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*Sweet temptation
must never be denied...*

*Mistress
by Midnight*

MAGGIE ROBINSON

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Prologue

Dorset, 1808

Despite it being high summer, Con was so pale that he looked ill. But he had come to her at the ring of stones, and that was the important thing.

In a few days' time, he would belong to some other woman. He would stand in front of the altar at All Saints, and pledge his troth to Marianna Berryman, that sleek stranger who looked very like a cream-fed cat.

Laurette understood this rationally. Con had to enter this alliance for the sake of his estate and the people who depended on him. Two villages in his purview had suffered year after year from neglect. The prosperity of the local populace rested upon the shoulders of a nineteen-year-old boy. When others his age were out carousing, Con was promising his future away.

What she planned for the twilight was foolish. It would mean nothing in the wider world, but it meant everything to her. She smoothed the fabric of her beaded blue dress—the dress she had worn for her hopeless come-out—and almost enjoyed the shock on Con's face when he saw her. She had lowered the neckline—if her chest were the heavens, infinite constellations of stars were twinkling brightly.

But Con loved her freckles.

"I am considerably underdressed, I see." He wore a homespun shirt and breeches, clean but worn. New clothes were filling his closets, but she was glad he didn't come to her wearing Berryman largesse.

"This is a special occasion."

Con laughed a bit bleakly. "Yes, it's Wednesday evening. Bring out the fireworks."

"I didn't think of those. But I do have a bottle of champagne I pinched from my father's cellar."

"I'm not thirsty, Laurie." He collapsed onto the ground, but made no motion for her to join him. She could feel his retreat as though it were a living thing. Carefully she spread her skirts and sat beside him.

"You'll ruin that dress."

She shrugged. "I'll never wear it again. But I

wanted to wear it for you tonight. So you would remember.”

“I’ll never forget you, Laurie, and that’s the problem.”

She clasped a hand. “This is to be my wedding dress, Con. I’m going to marry you tonight.”

He pulled away. “Don’t be daft. I’ve signed all the papers. Berryman will send me to jail if I renege now.”

“You’ll marry on Saturday, just as they planned. But your heart will always belong to me.”

“You know it will, but what good is even saying it? This is over, Laurie. *We* are over.”

His words were brutal. His thick black brows drew into an angry frown.

“Please give me tonight, Con. I want us to stand in this magical place under God’s sky. To speak what’s in my heart. To be your wife of the heart, if not in a church register.”

She searched his face for a reaction. At first there was none. Then residual anger turned to incredulity, and, eventually, a faint smile.

“A pagan wedding for my pagan girl. It’s not much to cling to.”

“It’s all I’ll ever have,” she said simply.

He kissed her then, too gently. She stole control and toppled him on his back, eating him up with hands and mouth as if she were starving. If she didn’t stop she would make love to him before she said the words she had labored over so long. She broke the kiss, leaping to her feet.

“We shall continue all that in a moment, my Lord Conover. First I want you to stand up with me before the altar stone.”

He shook his head. “You really are serious.”

“I am.”

“All right.” Con got to his feet, brushing off his threadbare pants. “I wish—”

Laurette placed a finger on his lips. “No regrets. We have tonight, as the sun is sinking and the shadows loom. Now, hold my hands.”

“Yes, madam.” He brought them to his lips.

“That’s soon to be Lady Conover to you. Oh, don’t look so stricken. I know this is all pretense. But when winter comes, the thought of this summer evening will keep me warm.”

“It’s not enough.”

“It will have to be. Now then.” She squeezed his

hands. "I, Lurette Isabella Vincent, do take thee, Desmond—"

"Thee?"

"Quiet. Your turn will come. Do take thee, Desmond Anthony Ryland, seventh Marquess of Conover, to be the husband of my heart, and the keeper of my soul and body for all eternity. Though circumstances may part us, nothing will ever break the bonds of our friendship and love."

The next part was tricky. She certainly was not going to promise to *obey*. Not Con or anyone.

"I do solemnly promise to be mindful of thy wishes in all things, even if I do not always agree. I will love you—*thee*—and support thee until I cease to draw breath. I pledge this to thee before the altar of the Ancients, in the sight of God our Father, whose ways may be a mystery at present."

There had been more, but her throat was becoming thick as Con looked down on her, his black eyes somber. "Amen."

He kissed the tear from her cheek. "I, Desmond Anthony Ryland, seventh Marquess of Conover, take thee Lurette Isabella Vincent as my wedded wife of

the heart. I shall be true to thee until death. I love you so much, Laurie, my heart is breaking.”

They held each other as the sun dipped behind the megalith, casting its last light on the sparkles of Laurette’s dress. The champagne was forgotten, but the consummation of their union was not.

Chapter 1

London, 1820

Laurette knew precisely what she must do. Again. Had known even before her baby brother had fallen so firmly into the Marquess of Conover's clutches.

To be fair, perhaps Charlie had not so much fallen as thrown himself headfirst into Con's way. Charlie had been as heedless as she herself had been more than a decade ago. She was not immune even now to Con's inconvenient presence. She had shown him her back on more than one occasion, but could feel the heat of his piercing black gaze straight through to her tattered stays.

But tonight she would allow him to look his fill. She had gone so far as having visited Madame Demarche this afternoon to purchase some of her naughtiest underpinnings. Laurette would have one

less thing for which to feel shame.

Bought with credit, of course. One more bill to join the mountain of debt. Insurmountable as a Himalayan peak and just as chilling. Nearly as cold as Conover's heart.

She raised the lion's head knocker and let it fall, once, composing herself to face Con's servant.

Desmond Ryland, Marquess of Conover, opened the door himself.

"You!"

"Did you think I would allow you to be seen here at such an hour?" he asked, his face betraying no emotion. "You must indeed think me a veritable devil. I've sent Aram to bed. Come into my study."

He *was* a devil, suggesting this absurd time. Midnight, as though they were two foreign spies about to exchange vital information in utmost secrecy. Laurette followed him down the shadowy hall, the black-and-white tile a chessboard beneath her feet. She felt much like a pawn, but would soon need to become the White Queen. Con must not know just how desperate she was.

Though surely he must suspect.

He opened a door and stepped aside as she

crossed the threshold. The room, she knew, was his sanctuary, filled with objects he'd collected in the years he'd been absent from Town and her life. Absent from his own life, as well. The marquessate had been shockingly abandoned for too long.

She had been summoned here once before, in daylight, a year ago. She was better prepared tonight. She let her filmy shawl slip from one shoulder but refused Con's offer of a chair.

"Suit yourself," he shrugged, sitting behind his desk. He placed a hand on a decanter of brandy. "Will you join me? We can toast to old times."

Laurette shook her head. She'd need every shred of her wits to get through what was ahead. "No thank you, my lord."

She could feel the thread of attraction between them, frayed yet stubborn. She should be too old and wise now to view anything that was to come as more than a business arrangement. As soon as she had seen the bold strokes of his note, she had accepted its implication. She was nearly thirty, almost half her life away from when Conover first beguiled her. Or perhaps when she had beguiled him. He had left her long ago, if not quite soon enough.

A pop from the fire startled her, and she turned to watch sparks fly onto the marble tiles. The room was uncomfortably warm for this time of year, but it was said that the Marquess of Conover had learned to love the heat of the exotic East on his travels.

“I appeal to your goodness,” Laurette said, nearly choking on the improbable phrase.

“I find good men dead boring, my dear. Good women, too.” Con abandoned his desk and strode across the floor, where she was rooted by feet that suddenly felt too heavy to lift. He smiled, looking almost boyish, and fingered the single loose golden curl teasing the ivory slope of her shoulder. She recalled that her hair had always dazzled him and had imagined just this touch when she tugged the strand down.

She had hoped to appear winsome despite the passage of time, but her plan was working far too well for current comfort. She pushed him away with more force than she felt. “What would you know about good men, my lord?” She scraped the offending hair back with trembling fingers and secured it under the prison of its hairpin. It wouldn’t do to tempt him further. Or herself. What had she