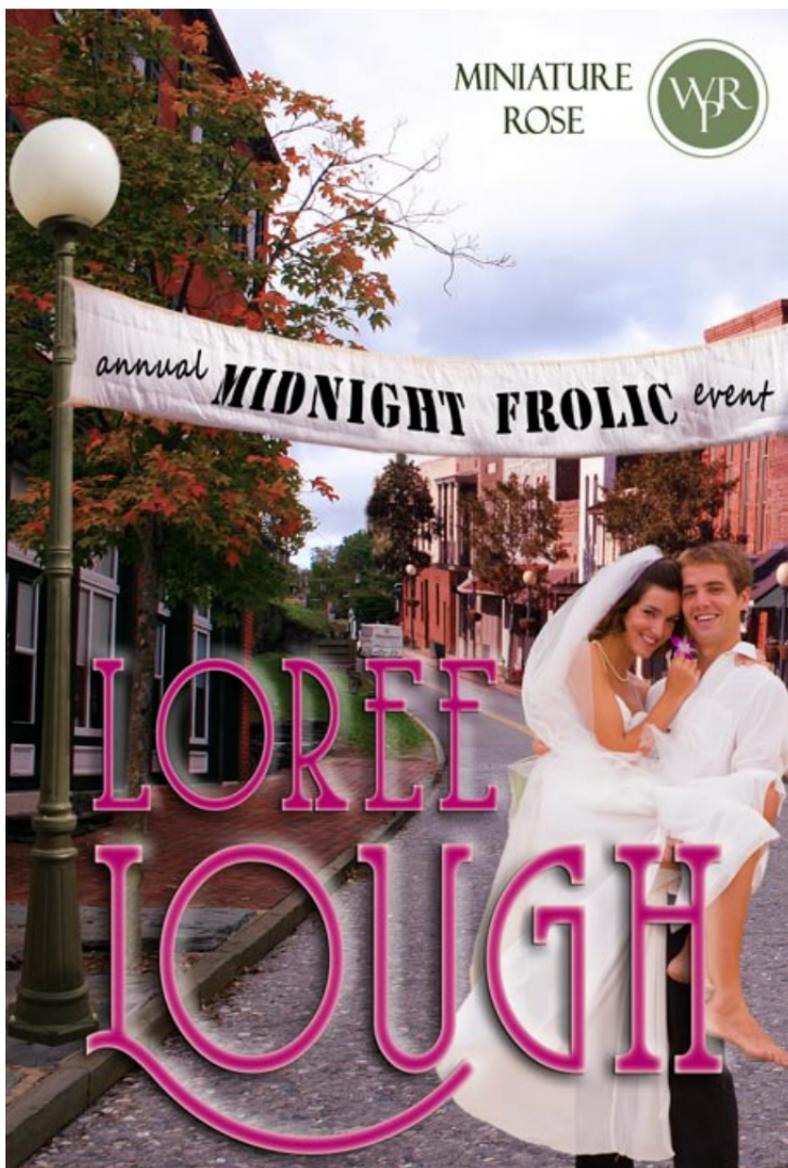


MINIATURE  
ROSE



annual **MIDNIGHT FROLIC** event

LOREE  
LOUGH



**Emily was different, from the earrings jangling in her earlobes to the wispy material of her ankle-length dress, to the strappy white sandals on her feet.** She hadn't talked about the things other women he'd known had been interested in, hadn't fussed when her hair got mussed in the convertible, hadn't whimpered when she broke a fingernail unsnapping her purse. She'd aimed her full focus on *him*—something Cory had no idea how to cope with. Other women he'd dated had been so easy to entertain. Make 'em the center of attention, and they'll have a grand old time had been the private joke that kept him smiling through all their self-centered conversations.

Cory didn't for the life of him understand how she'd gotten him to talk about himself all evening. Somehow, the tables had been turned, and by the time he dropped her off, she knew more about him than Simone did after two years of dating. He'd hardly known the information was being taken. Her method was so slow, so easy, like coaxing honey from a pot.



# Midnight Frolic

by

Loree Lough

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Midnight Frolic

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## **Dedication**

To all who trust that God will link them to their one true love, and to Larry, my very own hero.



## Praise for Loree Lough

### *The “Suddenly” Series:*

“Each novel is well-written and enjoyable, with easy-to-identify-with characters and gripping stories. If you like Christian fiction, this is one series you won’t want to miss. I found it hard to put the books down and each have become favorite. If I could give more than 5 stars, I would!”

(Rosella Myles, Romance Reviews)

### *Midnight Frolic:*

I can promise you smiles, tears, and laughter...what I can also promise is that you will love this book! Kudos to Ms. Lough!

(Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio)

### *Love’s Sweet Attack:*

This story is about two people who have had disappointments in the past, but have learned to put their fears and hope for the future in God’s hands. Ms. Lough introduces a town I would love to travel to, and characters I’d like to visit while there.

(Kathy Andrico, The Road to Romance)

### Dream Seekers:

“Impressive treatment of historical themes. As a Christian parent and educator, I appreciated the presentation of both sides of the debate over separation of church and state, allowing young readers to mentally and morally wrestle with the issues. The book is strong on examples of character development, without being preachy.”

(Beth Bascom, Kids’ Book Reviews)

## Chapter One

“Great,” Cory muttered, “just what we need on Main Street...another hot-headed female, shooting off her big mou—”

“Uh-oh, did Suzi set somebody’s hair on fire again?”

Cory looked up from the article he’d been reading and grinned despite its content. “Hi, Mom. Didn’t hear you come in.” He grabbed a white ceramic cup, filled it with hot water, and went back to frowning. “If only it was a disgruntled Curl ‘N’ Go customer who’s got my goat.” Handing his mother a teabag, he slid the mug across the red-marbled Formica. “It’s that...that woman who opened the dress shop next doo—.”

Realizing what he must have sounded like, Cory clamped his lips together and leaned both palms flat on the counter. “So what’s got you out and about so early?” he asked, hoping to improve his mood by changing the subject.

Sliding onto a red-cushioned swivel stool on the customer’s side of the coffee shop’s snack bar, his mother stirred a packet of sugar into her cup. “Not ‘up and about early’. More like, ‘didn’t sleep at all.’” She added a dollop of milk to her tea. “Decisions, decisions, decisions, you know?”

Cory plopped a blueberry Danish onto a plate. “Bah humbug,” he teased, handing her the pastry. “You’re too young and vital to retire, and you know

it. That's why you're having trouble making the decision."

She waved away the comment as she would a pesky housefly. "I'll be sixty-two in September, need I remind you, and that's only four months away. It's time to think about retiring, at least." She sighed. "Duke and I will be celebrating our fifth anniversary soon. He's worked hard all his life, and deserves a little R & R."

Patting her son's hand, she said, "So tell me, hon, what has you so riled up already this morning?"

He jerked a thumb in the direction of the street. "That new gal...the one who bought Marcy's shop?"

"Ye-e-e-es."

"Somehow, she wrangled a feature article about herself out of the Howard County Times."

Clucking her tongue, his mother said, "Well, that's unusual, but it's hardly a reason to get so fired up."

Using his chin as a pointer, he indicated the article. "She's been in town less than a month, and already she's knocking our traditions." Crossing both arms over his chest, he shook his head. "Women."

"Now, Cory," Mom said, giving his hand another affectionate pat, "don't you think it's high time you put the Simone fiasco behind you? How will you ever meet a nice girl if you judge all women by what she did?"

It had been nearly two years since the breakup, yet he couldn't seem to reconcile himself with an ordeal that seemed to turn his whole life upside down. But he wasn't about to get into that with his mother again.

She finished skimming the newspaper story. "Seems pretty harmless to me, hon.."

"Harmless!" He pointed at a particular line in the article. "You call that malarkey 'harmless'?"

She picked up the paper again and read Emily Alden's quote aloud: "Change is a good thing, and I

have a few ideas that will fine-tune Midnight Frolic.” She gasped. “Fine-tune’ it? But we’ve been holding that midnight sidewalk sale every summer for decades. It hasn’t needed any fine tuning up ‘til now.”

His mother continued reading. “Ms. Alden doesn’t see much reason to go on with the main event, especially considering it doesn’t fulfill certain aspects of its original purpose. Calling the mock wedding “quaint”, Ms. Alden seemed to feel some of the Midnight Frolic ideas are a bit stale.”

He gave a firm nod of his head, his silent “I told you so.”

Shaking her head, Cory’s mother sighed. “And she seemed like such a nice girl...”

That surprised him, and he said so. “When did you meet her?”

“A piece of her mail got delivered to my shop by mistake. But we didn’t have time for more than a quickie introduction when I brought it to her.” She shook her head again. “Still...I’m not usually such a poor judge of character.” Shrugging, she added, “Oh, well, guess that’s just one more thing that ‘goes’ when you get old.”

Cory was too busy scribbling notes on a paper napkin to acknowledge her. “I’m gonna write a letter to the editor.”

She put the newspaper back onto the counter none too gently and took a sip of her tea. “I don’t like tradition-bashing, either,” she said. “Why, that wedding ceremony has been part of Midnight Frolic from the get-go.” Brow furrowed slightly, she added, “On the other hand, Miss Alden does make one valid criticism.”

Cory widened his eyes. “You’re kiddin’, right?”

“The wedding doesn’t generate the donations it once did.”

He stuffed the newspaper onto the shelf below the counter. Out of sight, out of mind? he asked

himself. "That isn't the point."

She met his gaze. "Then what *is*?"

"The point is...any amount we raise for Home Sweet Home is better than none."

She gave his statement a moment's thought. "I suppose you're right." Looking left, then right, she leaned forward and whispered. "I think you should write that letter." Sitting back, she wiggled her eyebrows. "And if it nets a little free publicity for The Cup Runneth Over...." Hands extended palms up, she glanced around his coffee shop and shrugged, as if to say "why not?"

The bell above the door tinkled, announcing the entrance of three laughing, chattering women. "I might just do that," he said, winking as he headed for their table.

\*\*\*\*

The article had no doubt given Mister Cory Russell the impression that Emily was opposed to marriage, and the proof was his scathing letter to the editor. Not that she could blame him. The way that reporter had twisted her quotes, anyone reading the article would have gotten the impression that Emily was poking fun of the mock wedding ceremony. Not only that, but he'd made it sound as though she was opposed to all traditions.

Heaving a deep sigh, Emily shrugged. If one of her neighboring shop-keepers had gotten angry enough about the article to put his feelings down on paper, surely others who hadn't taken the time to write a letter to the editor felt the same way.

Emily ran a hand through her dark curls. *Well, there isn't anything you can do about it now.*

Or was there?

She re-read the paragraph where Russell had explained that the wedding was just one of the ways merchants raised money for Home Sweet Home, the organization founded by Main Street merchants to help put troubled teens back on the right path. Their

latest project was the rehabbing of a house in Ellicott City's historic district, donated by a retired judge. When renovations were complete, the property would be auctioned off, and the proceeds contributed to the youth shelter. "Why not join us at 456 Court House Drive," Mr. Russell's letter challenged, "where we're teaching kids about choices and consequences by helping them see they have a future that doesn't have to involve drugs or booze. We might not change your mind about the institution of marriage, Ms. Alden, but you're sure to find a reason to support Home Sweet Home...."

*It's a wonder you haven't burned your fingers, holding this thing,* she mused. She'd never been officially introduced to Cory Russell, but Emily didn't need to know him to read the anger in his words. She'd seen him from a distance—feeding parking meters for his customers, waving to Zeke at the pharmacy across the street, passing the time of day with Bubba the mailman or Suzi the hairdresser. She could more or less tell by the way he carried himself that Cory Russell believed he was a man to be reckoned with. Well, she thought, re-writing the age-old adage, he may think he's the baddest dude in the joint, but never underestimate the power of a woman whose *nose* is outta joint!

She'd never backed away from a challenge before, and didn't intend to start now. Chin up and shoulders back, she dumped the newspaper unceremoniously into the trash can and headed for her loft apartment above the boutique. If he thought his invitation to help out with the Home Sweet Home project would embarrass her, he had another think coming. Handy with a screwdriver and a hammer, she marched upstairs, thinking, *you've got yourself a date, Mr. Russell!*

Maybe, if first she earned his respect by volunteering to work on the mansion, she could convince him there hadn't been a shred of truth to

what that smarmy Times reporter had said. If not...well, at least she'd be able to look him in the eye when they ran into each another at Business Association meetings....

Pulling jeans and a T-shirt from her dresser drawer, she shrugged. It was worth a try, because after saving for five long years to open the boutique, she sure didn't need neighbor troubles. And from the tone of that letter, Cory Russell might be trouble. Big trouble, with a capital T.

In the year since Jonathan asked her to return the engagement ring, Emily had gotten pretty good at avoiding trouble. At first, focusing her energies into working toward buying her own business had been the distracter that kept her from wallowing in self-pity. But soon, hard work was a habit, one Emily didn't know if she could—or wanted—to break. The silver lining to that humiliating cloud had been obvious, almost from the beginning: If she'd married Jonathan, Emily would more than likely have repeated her mother's marital mistakes. *Thanks, Jon*, she said to herself, *for sparing me that agony.*

She stuck the "Closed" sign in the front window of *Be Yourself*, locked up the shop and, tool belt slung over one shoulder, headed out.

In the month before she opened the doors of her boutique, she'd made a point of learning about the area, and could spout the city's rich history like a Maryland native, could give directions like a Howard County map maker. Home Sweet Home's project was three blocks from her store; it would take longer to maneuver her sports utility vehicle out of the parking lot than to walk the distance. Besides, there were precious few opportunities to visit with other Main Street merchants, and Emily fully intended to take advantage of this one.

Donning her new Hollywood style sunglasses, she sauntered down the street, sneakers quietly

padding along the cobbled walkway. The steady chirp of crickets harmonized with the peeping of cardinals perched in the canopy of towering oaks overhead. A gentle breeze riffled her hair, stirred puffy white clouds in the deep blue sky, and awakened the sweet scent of the last lilac blooms clinging stubbornly to the ancient hedgerow.

She stopped to chat with Zeke and Suzi, waved to Bubba across the street, then rounded the corner and started up the steep hill toward Court House Drive. The whine and whir of power saws and electric drills greeted her long before Emily passed through the newly-painted wrought iron gates. A skinny kid of perhaps sixteen greeted her on the flagstone path. Thumbing his yellow hard hat to the back of his head, he squinted into the bright sunlight. "Morning, ma'am. How can I help you?"

Smiling, Emily said, "I'm looking for Cory Russell?"

"He's inside. You want I should get him?"

"No, thanks, I'll find him." She started up the walk, and then stopped. "Did you build this walkway?"

Pride puffed his chest. "Yes'm, I did."

"Well, you do beautiful work."

The boy shrugged one bony shoulder. "Thanks," he said, beaming, "but I can't take all the credit, since Cory taught me everything I know. He's one real cool dude."

"I'm sure he is." She stuck out her hand. "My name is Emily Alden."

"Pete Maxon," he said, shaking it. "You from around here?"

"Yes, but I've only been in Ellicott City a little over a month. I bought the—"

"Oh, yeah," Pete said, "that's why you look so familiar. You bought Marcy's place. My girlfriend is nuts about a dress in your window. I'd buy it for her birthday, but it's way out of my price."

Emily pulled open the screen door. "Stop by any time. We'll see what we can do to make it more affordable." She stepped into the foyer of the mansion.

"You sure you don't want me to get Cory for you?"

With a hand beside her mouth, she said under her breath, "Looking for him will be a great excuse to snoop around this neat old place, wouldn't you say?"

Grinning, Pete nodded, and went back to work.

While she waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim light, she overheard several boys whispering near the staircase: "Hey," one asked, "who's that?"

"I dunno," said the other, "but she's a knockout!"

It wasn't until Emily drew closer that they realized she had a few years on them. "Hey, she ain't no girl," said the first. "She's old enough to be—"

"Your older sister," Emily interrupted, grinning good-naturedly. "Do either of you have any idea where I might find Mr. Russell?"

The boys exchanged sheepish glances before the second one said, "Cory? Yeah. Last I saw him, he was in the kitchen, showing Dave how to install a dishwasher." He pointed. "Last door on your right."

"Thanks," Emily said. And hitching her tool belt higher on her shoulder, she headed down the hall.

"Didn't know old guys were interested in babes," the first boy whispered.

Old? Cory Russell could be a hundred and fifty—or twenty-one—for all she knew, since until now, she'd seen him only from a distance.

The moment she entered the kitchen, Emily heard a deep, soft voice, echoing in the cavernous, unfurnished room. "Easy does it. That's the way. You're doin' great, Dave." The voice belonged to a cowboy-booted, blue-jeaned man wearing a snug white T-shirt. He was on his hands and knees, half

in, half out of the cabinet beside the sink, patiently doling out instructions to the teenaged boy beside him. This was Cory Russell?

Not wanting to startle him or the boy, she cleared her throat. "Um, Mr. Russell?"

Despite her good intentions, he thumped his head on the underside of the cabinet. "What," he hissed through clenched teeth.

The kid beside him continued to work as if nothing had happened, grunting now and again as he attempted to attach black rubber hoses to the water supply.

"I'm Emily Alden?"

Russell pressed a palm to the bump, causing a blond curl to fall across his forehead. Sitting back on his heels, he said, "You sure about that?"

She smiled nervously. "Sure I'm sure."

Frowning slightly, he inspected his fingertips. "Then why put a question mark at the end of it?"

He'd already given her a dressing down in *The Howard County Times*. She'd had no control over that, but Emily wasn't about to let him give her what-for again. "I didn't come here for a grammar lesson, Mr. Rus—"

"Then why are you here, Miz Alden?"

From the way he'd berated her in the editorial, she'd expected him to be a grouch, and so far, he hadn't disappointed her. His letter made her picture a giant...a thick-necked, beady-eyed, ugly old man. But Cory Russell was none of those things. Surprisingly, she wasn't disappointed by that, either.

"Well?"

She met his eyes...eyes as blue as her mother's topaz ring.

"You were saying...?"

Emily blinked, distracted by fast-swelling bump on the side of his head. In a few hours, she knew, it would be the size of a hen's egg. "You should

probably put some ice on that lump.”

Instinct drew his fingertips back to the injury. “I think I’ll live,” he said dryly.

A Styrofoam cooler stood a few feet away. “To answer your earlier question, I’m here at your invitation,” she said, lifting its lid.

“My invitation?”

The bandanna she’d worn as a hairband now became an ice pack as she filled it with crescent-shaped cubes. She watched his eyes darken and narrow as one brow lifted high on his forehead. Was he trying to figure out what she aimed to do with the makeshift ice pack?

The right side of his mouth lifted in a wry smile as she stepped up and gently held the ice in place. “That’ll keep the swelling down, but you’ll probably have a bad bruise in a few hours.”

When he took hold of the ice pack, their hands touched. It was an instant, a tick in time, and yet Emily was fully aware of the power and warmth of his fingers. She quickly withdrew her hand, stuffed it into her jeans pocket.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

He seemed to have more to say. A whole lot more. But he only aimed a thumb toward the door behind her. “If you’re serious about helping,” he said, facing the sink again, “there’s plenty to do in the cellar.”

He didn’t say what, exactly, needed to be done. Didn’t ask if she might prefer another job, upstairs, where it was brighter, and more populated. Russell tossed the bandanna into the sink, got back onto his hands and knees and in that same gentle voice, picked up the installation instructions where he’d left off.

Of all the thick-headed, know-it-all, male chauvinist—Emily fumed for a full ten seconds before thinking, *I know what you’re up to, cowboy; there are probably a couple of wooly spiders down*

*there, and you think the minute I see one, I'll take off like a prissy school girl who's afraid of the dark and bugs and a little hard work.*

Well, she'd show him a thing or two. If he was one of those guys who thought all women were sissies, he'd learn to sing a different tune today!

Emily spun on her heel, flung open the basement door, and flipped on the light switch. One dim bulb cast an ominous, dingy glow over grey stone walls and a red-clay dirt floor.

She was halfway down the gritty wood steps before she realized what she'd gotten herself into.

## Chapter Two

Spiders, she could handle, one at a time. But it was like an arachnid factory down there. Emily couldn't help but wonder as she tip-toed over the spongy dirt floors if the huge and elaborate webs were held together by the support beams, or the other way around.

Squinting into the dark, low-ceilinged space, Emily shivered involuntarily. Something told her Cory Russell had sent her into this pit as a test, and that he expected her to fail it.

Clamping her jaws together with stubborn determination, she took a deep breath. You will not go back up those stairs until this place is ship-shape!

Another glance around deflated her resolve a bit, because she had no idea where to begin. Grandma Alden would say, "Start at the beginning." The cliché had been the motivator that inspired people to get to the point in recalling an event, but Emily supposed it could be just as effective as a work stimulant.

A moment ago, she'd nearly tripped over a tray of cleaning supplies and old rags. In it, she found a can of insecticide, and proceeded to cloud the room with bug eradicator. Next, she grabbed the straw-bristled broom that leaned near the stairway and started whacking the cobwebs.

The long-handled rake helped her shove newspapers, cardboard boxes, and Styrofoam cups

into a pile. Climbing a set of squatty, rough-hewn steps, she shoved open the slanting cellar doors that led to the backyard, where two rusting, battered trash cans stood beside a nearby outbuilding. Dragging the cans behind her, she clanged back down the stairs. Three trips later, she had finally disposed of the mess.

While searching for a shovel to help scoop up the rocky debris, she'd discovered three cans of white enamel, a jar of turpentine, and one large paintbrush in a hand-made wooden cabinet. Using the broom as a scrubber, she dusted the stone walls, and then gave them a coat of paint.

Last, but not least, she stacked several wooden crates under the basement's only window, and polished the glass 'til it seemed to disappear. Looking up, Emily rubbed her forehead. She'd been squinting into the dark for so long, her head ached. "No wonder you can't see," she whispered; "that light bulb is almost as dim-watted as you are dim-witted."

As she climbed the stairs to find a brighter one, Emily peeked at her wristwatch, and stared with disbelief at the time. Had she really been alone down there for six straight hours? Either that, or she needed a new battery in her watch.

It surprised her that Cory Russell hadn't checked on her in all that time. Yes, he'd seemed gruff and grumpy, but what if something had happened to her down there? *You'd have lain there, unconscious, that's what, for all he cares—*

And why should he care? He barely knew her.

"I was beginning to think we might have to start charging you rent."

Leaning against the doorframe that way, with one boot crossed over the other and walking a toothpick from the left side of his mouth to the right, he reminded her of James Dean, right down to the smug expression on his handsome face. "How long have you been standing there?" she demanded.