

MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **TEMPT ME AT MIDNIGHT**

The grand ballroom was a sea of masks. Black, white, sequined and feathered masks everywhere Lexi Austin looked.

As she waded through the crowd of revelers, excitement pulsed through her veins. In half an hour the clock would strike twelve, ushering in a new year. Lexi could think of no better way to celebrate than by attending a masquerade ball at a luxurious chateau owned by legendary fashion designer Asha Dubois. The glitzy soiree was the hottest ticket in France every year, attended by everyone who was anyone in the fashion industry. Which meant that Lexi could be rubbing elbows with the likes of Miuccia Prada and John Galliano without even—

A man in a feathered black mask suddenly jostled her, murmuring apologetically, “*Excusez-moi.*”

Lexi smiled beneath the jeweled white mask that covered the upper half of her own face. “*Ce n’est pas grave,*” she assured him, the words rolling smoothly off her tongue.

The stranger returned her smile before moving off.

Lexi continued across the crowded room, taking in the sights and sounds as if she’d just arrived at the party. A canopy of twinkling lights hung from the frescoed ceiling, and ornate wall tapestries and marble columns evoked the grandeur of the French Renaissance. A fifteen-piece orchestra performed a dreamy Viennese waltz that had lured many couples onto the dance floor, the swirl of white ball gowns transforming the scene into a shimmering fairyland.

As Lexi paused to watch the dancers, she couldn’t help wishing she had a date that evening. What could be more romantic than ringing in the New Year wrapped in the arms of a man she loved?

But she’d been woefully unlucky in that department, so tonight she was flying solo.

A soft smile curved her mouth when two of her closest friends, Michael and Reese Wolf, whirled into her line of sight. Michael was darkly handsome in a black tuxedo, while Reese was positively radiant in a long white gown that gently flowed over her round, protruding belly. Being eight months pregnant hadn’t slowed her down that evening; her head was thrown back in laughter as her husband twirled her gracefully around the dance floor.

As Lexi watched the happy couple, she thought of the missing member of their group. Quentin Reddick had called last night to let them know he’d be unable to join them in France, citing an unexpected development in one of his upcoming court cases. Lexi had been sorely disappointed. Quentin was her best friend. Over the years they’d attended numerous parties together, often serving as each other’s “mock date.”

Not that Quentin ever had any trouble finding *real* dates, Lexi thought wryly. The man was a veritable chick magnet. If he'd been at tonight's ball, he would have spent the evening surrounded by gorgeous, leggy supermodels. God knows there were plenty in attendance.

Still, despite his popularity with the ladies, Lexi had always known she could count on Quentin to save her a dance or two. When she returned home to Atlanta in a few days, she'd be sure to give him an earful for abandoning her.

With one last envious glance at the dancing couples, Lexi made her way across the ballroom toward a row of French doors that opened onto an ivy-draped terrace. She'd decided to ring in the New Year outside on the balcony, which was preferable to remaining indoors where she'd be surrounded by couples kissing and embracing at the stroke of midnight.

When she reached the doors to the terrace, she was relieved to see that it was deserted. The cool temperature had undoubtedly deterred the other guests from wandering out there to steal a romantic moment under the stars or enjoy the breathtaking view of rolling green hills, beautifully landscaped gardens and lush vineyards.

Standing at the white stone balustrade, Lexi closed her eyes and inhaled the crisp night air. She almost imagined she could detect the scents of lavender and fermenting grapes that would permeate the French countryside during warmer months.

She'd been thrilled when Michael and Reese invited her to celebrate the New Year with his family in France. Lexi would have been content to spend the holiday with her friends anywhere. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined staying at a sprawling twenty-bedroom chateau nestled deep in the country's most famous wine region. Burgundy was a chef's paradise, a French Mecca for lovers of gourmet cuisine and exquisite wine. Lexi couldn't *wait* to go exploring tomorrow.

Belatedly she realized that the orchestra had stopped playing inside the ballroom. An air of hushed excitement swept over the crowd moments before Asha Dubois's lilting, cultured voice came over the loudspeaker. "*Bonsoir, mon amis*. I hope all of you are having a splendid time this evening."

She paused, chuckling softly as a chorus of cheers and applause went around the room. "*Très bien*. I'm very pleased to hear it. Well, my dear friends, we're just minutes away from welcoming a new year. If you haven't already, please be sure to snag a flute of champagne from one of the servers circulating around the room. After all, darlings, you can't toast the New Year empty-handed."

Glancing down at her empty hands clasped over the balustrade, Lexi smiled ruefully.

"For those of you who have never attended one of my masquerade balls," Asha continued, "we observe a very simple tradition: At the stroke of midnight, everyone removes their masks and reveals themselves. So without further ado, I'd like to wish all of you a wonderful New Year. May you experience love, laughter and joy—and have plenty of hot, mind-blowing sex!"

Lexi grinned as the crowd roared with laughter and approval. And then the revelers joined together to belt out the last ten seconds of the countdown. "...five, four, three, two—"

As fireworks erupted into the night sky, a pair of strong arms curved around Lexi's waist and swept her around. She had only a fleeting glimpse of a black mask and impossibly broad shoulders before the stranger lowered his head.

She gasped at the shock of soft, warm lips covering hers.

Her first instinct was to jerk away. But the sudden onslaught of pleasure engulfing her body made it impossible for her to move.

The stranger increased the pressure of his mouth as his hands slid up her back, holding her close against his hard, muscular frame. Dazedly her mind registered that he was very tall, at least six five. And he tasted delicious—an irresistible combination of chocolate, peppermint and man. Her blood ignited, and her heart thundered furiously.

The stranger, whoever he was, could kiss like *no* other man she'd ever kissed before. As he traced the shape of her lips with his tongue, violent pulses of sensation charged through her body. She opened her mouth and his tongue dipped inside, lazily stroking hers. A tiny sound caught in her throat, a whimper of pleasure.

He deepened the kiss, exploring her mouth with slow, sensual licks that left her quaking all over. She arched against him, craving more.

All too soon, he released her and lifted his head.

Disoriented, Lexi swayed on her feet before strong hands gently gripped her upper arms, steadying her. She opened her eyes slowly.

“Happy New Year,” a deep, familiar voice greeted her.

Lexi went rigid, her eyes widening with shock. No, it couldn't be.
“*Quentin?*”

Slowly he reached up and removed his mask. A kaleidoscope of bright colors flashed across his wickedly handsome face—a face Lexi knew almost as well as her own.

She staggered backward, stunned and shaken. “W-what the hell do you think you're doing?”

“Wishing you a Happy New Year,” Quentin murmured.

“You couldn’t do that *without* kissing me?” she cried in exasperated disbelief.

Another burst of fireworks illuminated the devilish gleam in his hazel eyes. “Come now,” Quentin drawled. “What’s a little kiss between old friends?”