

Required to Wear the Tycoon's Ring (Harlequin Presents)

By Maggie Cox

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Jilted bride Imogen vowed to save herself for her wedding night—but she never expected to be walking down the aisle to Seth! With the brooding tycoon waiting for her at the altar, will Imogen succumb to his charm and be his wife in more than name only?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

The day Maggie Cox saw the film version of Wuthering Heights, was the day she became hooked on romance. From that day onwards she spent a lot of time dreaming up her own romances, hoping that one day she might become published. Now that her dream is being realised, she wakes up every morning and counts her blessings. She is married to a gorgeous man, and is the mother of two wonderful sons. Her other passions in life - besides her family and reading/writing - are music and films.

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It doesn't matter how long it takes... I'll wait for you. No one is going to keep us apart. There's nobody else on this earth for me but you. You're the only one who can calm the lightning in my soul and help me find peace. If you ever doubt the strength of my love I want you to know that I love you more than life itself and always will...

Imogen read the words and it was as though they bled onto the page, such was the impact they conveyed. The depth and power of the sentiment pierced her heart, and something inside, something that had been tight and unyielding for so long, started to melt and unravel... Before she could stop it a stinging hot tear splashed down onto the once tightly folded piece of notepaper in her hand.

In her spare time she often browsed the charity shop shelves in the hope that she might find something new or interesting. The note she was reading had been carefully inserted inside the anthology of a well-known romance poet. As she'd flicked through the well-thumbed pages the unexpected addition had spilled out and revealed itself. The note had landed at her feet.

There was no indication of the writer's name, just the initials SB. Was the writer male or female? she wondered. All Imogen knew was that the poignant promise 'I'll wait for you' had her longing to experience being loved so deeply that she would never have cause to doubt that she was cared for.

Her recent excoriating experience of being jilted at the altar had almost entirely crushed any hope she had that there were men out there who were genuinely loving and considerate. Yet in a secret corner somewhere Imogen refused to relinquish that hope. Had the note's writer reconciled with his or her lover after whatever had torn them apart? she mused.

With a trembling sigh, she momentarily shut her eyes. It wasn't easy to deal with the tumult of the feelings that rolled through her. Sometimes they threatened to spill over and undermine what little confidence she had left.

She'd never experienced such loving devotion and she *longed* to. If only she could discover whether or not things had worked out well for the couple... It would mean so much to her if they had. She wanted evidence that hopes and dreams *could* be fulfilled and that true love *could* last so long as the lovers drew breath.

She made a resolve. Suddenly impatient, she finished her browsing. Carefully reinserting the note inside the book, she moved across to the cashier to pay.

The cheerful elderly assistant smelled liberally of lavender, and her pristine white blouse was perfectly

ironed and starched, as though she wouldn't dream of leaving the house unless it was.

As she surveyed Imogen her face crinkled in a welcoming smile, just as if she was a trusted old friend. 'Found something nice, have you, dear?'

'Yes. I have. I'd like to buy this book,' she replied.

When the sale had been rung up on the till the woman put the purchase into a crumpled carrier bag.

After murmuring, 'Thanks...' as she took it, Imogen asked, 'By the way, can I ask if you know who donated the book? Only I was in here a couple of days ago and I didn't notice it on the shelves then...'

'I can't tell you who donated it, my dear, but I do know that my colleague took a delivery of books from the big house up on the hill yesterday. You must know the one I'm talking about—that splendid Gothic mansion that backs onto the woods? Evergreen, I think it's called. It used to belong to the Siddons family, but they're long gone now. I think there's somebody looking after the place but no one knows who. There's a rumour that it's been bought by some business corporation to use for staff training... You can always enquire. Does that help?'

Although Imogen smiled, the expression didn't come as easily to her as it had used to. She was sad about that. What she wouldn't give to return to the land of the living, with her heart whole again and the optimism she'd always managed to somehow find well and truly restored.

Clutching the carrier bag against the black bouclé jacket she'd discovered in another charity shop, she said, 'It does. Thanks for the tip.' Glancing across at the shop's thick glass doors, she added, 'Have a good day... It looks like the sun might come out if we're lucky.'

'It does, doesn't it? But it probably won't shine on us for very long. Still, I hope that won't spoil things for you. Perhaps reading some of those wonderful poems will help?'

As she walked back to the small flat she rented in a Victorian mid-terrace down a narrow side street, her route took her across the city's historic cobblestones, and Imogen automatically glanced towards the formidable cathedral that rose up before her. It was a real Mecca for tourists, but personally she found it intimidating.

To her eyes it spoke of too many spirits not at peace. She'd only explored it once, and it hadn't invited her for a second visit. If a person was hoping for comfort, would they honestly find it within those oppressive ancient walls? Somehow Imogen didn't think so.

The wind that was now gusting in earnest blew her hair haphazardly across her face. With a shudder she sensed an icy chill run down her back. So much for that promising glimpse of sunshine earlier! Winter was definitely starting to make itself felt. She couldn't wait to get back inside, light the wood burner and examine her book. Who knew? There might even be some further evidence about the identity of the original owner.

If there wasn't, she would love to dig a little deeper and find out. But even if she found the person, she realised that being confronted with such a note might potentially elicit some kind of unsettling repercussions for the person concerned. Her sigh was heavy. The story behind the poignant note was perhaps consuming her thoughts much more than it ought to.

Seth sat himself down on the wide mahogany staircase with its faded gold-trimmed runner and stared around him. The ticking of the old grandfather clock in the hall hypnotically marked the time, taunting him with the memories it scratched, as if he had deliberately dug his nails into an old, once infected wound and reopened it.

He had plenty of cause for being disturbed. The first time he had entered this house as a lad of nineteen he'd been full of trepidation at the thought of meeting his girlfriend's intimidating father because he was going to ask for her hand in marriage. The esteemed financier James Siddons had been known to put the fear of God even into his peers—let alone the hopeful boy from the wrong side of the tracks that Seth had once been.

Although he and Louisa had only been seeing each other for a couple of months, they'd known from the very first moment that they were meant to be together. What they'd felt for each other had gone far deeper than simple attraction. But he had known the path they'd planned to take wasn't going to be easy. She'd still been a student at the university, and Seth an apprentice car mechanic at a local dealership. Hardly of the material to render him acceptable to her esteemed family.

He'd had to garner every ounce of courage he had in him on the day of the meeting. And every one of his fervent hopes to make a good impression had been utterly dashed as soon as he'd laid eyes on the stern-faced banker. He'd barely even crossed the threshold before the man had very candidly expressed his dislike. And when Seth had bolted his courage to the floor, met his gaze eye to eye and confidently declared that he wanted to marry his daughter, he had been immediately shot down and put in his place.

'Louisa knows perfectly well that families like ours marry into families from the same class, Mr Broden. And clearly you are *not* from that class, so there's no sense in beating about the bush, is there? My advice to you is to stick with your own kind,' Siddons had finished.

'You're not even giving him a chance!' Louisa had burst out. 'I love him. I want no one else. You have no right to put him down like that and make him feel small. Seth has nothing to be ashamed of. He came round to speak to you because he wanted to do things properly. We could just as easily have sneaked off and done the deed without telling you, but it was Seth who insisted we should do the right thing and be upfront about it.'

Appalled, James Siddons had issued her with a warning glare. 'I don't know what you thought you were playing at by encouraging a "nobody" like him,' he'd said. 'You must know that one day you'll have to marry someone suitable so that the family's lineage can continue. You are the last Siddons in the line, Louisa, and that makes it even more important for you to choose your husband wisely. I insist that you bring this charade with this man to an end right now. If you don't I will make sure that every penny of your allowance is frozen until such time as you do as I say.'

That day—that bittersweet day when they had sought to get Louisa's father's approval to marry—the man had broken his daughter's heart with his chillingly cold refusal. Seth would have done anything to spare her the disappointment and heartache that had followed, but his own heart had hardened like ice at James Siddons's brutal reception.

However, he had refused to let the rejection crush him. So he was a *nobody*, was he? Squaring his already broad shoulders, he hadn't been able to contain his temper. Swearing that he would show James Siddons what a fool he was for believing that he was somehow better than Seth—just because he had gone to the right schools and his family had money—he had finally vented his spleen.

There would come a time soon when he would surpass James Siddons's wealth and power with his own, he'd vehemently told him, and Louisa would never have so much as one moment's worry about how they would survive.

But at the end of that cold encounter the supercilious banker had banned her from seeing him again, told him he would put a watch on her to make sure she kept to the command he'd declared, and he had threatened Seth with what he would be able to do if he should dare have the effrontery to try to persuade her differently.

'There won't be one dealership in the country that will hire you after what I tell them,' he'd finished.

With tears pouring down her face, Louisa had been able to do nothing else but urge Seth to go.

He sucked in a harsh breath and slowly released it. Why had he bought this place and opened up old wounds that should have long ago healed and scarred? He had nothing left to prove.

James Siddons had been dead for about a year now and—to his everlasting distress—Louisa had died not long after that volatile meeting with her father, having been mown down by a hit-and-run driver. It had been the most colossal shock, and Seth had honestly thought he would never get over it.

When the mansion had come on to the market not long after its owner's demise, six months ago, Seth hadn't been able to resist buying it. How could he have? It was the place where Louisa had grown up. He had an important personal connection with the place. Despite the house's dauntingly grand appearance, she'd confided to him that it had once been a very warm and loving home, thanks to her mother, Clare Siddons.

'My mother was a wonderful woman. She was infinitely patient and kind, and she always told me to follow my heart...not just my head,' Louisa had told Seth. 'She certainly wouldn't have looked down her nose at you because you come from the "wrong" background. She would only have had to look at you to know why you have my heart.' Her pansy-blue eyes had sparkled tenderly as she'd related that.

Now the atmospheric house she'd grown up in couldn't help but carry the beguiling remnants of her presence. Although his decision to buy it was no doubt a double-edged sword—one that could just as soon wound him as satisfy his urge to show the local community that he was just as good as his nemesis James Siddons. Seth wondered if he'd been led purely by his ego to buy it.

Ten long years had passed since Louisa's death—wilderness years in which Seth had distanced himself as far from his hometown as he could in order to rebuild his life without her—and he'd achieved everything he'd set out to do. He ought to let the past lie.

Yes, there had been other women after he'd lost Louisa, but throughout all the time that had passed he had never loved anyone else and most likely never would.

Buying the house had probably been a completely dumb idea. Talk about rubbing salt into his wounds!

Cursing himself as a masochist, then feeling certain he could always sell it if things didn't work out, he shoved to his feet and turned to go into the drawing room. It was now completely devoid of the once grand furniture that had filled it.

Louisa had once shown him the room when her father had been away on business. But by the time Seth had come to buy the place all that had been left were a few old books and some kitchen items. Everything else

had been removed by the lawyers acting for her father—sold off to pay death duties.

As painfully ironic as it was, it turned out that James Siddons had not been nearly as wealthy as he'd claimed. Apparently he'd squandered his wealth on gambling and living the high life after Louisa had died.

Now the palatial room in front of him put him in mind of a ball that was at an end, with the well-heeled partygoers never to return. The only material items left in the lofty room were the faded red-and-gold carpets and the crimson velvet curtains that hung at the windows.

The day he'd accompanied Louisa in order to ask her father's permission to marry her he hadn't travelled any further than the imposing hallway. As Seth had anticipated James Siddons had hardly rolled out the welcome mat... Far from it. Instead, he'd straight away gone into attack.

He smiled grimly. Perversely, Seth was the one who had the last laugh. Now he had the satisfaction of knowing he was free to do what the hell he liked here.

Never again would he be accused of not being 'good enough' by someone who had been born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth, who hadn't had to rely solely on his own ability and wits to rise higher in the world, to make it against all the odds as Seth had. *He* was the one who owned the house now.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Margaret Soto:

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