Otto?"

"I don't want any fuss from you, Fräulein." The sound of the door opening accompanied her words, before Miss Otto slid her wide girth across the seat. Seconds later, the heels of her boots struck the cobblestone with a dull thud.

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

"It's best you just accept things as they are," the woman said. "Come along now."

Fear paralyzed Catriona, making it impossible for her to slide across the seat. "Please, Miss Otto, what's happening?"

"Come out of there now," Miss Otto barked.

She shook her head. "I should prefer to go straight to the school." Catriona didn't know where they were, but she knew it wasn't any refined school for blind young women. Panic clawed at her throat as she began to wonder if there even was a school.

Miss Otto's cold laugh answered her internal question, even before she spoke. "You daft cow, there is no school. Your family wanted you out of the way. Seems the young man your cousin set her heart on has the eye for you."

She shuddered, imagining a life as Barnus Townsend's wife. She almost thanked her aunt and uncle from saving her from the fate of spending the next fifty years with that small-minded prig. Almost. "I still don't understand, Miss Otto."

“They sold you to me, Fräulein.” There was a rustle of papers. “It’s all legal and binding.”

Catriona gasped, clutching her hand to her heart. “Sold me? Fo...for what purpose?” The sounds coming from the building increased in pitch, and she swallowed thickly. She had never ventured inside such places as this one sounded to be, but she knew of men’s clubs and worse, where young men frittered away their purses. This seemed like that sort of establishment, judging from what she heard.

“To please the gentlemen. You’ll adjust soon enough,” Miss Otto said pragmatically. “You might even come to enjoy it, Fräulein.”

Catriona shook her head. “I can’t. Please, you can’t make me do that.”

The woman’s voice was hard. “I paid good money for you. I’ve wasted enough time on this foolishness. Remove yourself from the carriage, or I’ll have someone carry you in.”

She dug her fingers into the bench, sitting tensely. Tears streaked down her cheeks, and she held her breath, listening for any sounds that might herald a way out. Instead, all she heard were heavy footsteps, followed by the coach dipping sideways as someone stepped inside. Catriona screamed when large hands fastened on her arms and dragged her forward. Her fingers slipped from their death grip on the seat, and she was soon out of the carriage.

The man holding her smelled of spirits and sweat. He had a large frame, and his unwashed hair brushed against her cheek as he slung her over his shoulder. Catriona kicked against him, but he seemed not to notice as he walked forward. The sounds from the tavern grew louder, then the fresh air disappeared, and the pitch of the sounds changed.

She choked on her first lungful of smoky air. The piano played a jaunty tune as two women sang a song she never would have heard in the salons of London. Whistles and catcalls intermingled with angry words and a lewd comment. She struggled to hide her fear as the man carried her through the room.

When he started climbing the stairs, she dared to hope she would receive a temporary reprieve. Surely, she could reason with Miss Otto. There must be some other duty she could perform instead of whoring.

The sound of his footfalls changed when they emerged onto the landing. She heard the sound of giggles and drunken male voices as the man's boots clomped down the wooden hallway, landing with a heavy thud with each step. He stopped walking, and a door opened. When he entered, she gagged at the odor in the room.

It smelled of unwashed bodies and something indefinable. She could smell cheap perfume, probably used in an attempt to mask the other scents, and the acrid smell of cigar smoke. It seemed to be a stale layer in the air.

"Please, sir," she said, trying to keep the tears from her voice. "Don't let Miss Otto do this."

His only answer was a grunt as he dropped her.

Catriona cried out, preparing for pain. Instead, she bounced against a sagging mattress. Her breath rushed from her, but more from surprise than any pain. His boots clomped away, and then the door closed. She heard the sound of the key twisting, and she screamed. "Please don't leave me here alone."

Her heart raced, and she clenched her hands together. She had no idea of the layout of the room, and she feared being alone in unfamiliar places more than most anything these days. Memories too easily encroached, and fear stole her courage before she could muster any. She knew from experience that the panic would only build, until she was sobbing and beyond coherence.

It was a relief when she heard the key turn again, seconds before the door opened. The hinges needed oiling, she thought disjointedly, listening to several sets of footsteps enter the room. "H-he-hello?"

"Aye, she's a pretty one, Fräulein Matilda."

"Yes, she is, Inga," Miss Otto said. "I paid a pretty penny for her, but it was worth it. She doesn't even need the surgery."

Someone gasped, and it was a high-pitched, girlish sound. "Why not, Fräulein Matilda?"

Catriona shrank away as they surrounded her, hovering too close for her comfort. Their perfumes clashed together in a disorienting cloud of stench, not adequately masking their unwashed states. They all smelled of that scent she couldn't identify. "What's happening?"

They ignored her. Miss Otto said, "She's blind. Some accident—I didn't get the specifics. All I know is it took her sight and her ability to provide heirs." She laughed, but it held little amusement. "She's a Godsend, right, girls?"

They made various sounds of agreement. Tears pricked Catriona's eyes at the reminder of her shame, and she bowed her head. She flinched when someone touched her cheek and tried to dodge as one took her hat, pulling out several strands of her hair by forgetting to remove the hatpin first. She whimpered.

"Can I have this, Fräulein Matilda?"

"You may, Bettina. Fräulein High-and-Mighty won't be needing it." The older woman cackled.

Fingers plunged in her hair, loosening the pins that held her knot. "She has pretty hair," the other girl said. "I've never seen a shade like this. What's it remind you of?"

"The bronze lions guarding Midnight Manor," said the girl she thought had stolen her hat, and there was a hint of fear in her voice.

Miss Otto made a strange sound. "Don't tell me you girls have been lurking around Midnight Manor, waiting for a peek of Herr Midnight. I thought you had better sense, Inga, Bettina. There's no accounting for the oddities of the wealthy. He's nothing but a strange fellow, wearing that mask. No mystery there, I'll tell you."

"Yes, Fräulein Matilda," the girl with the deeper voice said. "It's just—"

The other girl interrupted. "The Fräulein's eyes remind me of pennies."

"What is pennies?" the other girl asked.

"American money. A gentleman showed me one once."

"Bet that wasn't all he showed you." The girl snickered.

“Do you think Fräulein High-and-Mighty will faint the first time she feels a cock?” the girlish girl asked before giggling.

Catriona winced at the callous remark. She couldn't believe she was in a brothel, let alone the property of the brothel's madam. She knew the Bonners had little use for her, but she had never realized they hated her. How else could they have consigned her to this fate, if they didn't despise her?

“I think she has the makings of a fine whore,” Miss Otto said. “There's something about her prissy attitude, something beneath the surface. I bet she'll be panting to fall back with her legs in the air in no time.”

“You're wrong,” Catriona snapped, pushed beyond her endurance. “I won't stay here, and I'll never be like you whores.” The word burned on her tongue, and she added as much distaste as she could interject into the single word. She cried out when someone slapped her hard on the cheek.

“Keep a civil tongue, Fräulein, lest I cut it out. I think we'll give you a very special first customer, to show you your place.” Miss Otto's pitch changed, indicating she had turned her head. “Is Freiherr Müller coming tonight, Inga?”

“Yes, Fräulein Matilda. He comes every other Saturday, hoping for a new girl.”

Miss Otto's laugh sent chills up Catriona's spine. “Excellent. Shall we prepare the Fräulein for her night of passion?”

Catriona tried to fight them as three pairs of hands pulled her from the bed. She grunted when they lifted her, and she started screaming.

“Keep practicing, Fräulein Catriona,” Miss Otto said with evident relish. “The Freiherr loves to hear his companions scream.”

“I'll be glad it's not me,” the older girl whispered. “I didn't walk for near a week the last time I serviced the Freiherr.”

Catriona's stomach tied itself in knots as they left the room she had been in and walked down the hall. The floorboards creaked under Miss Otto's weight, and she fervently prayed that the floor would break under them. Death didn't seem like a bad way of escaping her fate.

They entered another room, and Catriona was set on her feet. She uttered a protest when hands pulled at her wool traveling jacket, taking it from her. The indignities didn't end there. Between the three women, they soon had her stripped to her corset and drawers. Catriona tried holding onto the bone corset, but they removed it effortlessly. She grasped the waistband of her drawers, but someone ripped the fine lawn from her body, leaving her naked and shivering.

Something creaked, followed by the sound of water rushing into a porcelain basin or tub. She was surprised the whorehouse could afford indoor plumbing, but that thought fled from her when someone pushed her back into the water.

"Part her legs. Let's see what I paid for."

She screamed and thrashed against their hands, splashing water all over herself and the two girls as they pried apart her legs. Her screams intensified when fingers as thick as sausages invaded her pussy. One pushed inside her, making her gasp at the sharp pain accompanying it.

Miss Otto made a sound of pleasure. "She's pure, just as the aunt assured me. The Freiherr will be doubly pleased."

"She has pretty tits," the girlish one said. "Look at her pale pink nipples."

"The breasts of a fine *lady*," the older one said, with a mocking inflection in her thick accent, before dissolving into giggles. She followed her comment by twisting one of Catriona's nipples hard enough to bring tears to her eyes.

"Freiherr Müller will mark them with shades of black and blue," Miss Otto predicted as she withdrew her hand.

Catriona huddled in the tub, squeezed her legs shut, and gave in to the tears. The girls teased her for crying, but she ignored them. She wouldn't find sympathy with this heartless bunch, and what difference did it make if she showed her emotions? Once the dreaded Freiherr finished with her, she wouldn't be the same. He would ruin her, just as they were ruined.

“Finish her up, girls, and then get back downstairs. The men will be getting impatient with just Patrice and Marta entertaining them. Leave Fräulein High-and-Mighty locked in the room Hans put her in earlier, until the Freiherr arrives.”

Catriona heard the horrible woman leave, but she didn't lift her head. She didn't try to plead with the girls as they went about washing her with strong-smelling soap, even when they invaded her personal areas. Whatever goodness might have once been in them had been burned away under the ownership of Miss Otto. She wondered if she would end up just like them. That thought frightened her almost as much as whatever tortures awaited her at the Freiherr's hands.

Chapter 2

Quintus could sense the pain rolling off the young woman before he even got close enough to see her. She had found refuge at the end of the alley, huddled on the ground, with her back against the sooty stones of the factory's wall. He could taste her tears in the wind, and he could feel the emptiness radiating from her. It was more than an unfilled stomach that caused the void in her.

His boots clicked on the cobblestone as he walked toward her. He felt a moment of guilt at having spent so much on footwear when this young woman didn't have enough to eat. He pushed it aside, having accepted long ago that he couldn't change the world. All he could do was relieve pain, a little at a time.

He knelt beside her. "What troubles you?" Quintus asked in a soothing tone.

She raised her gaze from the bundle in her arms. Her arms tightened around the bundle she held. "He isn't moving," she whispered. "He cried all day, but now he's quiet. I'm afraid to look." She sounded nervous, but deeper in her voice was a heart-rending layer of anguish. "Will you check him, Herr?"

With slow motions, Quintus reached forward and lifted the bundle from her arms. He frowned at the lightness of the bundle, and when he pushed back the top blanket, he found only a rag doll.

"My son," she said, rocking back and forth. "Tell me he is fine."

He touched her brow. "Shh. Look into my eyes." When she met his eyes, he used the connection instantly formed between them to send her into a trance. He set aside the blankets and leaned forward, pressing his mouth to hers. His lips didn't violate the young woman's. Instead, he sucked in her breath, but carefully. He didn't want her to stop breathing.

His eyes moistened as he absorbed her grief. She had lost her child to illness a few months ago, having been unable to pay for proper food for them, let alone a physician. Since then, she had left her job and now wandered the streets, seeking solace from her torment.

He couldn't take it all from her. He knew that. After a certain point, too many negative emotions began to poison him, rather than sustain him. His power reservoir refilled, and he knew it was time to break away. Still, her pain kept him inhaling her emotions long past when he should have.

It was only when a cramp hit his stomach that he was forced to break away. Quintus knelt on all fours, heaving. A cloud of putrid green emerged from his mouth, and he was strong again upon expelling it.

He turned back to the young woman once he was steady. She was still in the trance, and she would remain so for another minute or two. He grasped her thin hand in his, wincing at its iciness. "When you awaken, you will feel more at ease. Your guilt will have lessened, and it won't return to eat at you as it has. You must go on, as must we all."

Quintus kissed the back of her filthy hand, pressed three gold coins into her palm, and closed her fingers around them. As he rose and walked away from her, he reminded himself to find this girl again. He couldn't take on all of her pain and suffering, but he could help her deal with it. She need never know the part he had played when she recovered enough to resemble her former self.

He melted into the crowd moving through the streets. This was a dangerous area of Stossbourg, and he remained on alert. Gaslights at each intersection provided some illumination, but the pockets in between offered a host of opportunities for the thugs who preyed on others. Quintus kept the right side of his face hidden under the mask to the shadows as much as possible, while his wary eyes constantly scanned the milieu.

As he passed a brothel, a wave of terror and suffering jolted Quintus, causing him to stumble and jar the man he walked next to. He offered a hasty apology and moved deeper into the shadows, leaning against the wall of the building. Cautiously, he

touched the bricks with his gloved hand, and the emotions threatened to overwhelm him again.

Their intensity surprised him. Rather, his ability to tune into the emotions so vividly surprised him. Normally, the pain surrounding him was a muted blur, unless he had need of sustenance. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt someone's suffering so strongly when he didn't need to feed.

He tried to walk on, to ignore what he was experiencing, but the terror suddenly increased, and his knees buckled. He barely kept himself from falling, managing to brace his hand against the wall at the last moment before his knees touched the dirty cobblestone.

Quintus knew he couldn't walk away from this misery. Surprisingly, he had never found a rich source of sustenance in the brothel before. A vague sadness clung to the building, permeating its very walls, but none of the inhabitants had the soul-deep pain he needed to feed on to survive.

Until tonight. Although he didn't require further energy, Quintus allowed his instincts to guide him to the woman whose heart was calling out. He couldn't turn his back on her suffering.

* * * * *

They had left her alone in the room for what she guessed to be at least an hour. Since losing her sight, she hadn't been able to keep track of time unless she heard a clock ticking off the minutes, so she couldn't be certain.

What surprised her was that she hadn't fallen into a sobbing heap of hysteria yet. Perhaps the fear of what was coming had obliterated the fear of the unknown she usually succumbed to when left alone. Somehow, the tortures she had imagined in the past didn't compare to those that loomed.

She had thought herself incapable of experiencing more terror, but when the key turned in the lock, her racing heart accelerated further. Her mouth became as arid as the

desert, and she couldn't summon enough saliva to even whimper as the door slammed shut. She huddled against the headboard, praying for a way out.

She had a vague recollection of the girl she used to be—a spitfire full of energy, supremely confident in her own abilities. That girl would have tried to fight what was coming. This Catriona didn't know if she had the emotional strength, let alone the physical capacity, to even try.

When rough hands seized her, a spark of the old Catriona fired within her, and she lashed out with her fist, connecting with a fleshy cheek. She screamed when the hands clamped her to the bed, and she tried kicking out.

"If you don't settle down, Fräulein, I'll bind your feet."

A greasy hand caressed her calf, bared by the thin shift Inga and Bettina had dressed her in before locking her in the room. Catriona jerked away.

"Like that, is it?" He released his hold on her.

She seized the opportunity and tried to roll off the bed. She went too far and crashed onto the floor, landing with a hollow thud. She cried out at the pain, but she didn't let her slow her down as she tried to gain her feet. She settled for making it to her knees and started crawling.

Catriona didn't get far before the Freiherr caught up with her. Something whistled through the air before it struck her across the back. She screamed at the pain, unable to identify what the object was, and uncaring. She collapsed against the floor, but tried dragging herself forward. The article came down again, this time across her thighs, numbing her shaking legs.

"Just stay there, dove, and your punishment won't be so severe." Freiherr Müller's accompanying laugh was cold as ice. "Fräulein Matilda tells me you're unspoiled. I want you able to perform before I introduce you to the delicious world of pain."

She tried to inch away, but the object landed against her buttocks. She tentatively identified it as a walking stick. Knowing what it was didn't alleviate the pain it caused as it connected with her buttocks and lower back again. Then he stopped hitting her.

She tensed, anticipating a massive blow, assuming he was gathering his strength. It never came.

There was the sound of breaking glass from the window, followed by someone stepping into the room, crunching shards under their shoes. Level footfalls crossed the floor, as the Freiherr squawked in protest.

As the feet paused near her, Catriona guessed the intruder was a man by the manner in which he walked and the impact his heels made against the thin floor.

“What’s this now? You’re interrupting a private session.” The Freiherr seemed to be trying to bluster his way through, but the note of fear in his voice was unmistakable. “You can’t just barge in here through the window, ruffian.”

The other man ignored the Freiherr. He knelt near her. “Would you like me to leave, Fräulein?”

“No, please.” Catriona shook her head. “I don’t want to be here...to do this.”

“I thought not.” The man stood up. “How much did you pay for this evening? I will reimburse you.”

“I don’t want your money. I want what’s mine.” The trembling note in his voice had diminished under a barrage of outrage. “This whore’s pure. I’ll be the first to defile her.”

“Never,” the other man said with firm finality. “You can recoup your expense, or you can nurse your pain well into the night. I leave the decision with you.”

The Freiherr’s teeth clacked together several times. She imagined he was trying to swallow his anger so he could speak. His heavy footfalls moved to the door before it opened and slammed against the wall.

“We’ll see how brave you are when I return with Hans.” He didn’t close the door behind him.

Catriona flinched when the man knelt beside her and touched her arm.

“I won’t hurt you. Can you walk, Fräulein?”

She tried to get up, but her body wouldn’t cooperate. Tears filled her eyes, and she cursed her weakness. “No, sir.”

His hands were gentle as they lifted her into his arms. She liked the scent of his cologne, and she relaxed against him. Her nose wrinkled, and she struggled to identify the strange odor clinging to him. It wasn't like anything she had ever smelled before. It seemed to be a mix of bitter and sweet. That was as close as she could come to guessing it.

"Brace yourself for a drop. I don't think it's wise to try to leave by the front door."

Before she could reply, cool air caressed her face, and she became aware of his muscles tensing and relaxing as they slowly moved downward. She wondered if he was climbing down a trellis or pipe, but didn't bother to ask.

As soon as his boots clicked against the cobblestone, her mysterious rescuer broke into a run, holding her tightly against him. A feeling of protection washed over Catriona, and the accompanying sense of contentment nearly had her crying again. She hadn't felt so safe or cosseted since her parents last hugged her.

He stopped running and set her on her feet. His arms went around her, and she huddled into the wool cloak he wrapped around her frame. "How can I thank you, sir?"

"There is no need."

She tilted her head. "How did you know to save me?" Catriona heard his indrawn breath, followed by the subtle timber of his voice changing when he answered, indicating he wasn't telling her the truth.

"I was walking near the brothel and heard you scream. I climbed up to see if it was a game among adults or the abuse of an innocent."

Her face heated with a blush, knowing how the scene must have looked to him. She wondered why he hadn't told her the truth, and then wondered if he was embarrassed. Perhaps he had been seeking out the services of a prostitute when he heard her cry. No matter. It wasn't her business. "I thank you again. It wasn't my choice—"

"I could tell." His voice was warm and encouraging. "Do you have a name?"

"Catriona Hathaway." His jacket rustled, and she wondered if he was tipping his hat.

"I am Quintus Midnight."

Her eyes widened, and she wondered if this was the man the girls had spoken of earlier. "Of Midnight Manor, sir?"

There was a pause. "How did you know that? Your accent is British. I would be surprised if you've been in Lasenbourg for more than a week."

Catriona shrugged. "I heard your name mentioned, and I've been here less than a day."

"Do you have a means of getting home, Fräulein Hathaway?"

She shook her head, feeling the cursed tears that always seemed to linger hovering on the tips of her lashes again. "No, Herr Midnight," she used the form of address the women had used, "I have no home to go to. My relatives sold me to that awful woman." She took a deep breath. "Do you know of anyone seeking help?" She wasn't sure what she qualified for, but she had to find some way of supporting herself. It wasn't as though she could depend on the Bonners to give her a share of the inheritance left by her parents.

"There is a factory looking for workers, but the conditions are deplorable."

Catriona shook her head. "That won't work, I'm afraid. I'm blind." She tensed when he swallowed, preparing for him to distance himself from her.

"I know of no positions for one such as you," he said gently. "However, if you would permit me to offer you shelter at Midnight Manor until you decide on a course of action, I would be happy to do so."

Catriona hesitated as an instinctive refusal rose to her tongue, but she bit it down. Her options were few. Could she afford to dismiss one because it wouldn't be proper?

He must have realized her she was thinking, because he said, "Fräü Markham is the housekeeper, and she would be there to preserve your reputation."

Still, she hesitated. What might come of her acceptance? She would be little more than a charity case. That didn't sit well with the remnants of her pride, especially after hearing the Bonners harp about keeping her out of charity. Yet, what choice did she have? "It will only be for a day or two, Herr."

His hand rested at the small of her back as he eased her forward, getting her to walk again. "My carriage is this way. We will soon be at Midnight Manor, where you may stay as long as you need to."

She accepted his gracious offer with equal graciousness. "Thank you for your hospitality, Herr." She was determined not to impose too much on the man's hospitality. She simply needed a plan of action for moving forward.

She used to be headstrong, as her father would often tell her with equal parts exasperation and amusement. Catriona had preferred to think of herself as a modern woman, who was secure in her independence. Why, before the accident, she had been a Suffragette. Somewhere deep inside her was that same woman. She just needed to find a way back to her, so she could stand on her own two feet again. She couldn't depend on others forever.

Still, it was nice to have his arm curve around her as they stepped down a curb. She allowed herself to relax in his light embrace and lean on him, just for a while.

Chapter 3

The sounds of Catriona screaming awakened Quintus late in the night, for the second night in a row. He threw on a silk robe and his mask before he hurried down the hallway to the bedchamber he had assigned her. He knocked loudly, but she didn't respond. Her cries went on, prompting him to turn the knob on the door. She had locked it, but it was a simple matter of applying his telekinetic powers to manipulate the lock.

As soon as it turned easily, he hurried into the room, glancing at the incandescent lamp to turn it on with his thoughts. The light illuminated the way Catriona thrashed in the bed, pushing against unseen bonds, as she cried out in fear. She was still asleep, despite her movements, and he was cautious when he sat on the bed and shook her gently. "Wake up, Catriona."

She let out one last blood curdling scream before her eyes snapped open. They weren't in focus when she gazed up at him. "Herr Midnight?" she asked after a long pause.

"Yes, it's Quintus." He stroked her back as she leaned against him. "You were having a nightmare. Were you back at Fräulein Matilda's?" When she awakened him screaming last night, he had checked on the bruises left by the Freiherr as he listened to her. Once she purged the horror from her system, she had fallen back into a deep sleep that lasted most of the subsequent day and into tonight.

She shook her head. "No. I dreamed I was lost in the forest. It was the darkest of nights, and I couldn't see. I kept stumbling around, but no one came for me." She shivered, seemingly unaware of curling closer to him.

“When our carriage overturned, I was delirious and wandered in the woods most of the night. When they found me, I slept three days straight. It was only when I awakened that the physician discovered I had lost my sight.”

Quintus closed his eyes, feeling her pain inside him before she even spoke. It cut into him like glass, and he longed to ease her suffering. Although he had no need for more nourishment yet, he could safely take some of her distress into himself, to allow her to return to a peaceful sleep.

He eased her away from him, laying her back against the pillows, careful of the injuries that had faded to minor aches during her rest. She seemed confused as her unseeing eyes darted around the room. He leaned closer, not speaking as his lips neared hers.

“Quintus?” There was a note of fear in her voice, but an underlying thread of excitement.

“Shh, sweet one.” Quintus placed his lips against hers. His eyes widened as she moved her mouth under his in a timid kiss. He had thought only to ease her suffering, but he found his mouth shaping to hers, returning the shy kiss with more passion than he intended.

She flinched as her cheek touched the cool porcelain of his mask. She withdrew a few inches, bringing her hand up to touch it. “What is this, Quintus?”

He pulled her hand away, holding it gently in his own. “It is nothing.”

“Why do you wear a mask?”

“An accident,” he said, trying to dismiss the subject.

“What sort of—”

He moved forward quickly, opening her mouth with his lips and sweeping his tongue inside. His intent may have been to distract her, but the first taste of her jolted him from his predictable world.

He had lived so long that the time tended to blur together, coming almost to a standstill for him. With one kiss, he was reminded of what it was to truly live. There

was caution in her touch, but he also sensed unbridled passion and a thirst for life. The things she had endured had muted them, but those elements weren't gone.

Was it possible to fall in love at the first kiss? It had been a long time since he felt any emotion besides pity for another living being. The last time he had loved, he didn't remember feeling so invigorated. Every cell in his body tingled with life. His heart pounded in his ears, and his cock stirred to life. He had thought sex was nothing but a sweet memory, as the centuries settled on him. He wasn't old physically, but emotionally, he was as aged as the ancients.

To his shock, her passion increased and her sadness diminished as she kissed him. He hadn't yet taken any of her pain, and he couldn't remember having this effect on any of the women he had taken to his bed in the last few hundred years.

An image of her naked and writhing under him caused Quintus's cock to harden further, almost to the point of pain. His hands seemed to act of their own will as they cupped her breasts through the thin shift. She moaned as he thumbed her beaded nipples, and an answering cry rose in his throat.

She broke away, turning her head. "Wait. This isn't proper." She sounded as though the words had been torn from her with great reluctance.

Passion ruled his senses, a thing that hadn't happened since his youth. "I'll apply for a special license tomorrow. We'll be married in a week."

She gasped and tried to push him away. "No!"

He resisted her attempts, continuing to massage her breasts in lazy circles, not missing the way she arched her back to meet his touch, even as her hands pushed against his chest. "Why not? Heaven help me, but you've enchanted me."

"I can't."

He could sense her sadness welling again, and he released her breasts, embracing her instead. "It would solve your problems," he whispered into her silky hair. "I would take good care of you, Catriona." Her tears leaked through the silk of his robe, and he rocked her.

"It wouldn't be fair to you. I can't bear heirs." His robe muffled her words, but they were still distinguishable. "The accident, you see. Even if I could let you saddle yourself with a blind wife, I couldn't deny you children."

"I don't care about children." Quintus didn't even know if he could have offspring. In his time as an immortal, he had met only one other psychic vampire besides Lilly, whom he had turned, and that man had been his sire. The man had longed for the companionship of a son, so he had made one.

He hadn't taken much time to answer Quintus's questions about his new state. The old man had never wanted to discuss the realities of being a vampire, even one that was beneficial to humanity. Instead, he had spoken of his memories, keeping the young Quintus with him for two decades before he ended his long existence by greeting the sunrise. "I can't have them either," he added as an afterthought.

She lifted her head, and her shock was evident. "Truly, Herr?"

"Quintus," he said gently. "Yes, it's true."

"Was it your...accident?"

He shook his head. "No."

Her brow furrowed. "Then how do you know you can't? Have you tried before?" A blush tinged her cheeks. "Pardon my impertinence, but I must know."

"My first wife never conceived." He winced. To even think of Lilly was painful, and he almost touched his mask out of unconscious habit before forcing his hand to stay on Catriona's back and stroke her skin through the thin linen.

She stiffened in his arms. "You were married? For how long? Did she die?"

"I was married for several years." *More than a hundred*, he added silently, wondering how he had endured the vain Lilly for so long. "She grew tired of me." That was an understatement.

"You sound unhappy."

He shrugged. "Her leaving was a good thing, but she caused me much pain in the process."

Catriona sighed. "Yet, you would risk marriage again to protect me. You are a noble man, but I can't depend on others for the rest of my life."

A small chuckle escaped Quintus, and he was surprised to hear the sound. Although the negative emotions he fed on rarely stayed with him, he wasn't, by nature, a man of smiles and laughter. "It isn't nobility that prompts my offer. There is something about you that touches me."

"I can't marry you."

He didn't doubt her resolve to maintain her decision, but he could sense the yearning pulsing through her, even now. He knew he could turn that to his advantage and seduce her. He could be thrusting into her pussy within minutes, and she would be helpless in the face of her desires. When it was over, she would likely be crippled with guilt and agree to his proposal with haste, but he didn't want to trick her. "We'll speak more of this tomorrow."

She seemed to want to argue, but she finally nodded. She broke his embrace and lay back against the pillows. "Thank you for waking me, Herr...Quintus. The dreams endure sometimes even after I awaken. I can't dispel the images by opening my eyes."

He sensed sadness overwhelming her again, and he leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her forehead before touching his mouth against hers. This time, he breathed in, rather than giving in to the temptation to kiss her. A wealth of anguish flooded him, and he supped cautiously, not eager to poison his system. Her tense muscles loosened as he reached his limit, and he broke away from her. "Good night, Catriona."

Her eyes had closed, and she seemed to be near sleeping again. Her voice was little more than a sleepy blur when she said, "Good night."

He couldn't resist stealing a small kiss before he rose and left her. He paused to look back, intrigued by her air of innocence and the flush of desire still staining her cheeks. His blood pounded when he thought of making love to her, and the ferocity of the emotions overwhelmed him again. What was so compelling about this young woman to have drawn him to her so intently?

He exited her room, taking time to lock the knob again, before he returned to his room. As he neared his door, he froze in mid-step. A disconcerting thought entered his mind, and he struggled to dismiss it. Her blindness was an advantage, making her unlikely to reject his hideous countenance, but that wasn't why he wanted her. He hadn't known about her condition when he rescued her, he reminded himself.

However, it wasn't until after he found out she couldn't see that he had offered her sanctuary at Midnight Manor. Surely, he wasn't so desperate as to latch onto that broken soul to ease his own loneliness. No, he refused to believe he could have such nefarious motives. Something indefinable about her attracted him to Catriona, and he would do his best to persuade her to be his wife.

* * * * *

The memory of last night's events returned to Catriona as soon as she opened her eyes. Before she was even fully awake, she was thinking about Quintus's proposal. Part of her longed to accept the easy path, to allow him to be noble and protect her. A deeper part of her, one she had been more in touch with this morning than she had any time in the last thirteen months, resisted.

It told her she must learn to be independent again. She would never be any man's wife, for how could she bring the burden of infertility to a relationship? Despite Quintus's reassurance that he couldn't have children either, she refused to consign her mate to a barren woman. No, she must be strong and forge her own way. She firmly believed a woman could be happy with a career, instead of getting married and having children. She just needed to find a purpose once more.

As she slid from bed, her nipples brushed against the cover. They were still sensitive from his touch, and a corresponding ache between her thighs made itself known, as she remembered the way he had caressed her breasts.

Her mother had been strong and independent. Felicity had also been something of an eccentric, even among the rapidly evolving society of London. She had never doubted her equality to men, and she had passed those same beliefs on to her daughter.

She had been the one to introduce Catriona to the Suffragette movement, and when Harry objected to her participation, she had ignored her husband and continued the fight for her cause, until he eventually stopped protesting her involvement.

There had also been a soft side to her mother. She might be at odds with her husband's decrees one moment, and content to fulfill his every whim the next. She usually had a dreamy expression on her face when speaking of her husband, and she often said she hoped Catriona would find the same degree of passion when she married. She had longed for her daughter to experience the melding of heart and mind.

Catriona's heart ached at never experiencing that special bond with a man. She was drawn to Quintus Midnight in a way that confused her. A year ago, she would have set her sights on winning him as her husband. That was impossible now, but she found herself contemplating a heady idea. A sense of freedom swept through her, and she was more light-hearted than she could remember being in recent months. All she had to do was convince him of the merits of her idea.

Chapter 4

Catriona sat tensely in the salon after dinner, sipping tea from a delicate cup, and listening to the ticking of the grandfather clock behind her. Quintus drew in a heavy breath every now and then, and she wondered if he was searching for a way to recant his proposal. Perhaps he was summoning his courage, as she was. Could that be why he had avoided her all day, having the housekeeper tell her he was conducting business when she hadn't heard him leave or return to the house?

She cleared her throat. "Quintus?"

"Yes?" He sounded startled.

She set aside the cup, fumbling to ensure it was secure on the table beside her before she released the handle. "I wish to discuss last night with you."

"Of course, Catriona." His voice deepened, and his cup clicked when he set it on a hard surface. "My offer is genuine."

"I know." She waved her hand delicately. "I appreciate your kindness, but I can't marry you."

"Catriona—"

"Please," she said firmly, "let me finish. It wouldn't be fair to you to marry me. I can't see, but I assume from my surroundings that you are well-off."

Quintus took a deep breath. "If you're worried about me providing for you, I assure you that you wouldn't want for anything."

She gave him a small smile. "That doesn't concern me. I know you must need an heir to inherit your position. Although your first wife didn't kindle, that doesn't mean you're unable to get an heir on another woman."

He sighed impatiently. "I don't care about heirs. I would like to be happy if I marry again. Therefore, I shan't marry anyone if I can't respect her and grow to love her."

She swallowed the lump in her throat, uncertain if it sprang from his words or her own nervousness. "That is an admirable sentiment, Quintus. I hope you can find the bride to suit you. I know I'm not her." She tried to be gentle, yet firm, when she uttered her refusal again. "However, that doesn't mean I don't want to become better acquainted with you."

Catriona could hear Quintus's puzzlement before he spoke. "I am afraid you've lost me."

She clutched her hands together and took a deep breath for bravery. "I would like to be your mistress."

He choked, and it was several seconds before he regained his breath. "You can't mean what you're saying, Catriona. You're free to stay at Midnight Manor for as long as you require."

Catriona grimaced. "I wasn't offering my body in exchange for room and board." There were tears at the back of her eyes, and her voice emerged as a rasp. "My mother often told me she hoped I found true love, matched with an equal passion. I had assumed I would find that in marriage, but I can no longer consider joining myself to a man in that holy state."

"Catriona—"

She ignored his interruption. "I am drawn to you, Quintus. I think I could experience perfect passion with you, and I see no reason to deny myself. I have no plans to marry, so I have no need to remain pure. I can't conceive, so there is no fear of an illegitimate child." She straightened the skirt of the dress borrowed from Fräü Markham, realizing there was a small benefit in being blind. She didn't have to attempt to evade his gaze to hide her embarrassment.

A harsh exhalation shattered the quiet. "This is insane. You can't dismiss the notion of marrying. You're a young woman. In time, you may change your mind."

Catriona shook her head. "Time can't restore the things taken from me. I refuse to bind myself to a husband I can't see, nor deny him children. I believe we could have a beneficial arrangement for however long it lasts, but if you don't want me, please just

say so. I don't want to waste my time or yours." She was proud of the almost haughty note in her voice, and she was convinced no one but her could have heard the wobble of fear underlying it.

The ticking of the clock seemed to grow louder in proportion to the seconds it counted off. The silence in the room grew oppressive, and she shifted with discomfort, wondering if he would ever respond. Was he searching for a tactful way of refusing her offer? She squeezed her hands together with more pressure, waiting for him to speak.

"I can't believe I'm contemplating this," Quintus finally said in a soft voice. "Catriona, please discard this foolish notion. Let me give you the protection of my name before I bed you."

She shook her head more vigorously. "I can't marry you. I'm offering you all I am capable of giving."

Again, his silence stretched, until he broke it with a sigh. "When did you want to begin this *arrangement*?"

Catriona attempted to school her expression and tried to sound businesslike. "I see no reason to delay."

"Hmm."

She tensed as he stood and stalked across the salon. Catriona tilted her head when he walked away from her. She wondered if Quintus intended to leave without saying anything. She sagged when the door closed with a soft click, but her spine stiffened when the key turned in the lock. Her stomach clenched. "What are you doing?"

"Ensuring our privacy." His voice became clearer as he walked back toward her.

"You intend to begin now?" she asked with a little squeak.

There was a mocking inflection in his voice when Quintus asked, "Why delay?"

Catriona compressed her lips and nodded. She was determined not to show her fear of the unknown. She had an inkling he was determined to teach her a lesson, but she was equally determined not to falter in her resolve. She gripped the arms of the chair and nodded again. "I'm ready."

Quintus's laugh was low and sensuous. "We shall see. Can you undo your dress, Catriona, or do you require my assistance?"

She sniffed. "I managed to dress myself, didn't I?" He didn't need to know the housekeeper had helped her align the buttons going up the front of the shirtwaist. She tried to hide the trembling in her hands as she stood up and brought her fingers to the buttons. They opened with more ease than she would have imagined, and soon the dress gaped open, displaying her chemise. Fräü Markham hadn't had a corset in her size, so she had forgone one.

"Take it off."

Catriona obeyed his command with slightly less steady hands, pushing off the dress and letting it pool at her feet. "Satisfied, Quintus?"

He chuckled. "Not even close. Remove the chemise, drawers, and stockings."

Her eyes widened. "You wish me to bare myself entirely?"

"Yes." His tone brooked no room for argument.

She tilted her chin. "Will you be doing the same?"

Quintus's voice was a rough whisper. "Eventually."

She closed her eyes and summoned courage to strip off the chemise. When she bared her breasts, she heard him draw in an uneven breath a second before his hand cupped one, and his thumb stroked the nipple. Catriona stood still, biting back a moan as her breasts ached, and her body started tingling. Moisture gathered in her pussy. She took a step back and pushed down the drawers, letting them fall to the floor before she stepped out of them and the dress.

Quintus's breath hissed through his teeth with a whistling sound when she stood naked before him. "You're beautiful, Catriona."

She tried to drape her arms across her stomach, attempting to hide the scars there. A surgeon had cut her open to stop internal bleeding, removing her womb in the process. She had nearly died from the operation, but it had been crucial. Fortunately, she had no memories of the experience, having been unconscious during the procedure.

To her surprise, Quintus pushed away her arms, and he released her breast. His shoes creaked as he knelt. She started when the cool porcelain of his mask touched her skin, seconds before his lips traced the line of scars extending across her stomach. She tried to push away his head, but he ignored her efforts. She flinched when his tongue licked a patch of rough flesh. "Don't torment me."

His tongue withdrew, and he moved away. "I'm not tormenting you."

"Why do you focus on my scars? If it's to let me know you could never lie with me, don't be cruel about it." She couldn't hold back the tears, and one managed to trail down her cheek.

"I'm not being cruel. You are beautiful, Catriona—every inch, scarred or not." He spoke so firmly she couldn't doubt his sincerity.

She stepped back as he got to his feet. He followed, wrapping her in his embrace. She lifted her head, meeting his mouth as it descended. She opened her lips, remembering the pleasure of having his tongue stroke hers. When it touched hers, she couldn't help a small groan. She buried her hands in his hair, trying to pull him closer.

Quintus resisted, pulling away from her, causing her to loosen her hold on his hair. "Sit down in the chair, Catriona."

She didn't know if he was still attempting to dissuade her as she perched on the edge of the chair with his assistance. There had been a cool note in his voice before, but now his voice sounded ragged, and his breathing was faster than it had been. She sensed he wasn't completely in control.

"Lean back and spread your legs."

A blush tinged her cheeks at the impropriety of the position, but she surrendered to his orchestration as his hands draped each of her legs over the arms of the chair. Air caressed her pussy, and her flush deepened. "What are you doing, Quintus?"

"Shh." Catriona heard him walk away, pause, and then turn back. Then she was aware of his hand by her thigh as he knelt on the carpet near her, within touching distance, but not touching. "What—"

She started to repeat her question, but she broke off when something soft and silky stroked against her left nipple. The same sensation feathered across her other breast, and she tightened her hands on the chair's arms. "Quintus?" The scent of roses wafted to her.

"Just concentrate, Catriona." As he spoke, he sped up his stroke on her left breast, while slowing down the object caressing her right nipple.

She arched her back at the strange sensation. "What is it?" she managed to ask through gritted teeth as one of the objects trailed down her breast to flirt with her stomach.

"Roses. Fortunately, the gardener removed the thorns before filling the vase." One of the flowers stroked across her cheek, teasing her nose.

She inhaled the heavy perfume, squirming against the other rose as it moved down her stomach and stroked across her thighs. She got wetter as the petals trailed up her thigh, brushing against the outside of her pussy.

Quintus withdrew the rose from her face and returned it to her breast, alternating which nipple he feathered it against.

She could hear his heavy breathing, and she didn't doubt he was as aroused as she was. Catriona arched her hips as the satiny petals glided down her slit. He withdrew the other rose, and she reached for his hand, eager for him to continue teasing her breasts.

"Relax." Quintus evaded her hand.

Her eyes widened when his fingers stroked her pussy, near where the petals rested. "Quintus," she said with a sob, alarmed by how her lower body contracted. She cried out as one of his fingers plunged inside her. "What are you doing to me?"

"Making you burn." His voice was smoky with desire. He withdrew his finger and held open her lips with one hand. The rose teased across her clit seconds later, and she writhed against the teasing pleasure. It was too light, too delicate, to do more than inflame her senses.

Catriona arched against the rose as Quintus applied more pressure, filling her opened lips with the petals. A few strained at her opening, and she pushed down, instinctively responding to the idea of being filled. When he rotated the rose, more moisture drenched her pussy, as the petals brushed against her clit in a whisper-soft kiss. "Please."

Quintus removed the flower, and she shook her head. She hadn't wanted him to stop. She only wanted him to go further. Before she could explain, the fingers from his other hand explored her splayed pussy, and she wriggled against them. She gasped as one pushed inside her, bringing a burning sensation with it. The pain faded as his thumb circled her clit, and she relaxed again.

"Damnation."

"What? What's wrong?"

He sounded almost angry when he said, "I wasn't going to do this. I only wanted to make you come to your senses."

She giggled, startled by the sound of uninhibited joy. "What's changed?"

"Now all I want to do is make you come," he growled. "Right before I bury my cock inside you." Quintus's voice took on a serious note. "Be certain this is what you want, Catriona, before we continue."

She nodded eagerly, wondering if her sightless eyes displayed her enthusiasm. "I want you, Quintus. I'm not afraid." *Maybe just a little*, she added silently. She was afraid it would hurt, but she knew he would be gentle.

Quintus's answer was a kiss. Not on her mouth, but between her thighs. Catriona stiffened as his tongue swept into her pussy, swirling around her clit. His finger inside her moved in concert with his tongue, and she rocked her hips, feeling her desire swell as her movements brought his finger deeper inside her. Her hands moved from the chair arms to his hair, anchoring his mouth against her.

His tongue feathered across her clit before sweeping lower to plunge inside her, along with his finger. Catriona arched against him, crying out wordlessly as convulsions built inside her. She had never felt anything like it. Her muscles tensed

unbearably, and her body shook. She sensed she was on the verge of something, but didn't know what. She released his hair and balled her hands into fists, struggling to find a shred of control.

Quintus's tongue swept back to her clit, and he sucked the bud into his mouth gently. His finger burrowed deeper inside her pussy, and all of her tense muscles released at the same time. Exhilaration swept through her, and she screamed her pleasure. Catriona was unable to prevent her hips from arching repeatedly as spasms rocked her pussy. A deluge of moisture saturated her pussy lips and Quintus's mouth as she stiffened once more before melting into the chair.

His mouth left her pussy, and she felt his mask as he laid his cheek against her stomach. She reached out to touch it, and he jerked away. She frowned. "You don't have to hide from me, Quintus."

There was a note of coolness in his voice. "I'm not hiding. I simply prefer to keep the mask on."

He got to his feet to shed his clothes. She could practically sense his emotional withdrawal, and she sighed. She didn't want to ruin the moment by pressing him about his mask. "If you wish."

Catriona stretched forward, seeking him. Her hand brushed against his chest, and she circled a hardened nipple with her finger and thumb. A shudder went through him, and she lowered her legs so she could sit up. She gasped as Quintus's hands tightened around her waist, pulling her forward, off the chair, and onto the carpet before he settled on top of her.

His mouth rested on hers. His lips were firm as he molded them to hers. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he settled between her thighs, and she returned his kisses with equal fervor. Her stomach quivered as his mouth softened, and he nibbled on her lower lip, drawing it into his mouth before releasing it.

Catriona shifted restlessly under his nude body, freezing when his cock pressed into her thigh. She had a rudimentary understanding of lovemaking, but she was about

to experience it firsthand. It was suddenly less scientific and much scarier than it had been when her mother described the process a few years ago.

Quintus broke the kiss. "We don't have to go further if you're frightened."

Her smile felt a little shaky. "I don't want to stop." She arched her neck as he cupped her breast, lowering his head to lave the nipple. She spread her legs wider, bending her knees and putting her feet flat on the floor. When Quintus licked a trail from her breast to her neck, flutters of pleasure accompanied the motion.

She moaned as he sucked gently on her neck. His hand slipped between their bodies and parted her lips. She tried to stay relaxed, but she tensed when she felt his cock pushing against her pussy. She whimpered as he moved in deeper, bringing a dart of pain.

"Catriona?" he whispered against her neck.

She took his inquiring tone as a question of her resolve. She nodded her head, digging her nails into his back. "Make me yours, Quintus." She bit down hard on her lower lip as his cock surged into her. The pain was enough to make her cry out, but it didn't last long. When he thrust into her again, it still hurt, but not as much. Soon, she matched his rhythm, raising her hips to meet his as his cock filled her.

Catriona's muscles tightened around his cock, and she got wetter as he fingered her clit while sheathing himself inside her. She pushed her hips upward, taking in all of him, and she cried out as he pulled away before pushing into her again, filling her to the limits. Her juices soaked both of them as he pushed against her clit while thrusting into her again.

"Burn for me again," Quintus said against her neck, before nipping her. He sucked the sensitive flesh into his mouth as his fingers and cock worked their magic. Desire overwhelmed her, and the convulsions built again. As her muscles tightened and then released, his cock hardened before he filled her with his release. Their orgasms mingled, until she couldn't tell who was trembling.

He settled his weight on her carefully. As Catriona fought to regain her breath, she allowed the vibration of his racing heart against her chest to soothe her. Her entire body

ached with the aftermath of release, but she didn't want to be parted from him yet, even if it would give her strained muscles a rest.

Quintus propped his hands on the carpet, lifting his torso from hers. His lips brushed against her forehead before he lifted his head. He sounded grim when he asked, "Do you regret your decision, Catriona? What I've taken from you can't be replaced."

"I know." She cleared the husky note from her throat. "I'm at peace with my choice."

"Won't you reconsider?" He sounded frustrated, and his muscles had tensed. "I still want you for my wife."

"Why?" she asked softly. "You don't even know me."

He made a sound low in his throat that sounded like a growl. "I don't know. I'm drawn to you, as you claim to be to me. I sensed a connection between us even before I kissed you last night. Something is urging me to hold you close and not let you go."

Catriona's heart stuttered at his blunt statement. She was too tempted to give in to his passionate words. She tried to wriggle away from him, to put some distance between them. "I do not intend to leave for a while, Quintus. Can't you be content with that?"

"Do I have a choice?" he asked with evident bitterness.

Catriona took a deep breath, steeling herself. "No. That's all I'm comfortable offering." He cursed under his breath as he got to his feet. She sat on the carpet, waiting for him to offer another argument, preparing to counter it. It wasn't fair that she had to fight both him and herself, she thought sourly.

Quintus sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push you. I shall respect your wishes and not badger you."

"Thank you." She sagged as he walked away from her, but tensed when he turned around.

"That doesn't mean I've given up on the idea. I want you as more than my mistress, Catriona."

She shook her head, hearing his confusion. He seemed to be conflicted by this link between them, as she was. She wondered if the solution wasn't just for her to leave. Her heart seized at the thought, and she found it difficult to breathe. She couldn't stand the thought of leaving him after what they had shared, but if she didn't leave soon, she might never be able to.

Chapter 5

Early the next morning, Catriona heard someone ring the front bell. She had spent a sleepless night tossing and turning after Quintus escorted her back to her room. Her thoughts had turned to her parents, and she couldn't help thinking how disappointed her father would be that she had surrendered to her desires without benefit of a ring. She knew her mother would also be disappointed in her, but for a different reason. Felicity would consider it cowardly to hide from her feelings.

As she imagined their displeasure, her thoughts had turned to darkness again. She had relived the accident and subsequent shock of waking to find herself deprived of her parents, her sight, and the ability to have a family of her own. Her fickle beau at the time, Percy, hadn't even come to visit her. A week after she awoke, he announced his engagement to another woman. She hadn't been heartbroken, but she had been disillusioned.

Was it fair to paint every man with the same brush? She had to ask herself that question, and others. Was she really trying to protect Quintus from the burden entailed by marrying her, or was she trying to protect herself from pain and rejection?

The heavy thoughts had eventually induced tears, but her memory got hazy after that. She had a shadowy recollection of Quintus entering her room and kissing her, but she didn't think that had happened. More likely, she had finally fallen into an uneasy sleep and dreamed about him coming to her.

Now, she was awake, and she wondered who was at the door. She didn't know what time it was exactly, but she knew it must be early. The birds chirped outside her partially opened window, but the busy sounds of the city waking were just beginning.

She jumped with surprise when someone knocked on her door a few minutes later. "Yes?"

"May I enter, Fräulein?" Fräü Markham's voice was thick with an accent.

She pulled the covers to her neck. "Of course." The housekeeper entered. Catriona assumed she was a heavyset woman by the way her shoes landed with heavy thuds, and by the shapelessness of the attire she had borrowed from her yesterday. She smelled of lemon, and her voice was gruff, but warm with kindness. "Good morning, Fräü."

"Good morning." There was a thud as she set something on the floor. "Herr Midnight instructed me to order you some clothes yesterday, Fräulein. They have arrived."

She sighed with pleasure, happy she wouldn't have to borrow clothing from the housekeeper again. "That was thoughtful."

"Do you require assistance, Fräulein?"

"Yes, thank you." She felt a moment of discomfort at asking for aid, but she had to be practical. She didn't know what any of the garments looked like, and she wasn't able to deal with complicated fasteners these days. She hated her loss of independence, but the only other option was to remain in the thin shift from the brothel.

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Later in the morning, Catriona sat downstairs sipping tea as she finished her breakfast of kippers and eggs. She couldn't help stroking the soft poplin of the lingerie dress she wore. The housekeeper had described the white lacy dress to her in detail as she helped her dress, and Catriona imagined it was lovely. She hadn't had a chance to try the new style before the accident, and there had been no funds for her to buy one when she went to live with the Bonners. She knew the housekeeper had also added a pastel sash at her waist, although she couldn't remember if Fräü Markham had said the color was lilac or peach.

Satin slippers encased her feet, and real silk hose and underclothes caressed her skin. She knew there was a matching hat, but she had no need of it while inside. For the first time in a long while, she felt like she used to, as the daughter of a prosperous

merchant. The Bonners had taken most of her nice clothes and forced chubby Prudence into them, leaving her only a small selection of plain shirtwaists and one travel suit.

It was amazing how the touch of fine material against her skin could put her in such a cheerful frame of mind.

She frowned, realizing she had actually awakened feeling optimistic, rather than with the sinking awareness that usually accompanied her from sleep and haunted her during the day. She still felt an aching sadness when she thought of her parents, but it had dimmed these past two days. As had her depression over her future. Perhaps making the decision to be Quintus's mistress had revitalized her.

She grimaced, wondering why Quintus hadn't joined her for breakfast. Again, the housekeeper had dismissed his presence as saying he was attending to business, but she had been awake since early morning, and she hadn't heard him moving through the house. She knew the older woman was lying to her, but she didn't know why.

With a sigh, she set aside her cup and rose carefully. She had made a point of counting the steps as Fräü Markham brought her downstairs earlier, and she was somewhat confident she could make her way back to her room. Another day of boredom stretched before her. How she missed being able to read or take a walk without assistance. What she missed most was her set of paints. She had always found painting engrossing, and her mother had encouraged her, having been proud of her talent.

Harry had been oblivious to his daughter's pursuits, still somewhat old-fashioned and imagining she did nothing with her days but prepare to be a man's wife. A soft smile crossed Catriona's face as she marveled at the strong union her parents had built, despite how opposite their temperaments and beliefs had been.

She moved cautiously through the dining room, into the hallway beyond. She walked a few steps, trying to remember if they had turned left or right. She closed her eyes and tried to picture the route the housekeeper led her on, finally taking the right.

Her heart ached to experience the same intensity of love and passion her parents had shared. She already knew she could find that passion with Quintus, and her heart

told her she could love him. It was her fear that held her back. How could she marry him as she was? What if he decided she was too much bother and sent her away? Divorces were becoming less scandalous, and she knew marriage was no guarantee of a lasting relationship.

No, she was being sensible in her decision, Catriona decided, as her hand touched the banister. She gripped it as she walked up the curving staircase. She might not be completely satisfied with what she could have with Quintus, but it was better not to bind either of them into a permanence he might decide he didn't want.

She ignored the twinge of guilt that accompanied her resolve, knowing her parents would tell her she was cheating herself and Quintus. She had to make the decisions that best reflected her future as it was now, not the ones that would have suited her before the accident.

Catriona emerged onto the second landing and felt her way down the hallway. She frowned as she came to the door with the ornate handles. She hadn't expected to arrive at her room so quickly, and she wondered if she had taken a wrong turn. She mentally backtracked, eventually deciding she must have gone the correct way.

She turned the knob, finding it locked. She frowned. Had she locked her room? She didn't recall doing so. Catriona started to think she had wandered into the wrong section of the house, but didn't know how to find her way back. She tested the other knob, finding it turned under her hand. She breathed a sigh of relief. She and the housekeeper must have used only one of the doors to her room, leaving the other locked.

A small headache had built behind her eyes, and she knew lying down would relieve the pressure. It was a lingering effect from her head injury, and the physician seemed to think it would endure throughout her life.

She walked through the room, uttering an unladylike curse when her knee collided with a table. She sidestepped it, mentally castigating herself for forgetting the layout of her room. She had spent hours walking around it yesterday to familiarize herself with the location of everything. She imagined if anyone had seen her pacing the room, they

would have thought her mad, but it was the method she had discovered that worked for her to memorize her surroundings.

She finally made it to the bed and sat down. She slipped off her slippers and thought about removing her dress. She decided it wasn't worth the bother to summon the housekeeper to undo the buttons at her back, and she stretched out.

Catriona froze when her arm brushed against someone. She inhaled and recognized Quintus's scent. "Quintus?" Had he come to her bed to wait for her? When he didn't answer, she touched him hesitantly. Her hand glided across his bare chest, and she couldn't resist tweaking his nipple. He still didn't awaken, and her hand traveled higher, noting the coolness in his flesh.

Her eyes widened when she discovered he wasn't wearing his mask. She ran gentle fingers over the puckered tissue, shuddering as she imagined the pain he must have endured. She wondered what had caused his injuries as she traced his high forehead, square jaw, full lips, and straight nose.

Her fingers stilled at the tip of his nose. "Quintus, wake up." She put her finger under his nostrils, frightened when she didn't feel his breath. Catriona rolled over and placed her ear against his chest, moving her head until she found his heart. It didn't beat.

"No," she cried out. He couldn't be dead. She knew he must be healthy and vital, after touching him yesterday. She had noticed during the past few months that those who were ill or old had a peculiar scent clinging to them, but he hadn't borne a trace of it. How could he be dead?

"Fräü Markham," she screamed forcefully. "Hurry." Within seconds, she heard the housekeeper's heavy tread rushing up the stairs. She cradled Quintus against her, noting he didn't smell of decomposition. It must have happened just a short time ago. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and sobs exploded from her. "Fräü," she cried again, but it was a low, mournful sound.

"What are you doing in Herr Midnight's room?" The housekeeper practically screeched the question. "This is most irregular, Fräulein—"

"I must have gotten lost. I thought this was my room." A wail broke from her. "It doesn't matter now. He's dead."

Silence descended, finally broken by the housekeeper muttering a prayer. "Have you killed him?" she demanded as she rushed across the room.

Catriona's mouth dropped open, and she sat up. "Of course not. I found him not breathing. His skin is cool to the touch. It must have happened just a short time ago."

The housekeeper breathed deeply and whispered, "*Danken Sie Gott.*"

Catriona frowned, wondering whom the housekeeper was thanking. If she remembered properly from her long-ago language lessons, *Gott* was God. Why would the servant be thanking God for Quintus's death?

"Come, Fräulein, I'll escort you to your room." The housekeeper sounded calm now. "Leave the master to his rest."

Catriona shook her head. "He's not resting. You must send for someone." She protested when the housekeeper's thick fingers fastened around her arm and pulled her from the bed.

"Herr Midnight will explain, if he chooses to." The housekeeper seemed to be keeping her tone deliberately distant. "He will join your for dinner, after sunset. You may direct your questions to him then."

She shook her head, trying to dig her feet into the hardwood floor. "You don't understand, Fräü. Quintus is dead. He isn't breathing. Please check him."

The housekeeper patted her hand as she forced her from the room, pausing to lock the doors behind her. "Have a rest, Fräulein. You'll feel better when you awaken and see the master safe and sound."

She continued to protest as the housekeeper half-dragged her down the staircase and through the hallway, to another set of stairs. As the woman pulled her up them, she tried to reason with her, to make her return to check on Quintus. The woman remained implacable as she took her down the hallway and opened her door. She firmly pushed her inside, ignoring Catriona's frantic pleas. Seconds later, the lock clicked, and the housekeeper moved down the hall.

She collapsed to the floor, beating her fists against the door. She wondered what the housekeeper planned to do with her, and she wondered why the woman had refused to check on Quintus. Coldness enveloped her as a horrible idea occurred to her.

What if the housekeeper had been the one to murder Quintus? If she had been, she would have no compunction about eliminating Quintus's guest to hide her crime.

* * * * *

When the key turned in the lock hours later, Catriona tightened her grasp on the vase she had taken from the table and propelled herself forward. As the murderous housekeeper entered the room, she ran to meet her, holding the heavy container over her head. She brought it down with a cry of satisfaction that turned to horror when Quintus grunted with pain. She clasped a hand to her racing heart. "You're alive."

"Of course—"

She hurled herself against him, cutting off his words. Catriona strained on her toes, covering his neck with kisses. Tears gushed from her, and she couldn't seem to stop babbling. "You were dead. I was so certain. I thought the housekeeper had murdered you." Sobs interspersed her words. "I kept thinking how unfair it was to have lost you too, after losing everyone else." A wave of sadness washed over her at the memory of the afternoon she had spent torturing herself, imaging the worst.

His hands soothed her as they touched her face, wiping away her tears. "Calm yourself, Catriona. I am fine. Fräü Markham didn't plot to do away with me." A thread of amusement underlay his mild tone.

"But she refused to check on you. She dragged me back to my room and locked me in." Her outrage was evident in her angry tone.

"I'm sorry she did that. She told me she didn't know how to deal with the situation, and she was frightened you would injure yourself if you had run of the manor."

She sniffed. "Still, she shouldn't have..." She trailed off, frowning. How could he be standing whole before her, speaking so calmly? He hadn't had a heartbeat. She took a wary step back. "What's happening?"

“Hmm?”

She caught the edge of subterfuge in his too-innocent tone. “I know what I felt. Your heart wasn’t beating. Your skin was cold. You had no breath.” Fear caused her throat to seize, and she clasped her hands to her chest. “What are you, Quintus Midnight?”

A sharp laugh escaped him. “A most appropriate question, dear.”

The door closed right before the lock clicked, and she backed away, sensing his presence as he approached. She realized just how foolish she had been to entrust her safety to a mysterious stranger. No one knew where she was. A harsh sob escaped her when she more fittingly acknowledged no one cared where she was or what happened to her. She would be the perfect victim for this...thing.

“I can sense your fear. Please don’t be frightened.” His tone had reverted to soothing. “I won’t hurt you.” As he spoke, he approached her at a slow, steady pace.

Catriona continued to back away until her legs hit the edge of the bed. She plopped down, and the fight drained out of her as he closed the gap to sit beside her. She didn’t try to pull away when he took her hand between his, squeezing gently. After everything she had been through this past year, it was the greatest of ironies to travel to another country to find death.

“Before I explain, I must swear you to secrecy, Catriona. If you can’t vow to guard what I tell you, I’ll have to send you away without an explanation.”

His words surprised her, and her head snapped up. “Send me away...you mean...you aren’t going to kill me?”

“Of course not.” He sounded annoyed. “Haven’t I just told you as much?”

She shrugged, disconcerted by the way her palm tingled where his hand touched her, even as her heart continued to race with fear. His hand brushed her cheek, and she automatically looked in his direction, though she couldn’t see him.

“Will you promise me?”

She licked her lips, torn between the urge to escape and the need to know. "Whom would I tell?" she settled for saying. "No doubt whatever you tell me would be interpreted as ravings if I repeated them."

"Doubtless," he agreed smoothly. "How old do you think I am, Catriona? I know you can't see my face, but please guess."

She frowned at the odd question, taking time to formulate an intelligent answer. He had an air of wisdom about him that suggested he was wizened, but he had the physical prowess of a young man. His body was firm to the touch, and his hair was thick and full. He was a strange combination. "I don't know." She licked her dry lips. "Perhaps forty?"

"I'm so old even I don't have a precise count of the years any longer. I have even forgotten my original surname, so I took Midnight when I purchased this home." He delivered the statement without a hint of artifice. "I know I was born during the height of the Roman Empire, but I can't recall my own birthday."

She gasped at the ludicrous words, but she didn't doubt he believed them. He spoke with utmost conviction.

He seemed not to notice her indrawn breath, or he chose to ignore it. "I was somewhere between five-and-twenty and thirty when I met an old man." He hesitated. "He wasn't really that old, but he had a presence that suggested he was as aged as the gods. He took a liking to me and made me his son."

She frowned. "How did he make you his son?"

"He changed me to what I am now. He hungered for companionship, but not that of a lover. He wanted someone to pass along his memories to, someone who would remember and honor him." There was a thread of sadness in Quintus's voice when he spoke. "He made me like him, and I stayed by his side for two decades before he grew tired and met the sunrise."

Catriona shook her head, more confused than ever. "I don't understand." She fell into silence as he touched a finger lightly to her lips.

"He was a vampire, Catriona. He made me one too."

Her eyes widened, and she wrenched away. "You're mad! I've read *Dracula*. There are no such things..."

He laughed. "Mr. Stoker wasn't the creator of vampires. They have existed long before written history, in many varied forms. I think I am perhaps the most rare, for I don't feed on blood. I get my sustenance from emotions." He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb, seeming to realize she was having a difficult time comprehending. "I am a psychic vampire, Catriona."

She blinked, not at all sure what she should say. Part of her remained skeptical of his claims, and she thought to demand he take her to the train station. Yet, she knew he had been dead when she disturbed him earlier in the afternoon. No matter how she tried to convince herself otherwise, she knew what state he had been in. "Quintus—"

"Will you allow me to explain before you begin to doubt me?" he asked with gentle reproof. He must have taken her silence for acquiescence, because he continued. "Psychic vampires sustain themselves by drawing emotions from their victims. It can be any emotion, but I have always tried to take in suffering and pain."

His voice changed, became darker. "My first wife, Lilly, fed only on the pleasure of mortals, leaving them in despair. There is a certain bitter aftertaste associated with negative emotions, but one quickly adapts. Unless we draw in too much of the emotion, it doesn't actually elicit any response in us but a surge of energy. There is no discernable difference between taking in pain or joy, but she could never be bothered to acclimate herself to the taste."

He fell silent for a moment before saying, "In fact, she seemed to glory in leaving anguish in her wake." He sighed. "Almost as soon as I changed her, I knew I had made a mistake. One I couldn't correct unless I took her life. I wasn't strong enough to do such a thing, so I endured her poisonous presence for a century."

A confusing whirl of emotions swept through her, and she was discomfited to find jealousy the uppermost among them. She didn't like him speaking of his first wife. "Why did you change her at all?"

He sighed again. "She was quite beautiful. I became enchanted with her when I fed on her. You see, she was dying, and there was no cure. I don't know what caused her illness, but it had something to do with her blood. She was so young, and had been so vital, that her disease brought on deep melancholy when she became confined to her bed."

"Did you know her...before?"

"No. Her suffering drew me to her. I thought she had a gentle soul, and I found my pity changing to love...or so I believed. I violated one of the few rules my father had imposed on me, which was not to reveal my powers to mortals. She embraced me." He sounded bitter. "I mistook her eagerness to be healed as a return of my affections. Like a fool, I married and changed her. It was only after she was well that I realized she wasn't the sweet woman she had pretended to be. She had used me."

Catriona's heart wrenched at the pain in his voice, and she cupped his hand between hers, rubbing gently. "What happened?"

"Our marriage was a period of Hell," he said bluntly. "She left for weeks and months at a time, only returning when her current lover ran out of funds or disenchanted her in some way. By the end of the second year, we didn't even make love when she returned to *try again*." He said the last part mockingly. "As the years passed, the span of her disappearances lengthened, until she didn't return for more than twenty years."

She held her breath, sensing he was about to reveal something terrible.

"I had convinced myself I didn't love her and never had." He exhaled before continuing. "However, it had been a long time since a woman warmed my bed. When she made certain overtures, I found myself responding. I don't think I ever fell in love with her again, but I did come to care for Lilly once more. I knew something had happened to her, and I thought it had changed her for the better."

"But it hadn't?"

"No." Heavy disappointment colored his voice. "There was a man she loved madly, but he had spurned her when he learned what she was. She decided he would accept

her when he was like her, and she changed him without his consent. He rejected her again, and she came home to me to restore her confidence.”

Her heart twisted, and she almost asked him to stop the tale. She didn't want to know how much he had loved his wife, or how Lilly had hurt him. Nevertheless, she couldn't deny the darker impulse that wanted to hear everything.

“I thought we had a chance to be happy, finally. She seemed more like the woman she had been before I transformed her.” He sighed, and his hand shook in her grasp.

“A short time after her return, her lover came to her, telling her he'd changed his mind. He swore he wanted her forever, and he begged her to come with him. Lilly had no trouble choosing, but she couldn't just go. I still don't know why she did it, but she had to leave a mark. Maybe she wanted me to remember her, or perhaps she wanted me distracted while she fled. Maybe she just wanted me dead.”

Nausea churned in her stomach. “She caused your accident?”

“Yes. Her servant branded me with the poker from the fire during the day, while I slept. It scarred me forever, because I was regenerating, and my body didn't have the strength to heal the wound.

“While her companion dealt with me, she and her lover fled. I went mad with anger and pain. I followed them after dealing with the servant, but they had a day's head start.” His voice lowered. “I caught up with them at an inn, and I discovered her lover had played her false. He was a pious man, and he believed all vampires were an abomination. I think he wanted to save Lilly from herself. He destroyed the two of them by paying the innkeeper to open the curtains while they slept.”

His pain drew her to him, and Catriona turned in his arms, pressing kisses across his face. “My poor darling.” She smoothed her hands down him. “You must have been in such pain.”

“It was almost anticlimactic. I had planned to kill her, but he had done it for me. When I saw her burned skeleton, I cried for the woman I had lost...the woman I suspect never existed anywhere but in my mind. I vowed never to love again.”

Her lips on his muffled his voice, and it was a long moment before he drew away.

“I have kept that vow until I met you, my sweet one. I, of all people, know the folly of rash behavior, but here I find myself once again prepared to rush into marriage. I have fallen in love with you, Catriona. I know I’m not mistaken about your sweet nature.” He kissed her again, thrusting his tongue inside her mouth and probing her depths. He finally withdrew. “Will you be my wife?”

She bit back a sob as confusion filled her. She ached to accept, but fear held her back. “I...oh, Quintus, kiss me.”

He hesitated but, at last, his mouth touched hers. His lips were soft against hers as he moved his mouth. He caught her lip between his teeth, sucking gently, as his fingers toyed with the buttons going down the back of the dress. When he unfastened the last one, he pushed the dress around her waist. His mouth was hot through the silk of her chemise as he dipped his head to taste her nipple.

Catriona leaned back, pressing his head against her breast. She moaned as his teeth raked the bud. She didn’t resist as he pushed her down on the bed, following her. He kept his mouth at her nipple, suckling with increasing pressure. He cupped her other breast in his hand, thumbing the hardened nipple.

She cried out as a tingle of awareness shot from her breasts to her pussy, causing it to spasm. She remembered the feel of his tongue against her clit, and she shifted restlessly.

Quintus lifted his head from her breast, and his fingers pulled at the skirt of her dress, bringing it up to her waist as she lifted her buttocks off the bed. He pulled her into a semi-prone position to remove the garment and her chemise before lowering her back to the bed.

“I want to touch you,” she whispered shyly. Her cheeks flushed as he lay down beside her. She rolled onto her side, pulling at his clothes. He had forgone a jacket, and she was able to quickly strip him of his waistcoat. She fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, and in her frustration, she tore them open. Quintus chuckled as she darted forward to lick his chest.

His laugh turned to a husky groan when her tongue teased the nub she found hidden in his chest hair. She nipped him gently, mimicking the movements he had made on her nipples. He groaned again, and she moved lower, trailing her tongue down his chest to his hard stomach. She paused to write her name in wet swirls, and he shifted restlessly under her.

Her hands moved to his trousers, hesitating at the ties. His cock pressed against the material when she ran her hand lightly down the front of his pants. She wanted to touch him, but couldn't summon the courage to unfasten his trousers. Her eyes widened when his hands settled on hers, jerking open the ties. She drew her hands away. "I can't..." She trailed off, pressing her flushed face into his stomach.

"It's okay." He seemed amused. Quintus pulled away and stood up. The sound of him removing his clothing reached her ears, and when he returned, he was nude. He lifted her higher onto the bed before lying beside her. His mouth settled on hers as his hand slipped through the slit in her drawers to stroke her pussy. She barely noticed the cool porcelain of his mask as his mouth moved over hers.

Catriona's tongue stroked his as his fingers delved inside her, spreading her moisture. Her clit swelled under his caresses, and she arched her hips, wanting more. "Touch me." She spoke forcefully as she lifted her hips to bring his finger deeper inside her. There was a twinge of pain as he slipped inside her, but it faded when he rotated his finger in slow circles. Her clit pulsed, aching for his touch, and she squirmed.

"Will you touch me, Catriona?" He sounded husky and out of breath. He thrust his hips forward, pushing his cock into the soft flesh of her thigh. "Will you stroke my cock as I stroke your pussy?"

She groped for his cock, trailing her fingers across the thick head. He removed his hand from her pussy and wrapped it around hers, guiding it to cup his cock. He moved her hand up and down for a few strokes. His fluid leaked from the tip. He was thick and pulsing in her hands, and she tightened her hold as she raised and lowered her hand, mimicking the motion he showed her as he withdrew his hand. He moaned with pleasure as he thrust his cock deeper into her hand.

Quintus's hand returned to her pussy, and he slipped two fingers inside her. He plunged them into her pussy in rhythm with the thrusts of his hips. Catriona maintained a firm grasp on his cock as her hips rose to meet his fingers' thrusts. She hovered on the edge of an orgasm when he withdrew his fingers and pulled his cock from her cupped hand. She shook her head, aching for release.

"I want to be inside you," he said as he raised himself over her, parting her thighs. "Don't you want that, Catriona?"

She squirmed against his hand when he parted her pussy. "Oh, yes. I want you so much I think I might die." She raised her hips at the same time the head of his cock settled against her opening. He plunged into her as she arched against him, and she cried out at the mix of pleasure and pain. She locked her legs around him and thrust upward again.

His cock spasmed inside her, and Quintus withdrew before plunging into her again. He cupped one of her breasts in his hand as the other settled on her hip, urging her up to meet him. His thrusts were slow and deep, making her cry out with pleasure each time he buried his cock inside her.

Catriona strained against him, getting as close as she could. His hands moved to cup her buttocks, and she couldn't hold in a small scream as he drove into her while lifting her to meet him. Pain spread through her, but it only provided a sharp edge to her pleasure. The combination sent convulsions pulsing through her. As the walls of her pussy clenched around Quintus, she strove to take in more of him, until she was almost sobbing with the effort.

Release came quickly, causing the tiny tremors to lengthen and increase. Her pussy locked around his spasming cock as his ejaculate filled her. Catriona tightened her thighs, trying to keep him inside her just a little longer. It wasn't until her muscles ached with exhaustion and her pussy released that she relaxed, loosening her hold on him.

Quintus's cock was still semi-hard as he pulled out of her and rolled onto his side, bringing her with him. He tucked her close to him and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

His heart hammered audibly, and sweat had given his body a slick feeling. The same sheen decorated Catriona's body. Her breath came in short bursts, and she could barely keep her eyes open.

"You delight me," he said in a low voice. "You're so passionate."

"Only with you," she said around a yawn that caught her by surprise. "I had never even kissed a man before meeting you." She curled her fingers into his chest hair. "You delight me too, Quintus. Your wife was a fool to not be content with what you gave her." Her last words emerged as a sleepy murmur, and her eyes closed. As they did, part of Quintus's explanation returned to her, floating across her subconscious.

I mistook her eagerness to be healed as a return of my affections.

Her eyes snapped open, but the ever-present blackness greeted her. "Quintus?"

"Yes, love?" He sounded as tired as she was, though he had spent the day in his deathlike slumber.

"You can heal me, can't you?" All traces of sleep fled, burned away by a burst of excitement. For the first time in months, pure joy swept through her. To not be confined to a life of darkness...she couldn't even begin to fathom such a thing after the last year.

His harsh tone chased away her joy. "Absolutely not."

She blinked with shock, and it was a moment before she could gather her wits. "I don't understand. If this gift healed Lilly, and it made you immortal, why won't it do the same for me?"

Quintus's silence filled the chamber. He exhaled harshly. "I didn't say it wouldn't heal you. I just won't do it."

A chill coursed through her. "What? I don't understand. Why not?"

"Because it's dangerous. The transformation is painful."

She shrugged. "I can endure more pain to regain my sight, Quintus."

"I won't do it! There are side effects, for one thing. You become vulnerable to enemies during the day. The trance you fall into is indistinguishable from death. Sunlight kills you. Can you imagine what it's like to not be able to see the sun anymore, Catriona? It's been hundreds of years since I saw anything but night."

“I can well imagine,” she said in a cool voice, surprised by her equanimity. “I haven’t seen the sun or *anything else* in thirteen months. You can change that, but you won’t. Why are you doing this? I can hear the note of guilt in your voice. I know you’re lying to me.”

“I won’t discuss this further.” With jerky movements, Quintus rolled from the bed.

She could hear him gathering his clothes and dressing quickly before he strode to the door. Her heart clenched with fear. “Quintus, please don’t leave me like this. At least tell me why.”

His answer was the slamming of her door.

Chapter 6

Just a few feet from her door, Quintus fell to his knees, clutching his chest. Tears burned behind his eyes, and he struggled to suppress them. His breath emerged as harsh pants, and he trembled all over.

She couldn't ask it of him. She just couldn't. It was too dangerous. What if he lost her during the transformation? Why was her eyesight so important to her? He would love her for the rest of her life, despite the blindness.

Or because of it, a sly voice whispered in the back of his mind.

A gasp tore from him at the thought. No. He couldn't believe that was his only reason for wanting Catriona with him. He wasn't so selfish as to keep her blind just to save himself from seeing the pity—or, God forbid, revulsion—in her eyes when she looked at him without the mask.

When she was whole and restored, she wouldn't need to stay with him. She could take care of herself again. She would leave him. If his ugly face didn't scare her away, her own need for independence would. If he didn't change her, she would stay with him. She had nowhere else to go.

She would eventually die. His eyes burned, and a tear escaped, trailing down his cheek. He might be able to keep her with him as she was. He might convince her she had no other options, but unless he transformed her, mortality would steal her away...in fifty years, maybe. He knew how rapidly fifty years could pass to an immortal.

How could he even think about leaving her that broken creature she was when he had the power to restore her? He had chosen for more than a millennium to ease suffering where he could. How could he turn his back on his ideals now? Did he want

her to stay simply because she had no alternative? Wouldn't it be better to have her stay because she made the choice, not because she had no other choice?

He was nauseated as he rose to his feet and staggered down the hallway to her room. He pushed open the door, finding Catriona attempting to dress herself. Emotion had flushed her cheeks, and he could feel the anger radiating from her. He sensed she was intent on leaving him. Not because he had refused to heal her, but because he wouldn't explain why. He sighed. "Don't leave, Catriona."

She spun in his direction angrily, though her gaze centered on the bust of a goddess on a pedestal beside him, rather than on him. "You can't make me stay. If I can't trust you not to lie to me, I certainly can't marry you. Why won't you explain? Damnation!"

"I'll transform you." He heard the weary defeat in his tone and winced. He made an effort to hide it. "If that's what you want, I'll change you tonight. You'll awaken whole and healed tomorrow night, after sunset."

She paused, and her brow had furrowed. She seemed shocked by his reversal. "Are...are you certain?" She licked her lips, betraying her nervousness.

"I leave the decision with you." He forced himself to sound impassive to her choice. He could sense her fear rising as she contemplated the change. Before, she had been too excited to consider the consequences.

"You said it was dangerous. Has anyone ever died?"

"I don't know. I don't remember anything from my own transformation except terrifying visions and unending pain. Lilly screamed for hours. Her heart stopped beating an hour before dawn, and I thought she had died. When she awakened at sunset, I was amazed." He shrugged, forgetting she couldn't see the gesture. "That may have been because she was ill before the transformation. I don't know," he said again.

Catriona fell silent, but her eyes moved back and forth rapidly. After several minutes of quiet, she nodded just once. "I want to try. I can't live like this for the rest of my life."

“Are you certain you’re prepared for immortality?” he countered. “If you decide to end your existence as an immortal, the only way to do so is to let the sun consume you. My father screamed for close to an hour before the light finished him.”

“I’m not the type to kill myself,” she said brusquely. “Had I been, events of the past year would have driven me to do so already.”

“I don’t think we can have children.” He made his last argument feebly. He really didn’t know. Lilly had never been home frequently enough for them to try, and she hadn’t been a virgin when he married her, so she may have known about birth control. Yet, his sire had never gotten a child on a mortal.

Her lower lip wobbled, but she shrugged. “I can’t have them now either.” She firmed her mouth. “What do I need to do?”

He accepted her decision with a heavy heart as he walked toward her. Quintus drew her into his arms. “You have to drink my blood.” He turned her in his arms, pressing her back to his chest. “It’s the only means of transformation for any type of vampire. Can you do it?”

She hesitated before nodding.

He closed his eyes as he brought his wrist to his mouth and slashed the vein. He quickly pressed it to her mouth. “Drink until the wound closes, but don’t reopen it. You only need a little.”

She gagged on the blood as it poured into her mouth, and he thought she might vomit. Her stomach quavered against his palm when he pressed his hand there. “Try to keep it down. If you throw up, you’ll have to do this again.” He interjected a lighthearted note into his voice. “I don’t fancy the pain a second time, Catriona.”

She didn’t reply, but her throat worked as she audibly swallowed mouthfuls of blood. The wound started closing, and he eased his wrist away from her mouth, feeling her slump against him.

“My head.” She sounded weak, and her body began to tremble. “Quintus, I feel...” She trailed off as shudders seized her. “So cold.”

Quintus lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He covered her with the blankets, forming a makeshift cocoon. "I'll do my best to ease your suffering. You'll soon pass out, but you'll still be aware of the pain. Do your best to endure it." He lowered his voice to a whisper as he pressed a kiss to her ear. "When you awaken tomorrow night, you'll be able to see everything you've missed for a year."

"Yes," she said with a soft sigh before her teeth clicked together. Convulsions seized her, sending her body flopping across the bed. Quintus crawled into the bed beside her, holding her close to him. It was just the beginning of a long night, but he knew it would be an even longer eternity if she chose to leave him when her injuries healed.

* * * * *

Catriona awoke suddenly the following night. Her eyes snapped open, and it took her a moment to realize she was staring up at a deep-red canopy and actually *seeing* it. She sat up so quickly her head spun, and she turned her head, eyeing the elegant room Quintus had given her. She was delighted with the unimaginative mix of maroon and cream. She had never seen anything so beautiful in all her life. A giggle escaped her, and she swung her feet onto the floor.

When she stood up, she realized she was nude, and a blush trailed across her face. When she hadn't been able to see her nudity, it had been easy to forget it. Now, she studied her body with intensity, trying to ignore her embarrassment. She touched her smooth stomach, pleased to find the scars gone. She winced when her overly long nails scraped her flesh, and she looked down at them. They had grown to talons during the night. Her hair had also grown, now touching her waist.

She cast her memory back to the night before, but she remembered very little except moments of terrible pain and strange dreams. Always, Quintus's voice was there to soothe her through the worst. She remembered him taking on her suffering several times, until he made himself unwell. Most of all, she remembered his tender touch as he held her against him. Everything else was a dull blur.

She frowned when she saw he wasn't in the room with her. Catriona went to the wardrobe and removed a dressing gown. She was about to go look for him when someone knocked on her door. "Enter."

She had expected Fräü Markham, but this man could only be Quintus. Her lips parted when she saw how handsome he was. His dark hair tended toward curly, but he had attempted to harness it by keeping it closely cropped. He was broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped, and he stood at least half a foot taller than her own average height. He wore an immaculate suit, and he had a well-formed face, with pleasing lines. She ached to draw him.

There was an air of hesitancy about him when he stepped into the room. He kept the masked side of his face averted, and he sounded distant. "How do you feel?"

A smile she couldn't contain burst across her face as she rushed across the room to throw herself into his arms. After a hesitation, his arms held her loosely. "I am wonderful, my love. You have given me back everything."

"You're strong, then?"

Catriona nodded, frowning when she saw the sadness in his green eye. The other was turned away from her. "I haven't felt so strong in a long time. I can do anything." She grinned up at him, hoping her excitement would be infectious. The air of melancholy clung tenaciously to him. "Are you well, Quintus? I remember you took too much of my anguish and became ill."

He nodded. "I am fine." He cleared his throat. "I suppose it would be polite to hold off on this conversation, but I find I can't wait another moment."

She frowned at his seriousness. "What conversation?"

He began pacing. "What will you do now, Catriona?"

She tilted her head, considering. "Before I accepted there would be no miraculous recovery, I often envisioned what would be the first thing I did when I regained my sight. I always thought it would be to go to my parents' graves to bid them a proper goodbye."

He nodded. "I can arrange that for you."

She shrugged. "I would like to in the near future, but I find myself too happy to mourn right now. I know my parents would understand this feeling. I have the urge to paint." She walked over to him, stopping him in mid-step. "I want to capture you on canvas, if you'll permit me to."

He flinched, but didn't answer. "My question referred to your long-term plans. Will you return to England and attempt to reclaim your inheritance?"

It was her turn to flinch. "I thought..." She trailed off, frowning. "Did you change your mind?"

He cocked a brow. "About what?"

"Your marriage proposal." She tried to keep her tone polite and emotionless. "I'll understand if you wish to withdraw the offer. After all, we don't know each other at all. I suppose it would be scandalous to marry so quickly –"

"No more scandalous than having made you my mistress," he said. His hands trembled as he lifted them to his face, where they paused. "Do you want to marry me, Catriona? You never answered the last time I asked you."

"I wasn't certain then." She gave him a tentative smile. "I wanted to be with you, but I didn't want you to be burdened by me. I didn't know if I was drawn to you because of my dependence, or for another reason." She hesitated. "I wasn't even certain how you really felt about me, until last night. I can't doubt your feelings after the way you stayed with me, sharing my pain. Now that I can meet you equally, I would be honored to be your wife."

Quintus shook his head. "You mustn't decide until you see my face." He fumbled with the black porcelain, removing the mask slowly to reveal his ravaged face.

She bit back a cry when she saw the pale, puckered flesh. Sections of pink scars furrowed his countenance, and the injury was a hideous irony to the left side of his face, which was so handsome. She clenched her hands together, trying to examine him dispassionately.

She could sense his fear and nervousness—the first indication of her new powers. She knew he wouldn't want pity or coddling. Her best reaction was calm acceptance,

and she struggled to hide her anger. Her voice still trembled when she repeated, "I would be honored to be your wife."

She reached out to touch his face, and he jerked away. "That bitch." The anger exploded from her, and Catriona could have throttled his first wife if the sun hadn't already consumed that cold-hearted fiend. "I could kill her for the pain she's caused you."

"Catriona—" He took a step back, seemingly intent on keeping her from touching him.

A surge of strength filled her as she stepped forward and pressed her body close to his. Catriona clasped her hands around his neck and forced his neck to bend, lowering his head toward hers. Her gentle kisses across the marred flesh were in direct contrast to the rage still flowing through her. She felt his bunched muscles slowly relax, and his mouth softened when she touched her lips to his.

She drew him into her arms, feeling his pain sweep through her. It struck her that Quintus was more of a broken soul than she had ever been, and he needed her. She acted on instinct as she stopped kissing him and instead inhaled. His breath flowed into her, but more than that, his torment filled her. It tasted bitter, almost enough to make her choke, but she persisted.

Slowly, the taste dissipated, and her energy skyrocketed. Quintus's pain lessened, and she continued to drink until her stomach churned with nausea. She broke away, coughing until a cloud of green escaped her.

When she looked up, tears streaked down Quintus's face, and he wore an unguarded expression. She touched her palm to the scarred side of his face, caressing gently. "I love you, Quintus. Will you marry me?"

He turned his head as he captured her hand. He kissed her palm, nuzzling his mouth against her skin.

She closed her eyes, enjoying his touch. A sense of peace filled her as he pulled her into his arms for a long kiss. There was no sharing of pain this time. This kiss was all about pleasure and love. It was a healing touch, for both of them.

Epilogue

50 years later...

Catriona studied the portrait in the artificial light of the lamp. The only time she truly missed daylight was when she was painting. Electric light didn't compare to the softness of natural light. She chewed on the end of her wooden brush as she struggled to identify what was missing in the painting of Quintus.

"The sun will rise soon. Are you coming to bed?"

His voice caused her to jump with surprise as he entered her studio, and she turned her head to smile at him after pulling the paintbrush from her mouth. "I'm sorry, love. I lost track of the time." She gestured to him to approach. "Tell me what's missing in this painting."

She held her breath as he studied the image. She had been trying for fifty years to capture his exact visage, but each painting always fell short of her mental picture.

He shrugged. "It looks like me...or how I used to look."

She shook her head. "There's still something missing, Quintus."

He put his arms around her, bracing his hands around her distended stomach. "I agree. My wife is missing from my bed. She needs to rest, for the baby's sake."

His cock poked into her back, and she couldn't hold in a throaty chuckle. "Somehow, I think you have more than sleep planned for me."

He thrust against her gently. "How perceptive. Baby needs rest, and Daddy needs loving."

She nodded. "I'll be there as soon as I put away my supplies."

Quintus heaved a sigh, but nodded. "Very well. Don't take too long."

As he walked away, she started to put her brushes away. As she did so, she looked up at the painting. It suddenly struck her what was wrong about it. In each rendering,

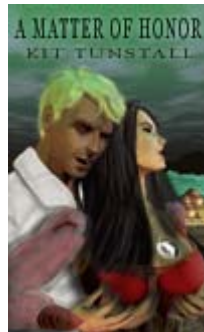
she always showed him looking solemn and stern. He wasn't like that anymore. It was seldom that a smile wasn't on his face, and he was quick to laugh. The pain he used to carry had faded to a distant memory during the past half-century.

With deft strokes, she painted over the expression she had captured, putting a smile in its place. She fixed the eyes and grooves around his mouth quickly, before stepping back to survey her work.

She nodded, satisfied with her attempt for the first time in five decades. The man smiling back at her from the canvas was the man she knew and loved. Yes, that was her Quintus, with the name Midnight, but a heart of sunshine.

She dismissed her silly musings and rushed through cleaning up. She was anxious to join her husband, to share with him her victory and her passion. Most of all, and always, her love.

Also by Kit Tunstall



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