

# PRELUDE TO A WEDDING

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*The Wedding Series:*  
Prelude to a Wedding  
Wedding Party  
Grady's Wedding  
The Runaway Bride

To Ginni,  
Who believed,  
even when there were no endings,  
and who gave the best advice of all:  
Just Get It Done

GRW Maggie Finalist

## Chapter One

“Paul, I’m having the baby.”

Paul Monroe stared in disbelief at the woman standing at the far side of his old-fashioned desk. A ripple of panic swept through him, but he swallowed and tried a chuckle. It sounded feeble. “You gotta be kidding, right?”

“No. I’m not kidding.”

He saw the strain in Jan’s young face, backing up her words, but still he hoped for a reprieve.

“I mean, you told me all along that this would happen sometime—”

“I told you it would happen today.”

He’d heard that exasperated tone enough to ignore it.

“And I’ve seen it coming for a while, so I knew you’d have the baby someday—”

“Not someday. Today. And not sometime. Now.”

Paul stared at Jan and wished he’d had an urge to make calls outside the office this morning, or an impulse to play hooky. The day had sure been tempting enough, with Indian summer casting sparkling October light across Chicago. Surely he could have found something he had to do outside the office. Maybe an appraisal in the country, down winding lanes between half-bare trees revealing bites of blue sky.

Not that he minded coming to his office most days. Building and office alike held an ambience Sam Spade would have recognized immediately. Paul liked that.

But some days he just didn’t feel like being confined by four walls, and he was lucky enough and good enough in his field so that on those days he could find something else to do. He wished he had today, because then he wouldn’t be here facing his very pregnant and

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soon-to-be-beyond-pregnant-and-into-motherhood secretary, wondering what in the hell he was supposed to do next.

Hospital. That's what he was supposed to do. Get her to the hospital. Damn, this should have been Ed's job. Fathers-to-be had a moral responsibility to make this panicked drive to the hospital—not bosses.

“Are you—?”

“I'm sure. I've been timing the contractions for a while and they're getting close now. Plus my water broke.”

He might not know much about women having babies, but anybody who'd ever watched TV knew that phrase meant business. “Have you called—?”

“I've called the hospital,” Jan informed him, still efficient even when her skin went pale and her breath came hard with a contraction. Contraction—that seemed a mighty polite word for what appeared to be just plain agony. “They're expecting us.” With a smile that shone even through the pain, she patted her protruding stomach. “And I've called Ed's office. They're trying to track him down and he'll meet us there.”

Paul should have known she'd have everything taken care of. On the other hand, she scheduled everything so darn efficiently, why couldn't she have scheduled this moment for about three hours earlier or six hours later so she'd be at home? Then he wouldn't have to be the one saying, “Okay, I'll dri—”

“I appreciate your driving to the hospital.” He also should have known her ability to anticipate his sentences wouldn't abate even in the throes of childbirth. Jan Robson might be only twenty-five, but sometimes she awed him. What awed him most was how she ran his office to her own exacting standards without impinging on his freedom. She was amazing. She never let up.

Nearly before the thought finished forming in his mind, she spoke. “But before we leave for the hospital, you have a phone call to make.”

“Aw, Jan.”

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“You’ve been putting it off and putting it off, and there’s no more putting it off now. It’s exactly the way you’re dealing with the proposal from the Smithsonian, too. Eventually you won’t be able to ignore that, either.”

He ignored her second statement. “This wasn’t supposed to happen until Halloween.”

“No. I’ve told you all along that the due date was October 7. And I’m right on time—”

Of course she was, Paul thought. Jan was always right on time.

“— but you chose to pretend it would happen until Halloween because you’ll be out of town then. You wouldn’t make the call before, so you have to make it now.”

“But Jan—”

“You promised, Paul.”

“I know, but this isn’t the time—”

“This is the time.”

“After I get you to the hospital—”

“No. Now, while I can make sure you do it.”

“I’ll talk Centurian into giving me somebody on loan like they did when you had flu two years ago and for your honeymoon and—”

“Disasters, every time. Besides, no secretary from Centurian will work for you now that they know better and—”

“But they all like me,” he protested with a faint satisfaction at, for once, getting to interrupt her.

It would be easiest if he could use one of the Centurian Insurance secretaries. Even as an independent contractor, he did enough work for them that they’d rented him this cubbyhole office. A Centurian secretary would have at least a basic understanding of what he did, besides knowing where to find the copying machine.

“Of course they like you. Everybody likes you, but they all know what you’re like to work for and they won’t do it. You’d run wild with a regular temporary, and I won’t have you— Ah!”

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The way she broke off and clutched her hand to her stomach propelled him out of his chair and to her side in record time. Then there was nothing to do but give her the support of an arm around her shoulders until he felt the tension ease out of her.

“Jan, we need to get you to the hospital.”

She looked up at him through eyes glazed with pain, joy and determination. “You promised.”

Hell! Hell and damnation! He pivoted and reached the phone in one stride. “You don’t play fair, woman.”

“That’s the only way to win with you.”

“What’s the number?” he grumbled, a grin fighting against the churning in his stomach. She did know him well.

She gave it to him. “And the person you want to talk to is Bette Wharton.” She pronounced the first name as one syllable.

He repeated the name when the voice on the other end of the line identified herself as Top-Line Temporaries and asked how she could help him.

He heard the click of the phone as he was transferred, then a new voice answered, “Bette Wharton.”

This voice sounded crisp and cool on the surface with the hint of something smooth and hot inside, and it made him think inexplicably of a spicy cheese concoction his mother used to stuff celery. Despite his tension over Jan, he almost grinned. How might this unknown woman on the other end of the telephone line react to being compared to stuffed celery?

“This is Paul Monroe. I’m calling because—”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Monroe. I’ve been expecting your call.”

“You have?” He looked up, prepared to skewer his secretary with a look. She *would* have him call somebody with the same trick as hers of not needing him to finish sentences. And why in the world did he have to make this call if Jan had already lined things up?

“Yes. I have a list of candidates.”

But Paul wasn’t listening. His dirty look had changed

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to one of worry.

“Tell her,” Jan ordered. She exhaled with a breath he supposed she’d learned at that birthing class she and Ed had attended.

“I need a secretary,” he blurted out.

“I know. As I said, I have several candidates. But I think you should make the final choice. If you’d like to stop by our office, or I could come by your office—”

“I’ll come there . . . sometime. Maybe today or—I don’t know— We have to get to the hospital. Now! We’re having a baby!”

Bette Wharton held the receiver long after the fumbling click had severed the connection, as if the instrument in her hand could reveal to her the scene on the other end. Only when the dial tone pierced her fog did she hang up.

So Jan Robson was having her baby. And Paul Monroe needed a temporary secretary. Which meant she’d finally meet him.

She’d been intrigued ever since the brisk young secretary first came to her office five months ago and explained that she would be going on maternity leave eventually and needed a very special temporary secretary for her very special boss. Bette had regarded the news as propitious. For two years, she had been steadfastly guiding Top-Line toward just that niche in the marketplace—matching special needs with special service. Providing a replacement for Jan Robson could be the perfect gauge of how well she and Top-Line were doing.

Bette had wondered at first if there was more between secretary and boss than dictation, but Jan Robson saw Paul Monroe’s faults far too clearly to be romantically involved with him. It had been Bette’s observation that women in love lost the ability to reason when it came to the men involved.

No, Jan simply had a very high regard for her boss of six years. Bette wondered why, when the man Jan

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described sounded so little like a businesslike adult, but she couldn't doubt the secretary's feelings.

In deference to those feelings and with an eye to her company's future, she had conducted the search for Paul Monroe's temporary secretary personally. The results pleased her. All the employees at Top-Line were just that, but the ones she had selected for Mr. Monroe's approval were the top of the top.

Now all she had to do was wait for the enigmatic Paul Monroe to make his appearance so he could make his selection.

\* \* \* \*

Darla Clarence closed Bette's office door behind her.

"There's a Paul Monroe out front asking for you. I can tell him you've left for the day."

Bette recognized the offer as part of Darla's long-running campaign to get her to work less. And that meant it must be nearing six, since that was when Darla usually started encouraging her to go home; most nights Bette didn't follow the advice until two or three hours later.

"That's all right, Darla. I'll see him now. He could turn out to be a very important client for us."

"Just a one-man office," Darla said with a hint of a sniff.

"True, but he has pull with Centurian. He's our first contact with them, and you know what a prestigious account that would be. That could open a lot of doors."

In her overall plan, Bette had targeted such large corporate clients for her fifth year in business. Having the opportunity this soon felt like winning the lottery. Even so, she wouldn't trust to luck to make the most of it. She'd already drafted a proposal of what she could offer Centurian. But first Top-Line had to impress Paul Monroe enough that he'd recommend her company.

Darla gave an almost silent click of disapproval, but started to open the door.

"He doesn't look like any important client I've ever

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seen. At least not for our kind of business.” She hesitated with her hand on the doorknob and glanced back at Bette, a glint in her dark eyes. “Funny business is what he looks like he’s best suited for.”

The soft chuckle Darla left behind puzzled Bette as much as her words. Neither prepared her for Paul Monroe, who started talking the minute he came through the door.

“Hi. Whew, what a day. And this is only the middle of the week! I don’t know if I’ll make it to Friday at this rate. Hard to believe when people spout off about you-really-should-have-a-family they’re talking about putting you through this 2.5 times. Once is enough to cure anybody.”

Before Bette could rise from behind her desk to greet him properly, he’d crossed the room and flopped into the padded armchair. Eyes closed, legs extended, arms dangling over the arms of the chair, he looked as if he didn’t have a bone in his compact body. At least not a self-conscious bone. He acted as if they’d known each other for years.

She swallowed her surprise. On second thought, he did look as if he’d had a rough day. In fact, he looked as if he’d spent it re-enacting *Romancing the Stone*.

His dark gray suit was top quality, but the jacket—now critically rumpled—was dangling from two crooked fingers. His slacks bore multiple creases and seemed oddly wrinkled at the knees. The knot of his silk tie rested at midchest, and his limp shirt showed a coffee stain on one rolled-back sleeve. The third button from the top had been matched with the second buttonhole, giving him a lopsided air.

His shining chestnut hair would do a racehorse proud, but any self-respecting Thoroughbred would demand a better brushing than this mane seemed to have gotten, she thought with a private grin.

“Sure, go ahead and laugh at someone who’s been through eight of the nine levels of hell today,” he said.

At the sound of his voice, she stifled a start and killed

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the grin. Great. Nothing like laughing at a new client to impress him. He'd opened his eyes, but only halfway, as if he could manage no more. When she met his look, however, she saw his eyes were dancing. She'd always thought that was only a figure of speech, but his truly did. The green flecks that showed against a gray background performed something lively and agile. If he'd been through eight levels of hell, well, she could believe he'd brought a bit of the devil back with him.

"You're the most cheerful martyr I've ever heard," she surprised herself by saying.

His grin widened in satisfaction—with himself, or her, or both, Bette didn't know. "That's the only way to go—singing at the stake."

"A variation on singing for your supper, I suppose."

"For my sup—? Ah, I get it. Stake turns to steak, as in charbroiled. I see why Jan picked you. I'll have to mind my P's and Q's—and I'm not talking vegetables."

Bette shifted at the reminder of why he'd come. Word-play was fun, but this was business. "Yes, well... Uh, how is Jan? And the baby? Your call ended rather abruptly."

"Both doing fine. A boy. Edward, Jr. Eight pounds eight ounces, all parts fully operational. Especially the lungs. Although his father's a little worse for wear at the moment." He held up a palm as if to forestall her, his first movement other than raising his eyelids. "And yes, before you ask, he does look worse than me right now."

"You mean he was there? I thought..."

His eyes narrowed and she felt as if she'd had a spotlight trained on her. "Of course he was there. And what did you think?"

"From your appearance, and from what you said, I thought..." Hesitating, she met his gaze and came to the conclusion that evasion was not a viable option if she wanted to stay on good terms with this man. "I thought you must have been in the delivery room somehow."

His eyes popped wide open. "The delivery room?"

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Good Lord, woman, are you crazy?” His body seemed to sag in reaction to the energy he’d expended in astonishment. “It was bad enough in the waiting room. I never would have made it in the delivery room!”

She tried not to laugh. She really did. It was no use. In the end, she had to wipe moisture from her eyes and take three deep breaths to get her voice under control.

“I see.” Another deep breath might get rid of the final quiver of amusement in her words, so she gave it a try, avoiding Paul Monroe’s gaze. She had a feeling his dancing eyes would surely pave the road to relapse. “I imagine the hospital personnel wouldn’t let you in there.”

One eyebrow rose in a quizzical expression that invited her to share his amusement. “Actually, they all presumed I was Jan’s husband at first, and for once in her life Jan was too preoccupied to straighten out the mess. I filled out some forms they shoved in my hands, then they kept telling me to follow this corridor and turn that way and check in with this desk and see that nurse. Ed arrived just in time. I tried to explain, but they were making threatening noises about my scrubbing and joining my wife in the labor room when he showed up. When they realized he was the father, they got all huffy, as if I’d been trying to worm my way into some secret place, and they kicked me out to spend the rest of the miserable afternoon in the waiting room.”

“That must have been very difficult for you.” Bette had had time to damp down the laughter, but apparently he didn’t fall for the straight face she’d assumed.

“It was,” he said in a tone that had just enough humor to escape self-pity. “I can see you think I had the easy role in this whole thing, but let me tell you, waiting rooms can really take it out of you.”

She fought a grin. Business. Get back to business. “I’m sure they can. I’m glad everything went well in the end. It all turned out fine. Now—”

His groan cut her off. “Went well? Are you crazy, lady? Midway through my day I had a woman walk into my of-

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fice and tell me she was in labor, and it went downhill—fast—from there. Went well?”

“I see your point. One expects one’s secretary to better arrange such matters.”

She regretted the teasing words as soon as they were out. Nine out of ten men didn’t appreciate having their egos pricked by a sharp tongue, even in jest. Not the best way to win prospective clients. She could feel her hopes for entree to Centurian fading as fast as the October daylight. Then she saw the glint of appreciation in his eye, and sighed in relief. Paul Monroe, apparently, was the tenth man. Still, she’d be on safer ground if she got the conversation back to the matter at hand.

“That’s right,” he said mildly. “A secretary should do this sort of stuff on her own time.”

“I can guarantee you that none of the six candidates I have selected for you to choose from will pose a similar problem for you—at least not for the next few months.”

He sat up, and she became aware of the way his chest filled the misbuttoned shirt and his forearms swelled below the rolled-back sleeves. She swallowed, and remembered the things Jan Robson had told her about this man. Not her type. Not at all.

“I sort of hoped you’d be my secretary.”

The words to slash his presumption that any woman in an office was automatically a secretary welled up in her throat. She caught the gleam in his eyes just in time. The sort of gleam a kid’s eyes had as he waited for the teacher to open the desk with a frog hidden in it.

He’d baited the hook and cast it out there like an expert. And she’d almost fallen for it.

“I don’t have the credentials to join the Mission: Impossible team,” she said smoothly. She tapped the folder on her desk. “But these people do. Why don’t you look at the profiles tonight and let me know in the morning whom you would like. Someone will fill in there tomorrow, then your selection should be available, say—” she checked the thick appointment book spread open

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on her desk “—Monday morning. Is that satisfactory?”

“Very efficient.” He said the right words, but his tone didn’t have the note of appreciation she might have hoped for. She could feel the “but” coming before his mouth even formed the word. “But I don’t think I’m in any shape tonight to give these profiles the consideration they deserve. I’d hate to gloss over them, but I’m afraid that’s what would happen.”

Despite his politely tailored words, Paul Monroe was being a smart aleck. She should be irritated at him for not taking her work seriously, but he obviously didn’t take himself any more seriously. That glint in his eyes seemed to invite her to find a joke to share with him.

She gave her head a tiny shake. Jokes? She couldn’t afford to think about jokes. Business. “What do you propose, then?”

He grinned.

Uh-oh. She’d made the mistake of giving Paul Monroe the perfect opening, and she’d been caught.

He sat up, slinging his jacket over one forearm and tucking the folder under his elbow. “As long as you asked, I think it would be a wonderful service of Top-Line Temporaries if you came and told me all about these candidates over dinner. An oral report instead of making me wade through the written report.”

“Dinner?”

“Dinner.” He stood, and tipped his head as he examined what she feared was the incredibly stupid expression on her face. “You do eat, don’t you?”

“Of course I eat.”

“Yeah, I guess you don’t look really anorexic, but you do look a little thin. My mother would love to get her hands on you and fatten you up some.”

“Your mother?” What was he doing talking about his mother? He was a client. A client. He’d proposed a business dinner. A little unorthodoxly, perhaps, but a business dinner nonetheless.

“Yeah, Mom’s a throwback to the old days. You’d think

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a Lake Forest matron who does charity luncheons and supports the symphony would have followed the trend into alfalfa sprouts and organic tomatoes, wouldn't you?"

Bette was vaguely aware that his hand under her elbow, warm and firm and so very much *there*, was supposed to encourage her to rise from her chair. She rose. He handed her her briefcase and she accepted it. He steered her toward the door and she followed. Too preoccupied by his comments, she paid little attention to where she was going.

So he was from Lake Forest, from the North Shore, where suburbs were pristine and upbringings well-to-do.

"But no alfalfa sprouts for Mom. She got fed up on that sort of thing as a kid herself." Surely alfalfa sprouts hadn't been big when his mother was a girl, so he must mean something else, but she had no idea what. Though she could swear she'd seen something like a grimace flicker across his face before being replaced by a grin. "She sticks to the basics of my childhood. And I'm happy to say my childhood was filled with double chocolate brownies and triple-decker sandwiches. All my buddies used to come to my house after school, just for the food. I don't think even now she's ever served granola in her life. Thank God. G'night."

He waved to Darla, who stared as they made their way through the outer office. "You're leaving, Bette?"

"She's leaving," Paul Monroe answered firmly. "We're going to dinner."

"Great!"

Bette cringed a little at Darla's enthusiasm, which made it sound as if Bette hadn't gone to dinner with a man in a year. And she had. Doug Burton, last winter. Once.

She tried to slow her pace against the tug on her elbow.

"Uh, maybe I should wait . . . lock up."

"Don't you worry. I'll lock up." So much for Darla's help. Her dazzling smile lit her face. "You two go on and

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have a nice dinner. Have fun.”

The last two words might have qualified as an order.

“We will,” Paul promised.

\* \* \* \*

Paul liked the smooth scratch of Bette Wharton’s wool tweed suit jacket against his palm, which he’d cupped under her elbow to guide her footsteps. To him the contact seemed all the stronger for the silence that rested easy around them.

Top-Line Temporaries occupied a neat, efficient suite in a neat, efficient building in the area bounded by Michigan Avenue and Lake Shore Drive, the river and Oak Street Beach. He was heading to a different neighborhood, not many blocks away, but where the mood could swing from class to crass, glass to grit in the time it took to walk from one door to the next.

That very variety drew him to the Rush Street area. You could wait to make up your mind until the very last minute and still be within walking distance of just about anything. And if something more appealing came along before you got there, so much the better.

But he knew exactly where he was going to take Bette Wharton tonight. He’d known it nearly from the start.

When he first walked in and saw the cloud of dark hair, the eyes as deep a blue as Lake Michigan and the individualistic mouth with its tilted-back top lip, he’d liked her looks well enough, but not the expression of stern concentration she’d worn. He was all too familiar with that look.

Then he’d seen her grin when she thought his eyes were closed.

It changed her. That intrigued him. Nobody with a mouth like that should be so serious.

She obviously didn’t agree. One bit of flippancy escaped her and she looked appalled. He’d watched her stiffen into seriousness, and had become determined to lure out that spark of mischief again.

That was when he knew he’d take her to Mama

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Artemis's Restaurant. Bette Wharton's exterior, with her conservative suit in a gray wool heathered by faint blue, sensible heels and unfrivolous gold lapel pin, might match her office's neighborhood, but that glint in her eye screamed of Mama Artemis's.

"Do you know where we're going or are you making turns at random?" she asked as they rounded yet another corner.

They could have walked four blocks straight west then five north, but he preferred to mix it up with a turn here and a turn there. "I know where we're going."

He frowned. He did know where they were going, had set out with that destination in mind. That wasn't like him.

"I could have sworn we passed this store before," Bette remarked.

His frown disappeared. He liked the edge of amused skepticism in her voice.

"I said I knew where we were going. I didn't say we were taking the most direct route."

She muffled a splutter of laughter, but he heard it and liked that, too.

"Trying to throw me off the track so I can't find the place again? If this is a secret hideaway, wouldn't it be easier just to blindfold me?"

"Aw, you know how nosy people are these days. I was afraid somebody'd stop us or call a cop. Besides, I gave up my handkerchief to the noble cause of mopping Ed Robson's brow hours ago, and I didn't want to risk my good tie. You wouldn't believe how many ties I've ruined by blindfolding women wearing mascara." He stopped and turned toward her as if scrutinizing her in the glow of a store's lights. "Unless you're not wearing mascara? It's not too late to use the tie . . ." He let his voice trail off hopefully.

"Your tie would be ruined. I'm wearing mascara." Beneath the words lurked a chuckle. "But all this talk of ties reminds me . . ."

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Her hands rose to just above where the well-loosened knot of his tie rested. Glancing down, he saw he'd misbuttoned his shirt at some point in this frenetic day. But that didn't interest him nearly as much as the revelation that occurred when Bette Wharton's index finger brushed his chest as she finished pushing the third button through its proper hole.

She'd hardly touched him. Considerably less skin had come into contact than in a business handshake, but no one would ever have confused the sensations. The bolt of heat tightened his muscles and kicked the breath out of him.

In the uneven light of the store displays, he saw a tide of color rising along her neck and sweeping into her cheeks. The instant before she could pull her hands away, he caught them in both of his and held them, not quite pressed against his chest. If he brought her hands back to where her finger had brushed, he wasn't entirely sure what he'd do. He couldn't risk that. But if he let her pull away now, there'd always be a barrier of awkwardness between them. And he couldn't bear that.

So he simply held her hands. Long enough so that both of them could regulate their breathing and convince themselves nothing had happened. When she took a long breath and looked at him with a smile tinged with wryness, he knew she'd succeeded before he had. To mask that, he spoke the first words that came to his lips.

"Thanks. I told you those waiting rooms are rough. I think that happened when this guy grabbed me by the collar. He was one of those chicken fathers."

He saw the question flit into her eyes, shoving aside some of the confusion and discomfort, and he felt a spurt of relief almost as strong as the disappointment.

"You know," he continued his explanation, "the fathers too chicken to go into the delivery room. Although this guy had no trouble grabbing me by the shirtfront and demanding what in the hell was taking so long. As if I knew!"

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Her chuckle assured him her recovery was complete.

“The worst afternoon of my life. Thank God Jan was nearly as efficient in having a baby as she is in everything else. The nurse kept telling me Jan was having an incredibly short labor—as if she thought that should make me feel better.”

“Poor Paul.” She smiled, apparently unaware it was the first time she’d used his name. She slipped her hands away from him. “What you need is food to fortify you after such a long day.”

“Yeah.” He pretended to believe the sympathy.

“So maybe we should get to the restaurant.”

“Okay.” But he didn’t move, enjoying the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, intrigued by the way her thoughts were alternately revealed and hidden. With eyes like that, teasing was irresistible.

“So . . .” she said again.

“What do you mean, ‘so’?”

“Don’t you want to eat?” she asked.

“Yeah, I want to eat.”

“Then don’t you think we should get going?”

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

“Because if we go, we won’t be able to eat.”

He saw annoyance warring with amusement in her deep blue eyes and loved it. “Paul—”

“All right, all right,” he gave in with a laugh. “Turn around.” He saw her take in the small sign that read Mama Artemis, then laughed again when she turned back to him with a grimace.

“You’re a fiend.”

“I know.” He took her elbow again to guide her through the door and along the narrow hallway that led between two shops before widening to the restaurant proper, tucked into the back of the building. Having his hand around her elbow already felt pleasantly familiar.

“Paul!” A small, round woman with gray streaking the dark hair piled on top of her head wrapped plump arms

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around him with enthusiasm. "It's been too long! Much too long. You must tell us how you have been all these long months we have seen nothing of you. And your mama and papa, and your dear little sister. But now you come, come and sit, you and your young lady."

Bette would barely have had time to absorb the lightning switch from the frown and scolding to the smile and invitation before she was towed along between crowded tables. But she didn't seem thrown. When she sent a quick, questioning glance over her shoulder, he smiled, shrugged and headed after them.

In a far corner, amid deep, rich colors aglow in candlelight, Bette slid into a small booth, its seat a quarter of a circle so small that when he sat next to her their knees tangled.

"Here. Now you settle, get comfortable, and I get wine. Then we talk about the dinner and I will tell you what you must have to eat." The woman patted Bette's hand and Paul's shoulder and hurried away.

"Is that Mama Artemis?"

"No. That's her daughter, Ardith. Mama Artemis is much more forceful."

Bette shook her head as she chuckled. "Where are they from? I don't recognize the accent."

"I really don't know. Not that I haven't asked. I have. But when they start talking about it they get into a lot of complicated history, and just when I think I'm starting to follow it, they get excited and lapse into their native language. Best I can tell you is somewhere in southeastern Europe. I guess one of those places that's been passed back and forth a good bit."

Ardith bustled back with a bottle of wine swaddled in a napkin to catch the weeping condensation.

"How is Mama Artemis, Ardith?"

"Ah, Mama. She is the same. Always Mama." She poured the pale gold liquid into the chunky clear glass in front of Paul. "She is a terror, Mama." Even if Ardith hadn't smiled, Paul could see that Bette recognized the

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affection and admiration and knew “terror” was a term of respect.

At her gesture, Paul tasted the wine and gave whole-hearted approval. “Glad to hear she’s doing well,” he said. “Be sure to tell her Jan had her baby today. A boy.”

“Ah, a baby! Yes, yes, I will tell her. Such a happy thing, young Jan to have a baby. And you should be having babies, too. You should find a woman, marry her, settle down and have babies.”

“Aw, Ardith.” The refrain was so familiar he responded automatically, but underneath a memory stirred uneasily of that same refrain spoken in another voice.

“Yes, yes, many babies. Baby girls for you to spoil and baby boys to play with the toys like you do with my nephews. They ask for you. Goran has found three soldiers he wants to show you. And a new engine. You come some Sunday. And you bring your young lady.”

As she launched into a description of the meal she would serve them, Paul knew it had been more edict than invitation, and if he didn’t bring Bette, he’d spend all his time explaining why.

He sighed as Ardith left them, apparently satisfied that their choices—more accurately, her choices for them—were in order.

“I don’t know why I come here,” he grumbled, only half-kidding. A lot could be said for places where nobody asked you to Sunday dinner or cared whom you were with or speculated on when you’d get around to having babies.

“Isn’t the food good?”

“The food’s terrific.”

“Maybe that’s the reason,” Bette said as if she meant it, but he spotted a glint in her eyes. “Or maybe it’s because you’re obviously adored here.”

“You saying I have an ego problem, huh?”

She shrugged, a movement that also raised and lowered her knee a fraction of an inch where it touched his, just enough to send a shiver of sensation running up

*Prelude to a Wedding*

his leg. "Or maybe it's because they invite you to come over on Sundays to enjoy the children's toys."

He grinned, trying to ignore where that shiver of sensation had concentrated. "Occupational hazard."

"Occupational? It sounds more like child's play."

He tilted his head. "Didn't Jan tell you what I do?"

"Of course she did. I couldn't select possible temporaries for you without knowing what they'd be doing."

"What do I do?" He saw her resistance to stating what she clearly felt was the obvious. "Humor me, please?"

She let out a short breath. As she started to answer, part of him experienced inordinate pleasure at the idea that she was willing to humor him.

"You are an independent appraiser, with a good bit of business coming by referral from Centurian Insurance Group as well as several other major firms, although you do a variety of noninsurance-related appraisals. And Jan mentioned you've worked with some large museums."

He nodded, and hoped he succeeded in masking the automatic frown. At least Jan hadn't mentioned the Smithsonian offer. Prestige was one thing, but you had to consider the cost, too. "That's true as far as it goes, but do you know what I appraise?"

He saw her quick intelligence consider the question and grasp its ramifications immediately. He could practically hear her thinking that insurance companies rarely hired independent appraisers for the bulk of their business—the cars, boats, houses and routine household goods that they could assess through statistics galore.

"A specialty. Something out of the ordinary."

"That's right." He waited.

"What is it? What's your specialty?"

He liked Bette Wharton a lot at that moment. She didn't want to have to ask. He figured she felt not knowing the answer represented a slipup in her preparation. But she didn't show any of that in her tone. No grudging echo tainted a single syllable.

*Prelude to a Wedding*

He wanted to kiss her. Right then and there. To lean forward across the small table and let his lips explore that up-swung lip of hers, to slip his tongue along it and then inside it.

The blood quickening through his body was a warning. Better get his mind—and his hormones—off that track and on business, or he'd be doing just what his imagination had conjured up. And he had a feeling Bette was the kind of woman to take it all too seriously.

Yes, better to stick to business. Even if she wasn't likely to take his business too seriously.

He shrugged. The movement helped a little, although he knew no shrug would ease the tension that had begun to tighten certain of his muscles. "It's pretty simple. I mostly appraise cards, trains and books."

"Cards, trains and books?" she repeated blankly.

"Baseball cards, toy trains and comic books."

Bette stared at him. "You're kidding."

"Most of the time, yes. But not about this. I also operate as a sort of clearinghouse for specialists in other areas from all over the country, and I specialize in appraising other stuff myself, too. Things like original Monopoly games, nineteenth-century mechanical toys, vintage Erector sets. But I'd say those three—baseball cards, toy trains and comic books—are the most common in my trade."

"Then your occupation really is child's play."

He'd heard it before. He'd heard notes of censure a lot stronger than the faint echo in Bette's words. But they had never bothered him before.

He did his best to shake it off. He grinned and tossed out the words of truth.

"That's me, a kid at heart."

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