



# COURTING MIDNIGHT

"Emma Holly's gift for sensual detail  
is absolutely stunning!—Susan Sizemore

# EMMA HOLLY

USA Today Bestselling Author of  
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BEYOND SEDUCTION  
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*Courting  
Midnight*



EMMA HOLLY



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*To my writing buddies:  
Michele Hauf and Nita Abrams,  
whose company makes me smarter, happier,  
and certainly better fed!*

# Chapter 1



NORTHERN ENGLAND, 1813

*The rain poured down like God's own deluge. That this comparison was justified could only be known to Lucius White, the oldest living blood-drinker in the world.*

Hard silver sheets pelted his swaying coach and turned the rutted Northumberland road to mud. Braced to keep his balance in the creaking carriage, Lucius pulled the shade from the window and peered out. He found little to admire. This was sparsely peopled land. No charming village of rose-strewn cottages met his gaze, no isolated country estate. One would never guess it was May, much less mid-afternoon. The sky was dark, and clouds as gray as Lucius's eyes piled up behind the sharp-ridged hills.

Lucius's companion saw none of it. Edmund was a shape-changing immortal just like himself. He slept with his shoulders wedged in the corner and his long legs stretched across the black leather seat, as insensible to his surroundings as one felled by drink. Even so, Edmund managed to look the very picture of a fair-haired medieval lord.

He had been traveling with Lucius since the elder changed

him more than four hundred years before. From that night forward, Edmund had made Lucius's comfort his central care. Because Edmund was unintrusive and quick of wit, Lucius had never wished to change the arrangement. He did, however, wonder how he had inspired it. It had been ages since he felt moved to obey anyone.

He was glad—so far as he was able to be glad—that they had come here for Edmund's sake. Edmund's human descendants still dwelled in the area, and every so often he liked to assure himself they were well. Had the younger *upyr* been awake, no doubt he would have felt the charm of home scenery. It was day, however, and he slept. Because there was not a scrap of sun to avoid, this was more from habit than need.

Ancient as he was, Lucius had few needs left: blood now and then, sleep, a run in his wolf form. Friends were a luxury he believed he could do without. They served a purpose, but what he felt for those he had was more the memory of affection than the thing itself.

*Why should I live?* he wondered so distantly the rain seemed to speak the words.

There had been a time when *upyr* needed no enemy but themselves to keep their numbers sparse. With the formation of the *Upyr* Council to maintain order, their survival was much increased. Others besides himself could carry the elder torch.

Lucius's only claim to importance was that he was the last of the first *upyr*, the sole member of his race who recalled any world but this. The planet of his birth had been wet and green, a jungle whose sun filled half the sky. More than that, he could not say. As for his life here, he did not remember much beyond the last thousand years. Still, was not the death of any unique creature a sad event? Would not Lucius be missed if he disappeared?

He tried to care, but the coachman's rain-drenched misery had more substance. When the carriage lurched to a

halt halfway up a hill, the human's disgust cut through his thoughts.

"Stay," Lucius ordered Edmund, though the other barely stirred as Lucius shoved the windblown door open. Lucius's Hessians sank to their ankles when he stepped outside. Rain pummeled him in sheetlike gusts. The cold did not discomfit him. In truth, the drumming was a mild pleasure. He was a cold creature himself. For the moment, he was at one with his surroundings.

"Horses can't get up this slope," the coachman shouted when he judged Lucius near enough to hear.

Soaked through, the many capes of their driver's great-coat wrapped slick and black around his hunched shoulders. Because Lucius and Edmund had forgone the usual complement of footmen for the sake of privacy, the coachman was the only human there. Judging him wet but well, Lucius turned his attention to the four wretched equines who were harnessed between the coach's shafts. His heart squeezed with unexpected pity. Not only their tails but their noses hung to the mud. They had no knowledge of inns and stables short miles away. They only knew they felt terrible.

"I will walk with them," he called to the coachman. "Spare them my weight. Maybe with encouragement, they will get on."

Ignoring the human's skeptical thoughts, Lucius touched each beast in turn, allowing his power to flow through their shivering hides. Had the atmosphere been less thick, the coachman would have seen a soft gold glow. Lucius excelled at weaving glours and could appear as mortal as any man, but over the years, his strength had grown so great its use was difficult to hide. When he reached the lead horse, he put his mouth to one ear.

"There's a boy," he whispered, sending soothing images of stalls and hay. "I'll keep you warm until we reach the yard."

He clucked to get them going, taking the shaft in hand so

the only weight the horses had to drag was their own. With an exclamation of surprise, the coachman slapped the ribbons across their backs. Not hard, thankfully. The human might be unsentimental about his partners, but he was not cruel.

*No worse than other humans, Lucius mused. And better than plenty of upyr.*

This thought had barely left his mind when he heard a hail and, through the gloom, spied a frantically waving lantern.

*Highwaymen, thought the coachman, come to slit our throats.*

“Someone has overturned his carriage in the ditch,” Lucius shouted before the frightened man could reach for his blunderbuss. “I think we shall have to carry him to the inn.”

His sharp *upyr* eyes had seen the carriage’s remains. Indeed, the carrier of the lantern soon splashed up. The solid appearance of Lucius’s old-fashioned coach, along with his inescapable air of authority, seemed to reassure the man he’d found help.

“Thank the Lord,” he panted, his plain servant’s clothes soaked through. “I’m afraid my master is taken bad.”

*Taken bad* implied something different from broken limbs. Not in the habit of wasting speech, Lucius followed the servant to the wreck. There he found a youngish human huddled beneath a makeshift oilcloth lean-to. Well-wrapped against the weather, the man’s eyes glittered with some fever. He appeared not to understand what was happening. He moaned when Lucius scooped him up, his body as hot as fire against his rescuer’s cooler skin. He did not smell particularly appealing, even to one who liked human scents. Lucius judged him very ill indeed.

“Follow us,” he said to the servant. “And bring whatever possessions you think your master cannot do without.”

The servant hastened to obey, and soon they were lifting the invalid into the coach to the accompaniment of the coachman’s

audible grumbles. Not unreasonably, he believed the horses could not handle the extra load. Edmund was sitting up inside, awake but bleary, able to muster little more than a wide-eyed stare.

“Accident,” Lucius said. He passed the rest of the story straight to his mind, along with a warning to get his glamour in better order. North of England or not, no human could be as pale as an *upyr*. Caught unawares, Edmund’s skin was close to glowing.

Lucius waved the servant into the coach. Edmund would not harm him, and nothing could be gained by him taking sick as well.

That settled, Lucius guided the team up the last rises, befuddling the minds of his mortal watchers to permit speeding their progress without remark. The inn they reached was small: stables, a tap room and parlor, a few humble rooms for guests. Its size did not matter. Any warm place would serve.

No sooner was their arrival spotted than they were met with all the bustle humans seemed unable to do without. Tea was brewed, and coal fires stoked, and much conflicting advice offered as to whether a doctor should be summoned. During the hubbub, the servant (his spirits recovered from drying off) revealed that his master was the son of old Squire Delavert—rest his soul—back from the Indies to claim his inheritance.

“Never thought he’d see a penny,” the servant confided. “Him being the younger son, and hardly the favorite. Why, if that horse hadn’t tossed his older brother on his head, my master would have been cut off. That’s why he sailed to Antigua to make his fortune. But can’t nobody make fortunes today, not with *Parleyment*”—this mispronounced with scorn—“abolishing people’s right to buy slaves!”

This declaration inspired a mix of murmurs, the locals having thought little about the issue. Nearer injustices like the price of bread had a better chance of arousing them.

Lucius kept his own opinion to himself. Humans were stubborn creatures. Any immortal who aspired too passionately to change them soon found his heart broken.

In this instance, at least, it seemed a kind of justice would be served. To judge by the dull black spots in the sick man's aura, Lucius doubted he would enjoy his good fortune long.

The question of doctors exhausted, the new arrivals—minus the coachman—were shown to a snug chamber. The invalid was put in bed, the innkeeper having decided the apothecary would be called if the weather cleared. Lucius would have been content to ignore the newcomers then, but Edmund pulled him aside.

Lucius noticed his friend was fully alert. Had Edmund been in his wolf-form, his ears would have been pricked. As they stood together before the window, the rain cast shifting patterns across his inhumanly perfect face.

“Have you seen him?” Edmund demanded in a low murmur.

“Of course I saw him. I carried him inside.”

“But have you *looked* at him?”

Lucius saw little point in examining anyone who was likely to be beyond all earthly intercourse within the hour, but apparently there *was* something to see, because the sick man's servant was eyeing him. When he caught Lucius staring back, he crossed himself. *Spitting image*, Lucius caught from his poorly shielded human mind.

“He resembles me?” Lucius asked.

“More than *resembles*,” Edmund said with a muffled laugh.

Interest aroused, Lucius moved to the bed. His pulse gave a tiny fillip at what he found. Seen without his head-wrapping garb, the similarity was striking. Though the ailing man had attained no more than his third decade, he had the same fully silver hair as himself, the same straight features and smooth high cheeks. Lucius lacked the man's air of dissipation, but had he been human and possessed of a bit more

color and flesh, the two could have passed for mirror images.

“Lord above,” breathed the manservant, looking from one to the other. “You and Master Lucas could be twins.”

Lucius’s interest thrummed again at the name—Fate plucking the strings of his ancient soul.

Edmund looked at him meaningfully. Rather than acknowledge this, Lucius sat by the sick man’s hip. The coincidence could mean nothing. If a man lived as long as he had, he might well encounter a double. Even if Fate was spurring him to take action, who knew what that action was? The man appeared beyond healing, even by Lucius’s power. Nor was healing humans an interference he performed lightly. Humans had their own gods, or at least their own destinies. Lucius did not have the hubris to set himself against that.

“Lucas,” he said softly, placing one hand on the sick man’s perspiring cheek.

The invalid had subsided into a doze, but at Lucius’s touch, his eyes twitched and then opened. Though unfocused, they were the very color of Lucius’s own, down to the tiny threads of blue only the strongest lights revealed.

“You,” the man said hoarsely, the first word he had spoken.

“Yes,” said Lucius. “I look like you.”

The man was in a state beyond surprise. “Dying, aren’t I?” he said as if amused. “Must have picked up a fever on the ship.”

His servant made a sound of protest, but Lucius would not deny his prediction. Instead, he inclined his head.

“Hell,” said the man, then stopped to cough. When it ended, he was breathless. “Guess I’ll miss my chance to lord it over those fools in Bridesmere. I was looking forward to that.”

Lucius handed him the madeira the innkeeper’s girl had left. She had not wanted to quit the room afterward. Something in her, deeper than self-preservation, was drawn to the scent of the *upyr*’s power. Fearing Edmund might find her too attractive, and betray himself with signs of hunger, Lucius

had been obliged to catch her eyes and order her to go.

Edmund always had liked feeding from females most.

The sick man was too weak to be troubled by urges so tied to life. He took the wine from Lucius's hand, swallowed painfully, then sagged back, the glass still clutched to his chest.

"You saved me," he said. "At least from dying in the ditch. I've half a mind to leave my worldly goods to you."

"That would be unnecessary," Lucius said. "I've worldly goods of my own."

"Yes, but you'd give those hypocrites a turn. Make them think they weren't quit of me. I'd look up from hell itself to laugh at that." His lungs rattled as he both laughed and coughed, a fit that seemed unlikely to cease before his final breath.

"Master!" exclaimed his servant, just as Lucius touched his chest to take away the pain.

As he thought, the pain was all he could remove. The spots in the sick man's aura swarmed about his fingers, like angry wasps forcing his touch away. The man's body, or perhaps his soul, would not allow Lucius to heal him even had he wished.

Perhaps the sick man knew his end was near. His humor fell away as his coughing eased, replaced by an unearthly intensity. "You witness it," he gasped with a sideways glance at his servant. "I make this man, whoever the hell he is, my lawful heir. Everything I have, including my debts, is his. If he is as rich as he claims, he should not have trouble settling them."

Lucius shook off a moment's shock. "Are you certain this is what you wish? A friend or relative might be more appropriate."

"Hate 'em all," said the man, subsiding with the ghost of an acerbic smile. "Luckily for you, I haven't known you long enough to take you in dislike."

Lucius exchanged glances with Edmund. It struck him as

a bit ridiculous that a human would make him his heir, and for no better reason than a chance resemblance. One might conclude the man was wishing he could leave his fortune to himself!

At his silent request for an opinion, Edmund shrugged. "You cannot doubt he means what he says."

"'s a deathbed request," the man said with a laughing rasp. "You cannot in good conscience refuse."

A tightening low in Lucius's gut told him refusal was exactly the course he should choose. Who knew what human nonsense this bequest might embroil them in? His kind lived best and safest in the shadows.

"I cannot die in peace unless you agree," the man added slyly.

"A churchman might do you better for that."

"Ha. I hate those prosing meddlers worst of all. Come then, you've the look of an honorable man. Walked with your horses, you did, and took a perfect stranger into your care. Surely you're not too finical to accept a bit of property in return. My gambling debts should ease your conscience easily enough. Racked up quite a few while I was waiting for the old man to die."

"Damnation," Lucius muttered in surrender, in response to which the man chuckled.



As it happened, Lucas Delavert lingered to midnight, the very hour *upyr* powers reached their height. Thinking him better, the servant left to find a meal. Lucius did not stop him, though he knew the sick man's quiet did not herald an improvement.

He reached for Lucius's hand. His grip was unexpectedly tight, and power flowed across the contact without Lucius willing it. Shored up a bit, the man grimaced at his own panic. "'Tis the fear that pains me most. Given how I've lived, I've no doubt I'm bound for the pit."

"I do not believe in Hell," Lucius said. "If there is a god, I believe He grants each man peace when he leaves this world. If there is not, nothingness is all man has to fear."

"Well, you're no prosing fool." The man laughed weakly. "Nor very comforting. Don't think I fancy the idea of nothing any better than the fire. Wish I didn't think I'd be forgotten. That'd comfort me most of all."

Lucius could not think what to say to this, and did not get a chance to try, for just then the man's spirit flared in a golden burst of light, swallowing Lucius's sense of anything beyond it. Lucius saw the dying man's life even as it left him, *lived* it as though it were his. Lucas Delavert's birthing cry. His childhood. A favorite pony named Mr. Bunch. The voice of his older brother, Daniel, lifted in scold. *Why, Lucas? Why must you disappoint our father?* With limbs like silk, his dark-skinned mistress rolled atop him in their gauze-draped bed, warm West Indian breezes tickling their skins. His manhood pulsed as she enveloped it. *Lucas*, she moaned in admiration. *You are so strong . . .*

Forgotten passions swamped Lucius. Love. Fear. Envy. Joy like a burst of sunshine. He had a mortal's feelings again, with every weakness and every strength that implied. He wept with it, unable to command his own emotions in the slightest way. For a space of time he could not count, he was utterly lost to himself.

Edmund brought him back by slapping his cheek. Lucas . . . *Lucius* realized his friend had dragged him to the window. The casement was open and the now-soft rain pattered on his face.

"What . . . happened?" he asked, his own voice foreign.

Edmund laughed breathlessly. "I was going to ask you the same. You would not respond to me. Nothing moved but your eyes—and they followed scenes known only to yourself."

Lucius pressed his hands to either side of his aching head. "He gave me his memories before he died." He glanced at the

body on the bed—now no more than a husk—and could not help shuddering. “He said he did not want to be forgotten.”

Edmund was staring at him, his features still as stone: a quirk *upyr* developed when in deep thought.

“What is it?” Lucius demanded. “What are you thinking?”

Edmund shook himself. “I am thinking you would not have asked me that an hour ago. I am thinking it would not have occurred to you to be curious. Most of all, I am thinking this is a sign.”

“A sign!” Lucius’s mouth twisted.

“Well, if not a sign, then an opportunity. Think, Lucius. You share this man’s appearance and memories. No one here knows he’s dead. Even if they found out, you could thrall them into believing whatever you like. You could *be* him, if you chose.”

“Why would I want to be him?”

“Because for a century you have not been a part of life. You exist—needing little, feeling less. Everyone has noticed it. Aimery. Gillian. All the Council. But if they could see you now . . . Your hands shake, Lucius. Your eyes brim with emotion.”

Lucius braced his shaking hands against the rain-damp sill. “Those symptoms will pass.”

“Maybe you should not let them. Maybe you need to plunge into life, to let yourself care as humans do. None of us want you to die. Why do you think Aimery sent me to watch over you?”

Lucius’s eyes widened. Aimery was Edmund’s brother and head of the *Upyr* Council in Rome. If he had asked Edmund to do this, his fears were severe indeed.

“I assure you,” Lucius said, “I have never had the slightest urge to embrace the sun.”

“No urge, maybe, but some morning you might have done it out of ennui.”

Edmund’s eyes were the ones glittering now. Lucius had

underestimated the depth of his attachment. The discovery perplexed him even as he felt—he paused to put a name to the sensation—even as he felt oddly touched.

“My survival means that much to you?”

“Your happiness,” Edmund corrected. “Your enjoyment of life’s drama.”

Lucius ran his fingers through his short, cool hair. The dead man’s locks and sideburns had been longer. Lucius would have to spell his to grow. The recognition that he was considering Edmund’s proposal gave him a shock. “We have no idea what dangers this might involve, what exposures we might risk.”

Edmund smiled, baring slightly sharpened, dazzling teeth. His relish for the challenge was obvious. Perhaps Lucius was not the only *upyr* who had grown bored.

“It has been many years,” Edmund said, “since a paltry bit of danger could put me off.”



The death of Mr. Lucius White of an unknown fever was an event of interest for the countryside. It was lamented that the apothecary could not have been called in time, but all in all everyone considered it lucky that Mr. Lucas Delavert, son of the squire that was, had found the stranger on the road and saved him from the otherwise sad fate of dying in the rain.

More compliments were heaped for assigning his servant the task of escorting the body back to London. Mr. Delavert, a dignified, youngish man, seemed uncomfortable with the praise, but this was considered evidence of a commendable humility. Indeed, everyone was much more pleased with the gentleman than they expected, having heard through local rumor that he was wild.

Edmund struggled not to laugh at Lucius’s reaction to this praise, but with every passing moment, the utter madness of

their endeavor struck Lucius with greater force. He had stolen a man's identity. He was going to assume his place in the human realm.

Most infamous was his arranging to have Delavert's body—supposedly *his* body—buried in a place to which it had no ties, though he was glad the manservant had gone with it. He had no wish to be keeping company with anyone who'd known the real Delavert so well.

By the time he and Edmund settled into the carriage, Lucius was grim. The coachman, now convinced he had been driving the heroic Mr. Delavert all along, assured them they'd reach Hadleigh Hall within the hour.

Edmund looked smugly pleased sprawled in the forward-facing seat. He was garbed in midnight blue and blinding white. The fashions of this period suited his athletic frame, from the skintight pantaloons and frock coats to the starched cravats and high-top boots. Come to think of it, even encased in medieval armor, Edmund had been a bit of a peacock.

"Lord," Edmund marveled now, his hand pressed to his waistcoat. "I fed so well from the people at the inn I might sleep all night." He grinned at the look Lucius gave him. "You need not reproach me. You did not want to spell them, and I am not as powerful as you. I had to bite them to ensure my thrall would stick. We would not want anyone remembering anything to contradict your story."

"My story." Lucius stared darkly out the window. The moonlit landscape was transformed by the recent rain. These northern hills would never be soft, but they were romantic, their heather kissed with purple, their boulders sparkling as if sprinkled with fairy dust. Lucius's mouth tightened at his thoughts. His *upyr* vision allowed him to see color even in the dark. Seeing beauty, however, depended upon the mortal whose memories he now harbored.

"You must make me your steward," Edmund said. "Then I may order your staff about and have my quarters

underground. I do hope this Hadleigh Hall is fine. I shall think it hard if the squire's estate turns out to be a cramped farmhouse."

"Hadleigh Hall is a good, large place with a handsome park," Lucius assured him with a mix of emotions not his own. "The gardeners alone could comprise a small regiment. You shall have sufficient underlings to satisfy even your vanity."

Edmund laughed. "Your wit returns. I am sure that is a good sign, too."

Lucius was sure of nothing except that he wished most heartily to turn back.

## Chapter 2



*Theo Becket had come to town on a secret mission.* That being so, the last individual she wished to meet on the pavement in front of Black's was Lady Morris. The wife of Bridesmere's mayor was a woman who wouldn't have known the meaning of discretion if it had been painted in foot-high letters across her chest.

Given how stout she had grown within the comfort of her marriage, it very nearly would have fit.

"Why, Theodora!" Lady Morris exclaimed. Sybil Morris was an old schoolmate of their mama—though in truth "old school rival" might be a better term. Having moved up in the world since then, she considered herself beyond any need to call Theo or her sister "miss."

Theo tried not to clutch her bundle too guiltily. "Good day to you, Lady Morris. Have you come to take the air?"

Bridesmere's prosperous high street sparkled down to its cobbles beneath a rain-washed sky, but Lady Morris laughed as if this were the drollest comment she'd ever heard. "I hope I know better than to take the air in town. I have come to visit