

# WEDDING PARTY

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

To memories and friends  
From days  
along Lake Michigan,  
Especially Marion and Susie

## Chapter One

Michael Dickinson continued efficiently sorting his mail despite the telephone tucked between his ear and shoulder. His calm, assured voice carried into the receiver over the noise of two dozen people pursuing three dozen tasks around him. As he spoke, he dropped envelopes, postcards, fliers and magazines into separate piles—discard, read immediately, pass on to someone else, read in that distant someday when he had time.

Another pile held one envelope. Addressed in a nearly illegible masculine hand, it had been among the mail he'd picked up from home when he returned to Springfield this morning after another whirlwind sweep through Illinois.

"I understand your concern for the party," he said into the telephone. He listened a moment, then answered with no betraying inflection of dryness. "Yes, of course, and your concern for the candidate, too. We all want Joan to win the election. If there is a perception among the voters that she tilts at windmills, you're right to say that could hurt her candidacy. It's my job to ensure they don't have that misperception."

As Michael spoke, his eyes rested on the single envelope.

"Yes, I will mention that to the candidate. Thank you. I'll let you know. Goodbye."

He hung up and reached for the envelope. Without making any move to open it, he turned it over in his hands.

Paul never wrote. Not even at Christmas. The phone was invented for a man like Paul Monroe. Michael suspected that if Bette hadn't insisted, the formal wedding

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invitation he'd received two weeks ago would instead have been delivered in the same manner as the request to be in the wedding party: "Hey, Michael, we're getting married. Why don't you leave your sleazy politics for a while and come join Bette and me? I want you to be best man. Bette suggested co-groom, but I told her that'd be a little kinky for a straight arrow like you."

Michael had heard Bette affectionately admonishing her fiancé in the background. He knew Paul well enough to recognize the invitation as a way to tease Bette, tease him and mask the sentimentality of the request, all at once. He'd been touched. And honored. And he'd said yes.

So it was hard to imagine what Paul could be writing about now.

If he had been a cynic, he might have wondered if Paul Monroe had decided he'd prefer Grady Roberts as his best man, since Grady was well on his way to making millions, while Michael was only chief aide-de-camp for long-shot United States Senate candidate Joan Bradon.

But Michael wasn't a cynic—he had that on the authority of Joan Bradon, who had overcome plenty of cynics in her fifty-odd years. What he was, said Joan with her usual precision, was a skeptic. "A cynic presumes the worst. A skeptic suspends judgment until the proof's in," she'd told him once. "And since you're never easy to persuade, you're our resident devil's advocate, finding the holes in time to plug them before we face the light of public scrutiny."

Michael accepted her label, but for his own reasons. A cynic would remember too many weddings, ceremonies whose memories outlasted the love they were supposed to celebrate, and say this one would be no different. A skeptic could look at Paul and Bette and believe there was a chance it could be different.

Before Paul's call, if he'd thought about it, Michael probably would have assumed Grady would be best

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man. After all, Paul and Grady went back to grade school. Michael was the latecomer in the group. He'd met them in the first hour of their first day of college.

Without ever saying much, he and Paul had seemed to understand each other from the start. Grady . . . well, Grady was Grady. But for all Grady's astounding good looks, easy charm and moneyed background, Michael had envied him only one thing. And he'd buried that resentment so long ago and so deep he didn't think even Paul had gotten more than an inkling of it. Certainly Grady hadn't.

Michael looked again at the return address sprawled haphazardly in the corner of the envelope and shook his head at his own hesitation. Ripping open the envelope, he skimmed the letter with the same quick comprehension he used to attack press releases, position statements and news reports. He understood it all with his first glance through. Still, he read it a second time.

A week. All of them together again for a week. The way it had been back at college, with the addition of Bette.

No, not the way it had been at college. That was romantic foolishness. There was no such thing as recapturing the past. Or altering it. That was all over with.

A week.

Since Paul owned his own business—appraising collectibles—he could clear his calendar for a week before the wedding as well as the two honeymoon weeks after. And he wrote that he'd talked Bette into turning over her temp agency to her assistant for the extra time.

But how could Michael consider taking a week off in August with the election coming up in November? A weekend to be best man at a friend's wedding, yes. But a week? How could he take that much time?

But he knew he would. Because Paul had offered a

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temptation Michael wouldn't pass up.

Tris.

\* \* \* \*

"Aha! I thought so!"

Leslie Craig's triumphant tone gave Tris an irrational rush of guilt. Her co-worker and friend made it sound as if Tris Donlin had just confirmed her worst suspicions.

In a way, maybe she had. But really, being at the office first thing in the morning was nothing to feel guilty about. Her flight had arrived at Dulles Airport so early that she'd even gotten to her downtown Washington, D.C. office before peak rush hour.

"It's good to see you, too," said Tris, her fingers stalling in midsentence on the keyboard. She had been composing a memo on the conference, since there were a couple of points she wanted the staff to consider over the weekend. Even if they didn't give it conscious thought, they'd come in Monday with ideas.

"Well, it's not good to see you. You look like death."

"Thanks!" Tris tried for outraged sarcasm, but the chuckle behind it ruined the effect. Leslie never failed to make her laugh. Even when she didn't want to laugh, something about the blunt statements delivered with a slight Southern drawl appealed to her.

"Couldn't expect any different after taking the red-eye from the West Coast, could you? That trip could make next year's Junior Miss look like a hag. So go home and get some sleep, like you're supposed to."

Leslie was thirty-six to Tris's twenty-nine, and the most direct, most sophisticated mother hen Tris knew.

"I will. I had just a couple things I wanted to do."

"A couple things you wanted to do—a couple things that'll take you all day and a good part of the night. Just because you were named after some indestructible, he-man football player—"

"Baseball," Tris corrected automatically; she'd had to explain this often enough. "Tris Speaker. Center fielder for the Indians in the twenties."

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Leslie waved off the distinction and kept on talking. “— doesn’t mean you have to be some superman. Good heavens, woman, first you spend three days in Cincinnati researching that facility for the homeless, and then go straight to a week of twenty-four-hour days at that wretched conference in L.A. Give yourself a break.”

“I will. Honest. Just leave me alone so I can get this done.” A little tiredness wasn’t too high a price to pay for what she’d found out. The Cincinnati project had fired her imagination, and the conference had produced solid proposals for how the historic preservation association she worked for could encourage more such projects. What could be better than turning endangered buildings into shelter for those who had none?

Leslie Craig consulted her gold-braceleted wristwatch. “You have forty-five minutes before I come back to turn you into a pumpkin. And that time includes a few minutes to check your messages.”

Tris flipped through the pink slips she’d been handed, noting that two men she occasionally dated had called. She wouldn’t mind catching a movie or going to a play this weekend with either Brad or Dave—after she finished this memo and got some rest.

“And read your mail,” Leslie continued, plopping a stack of envelopes on Tris’s desk before heading out the door. “I’ll be back in forty-five.”

Tris had already checked the basket that held her business mail, so this stack must have been culled from deliveries to her home, which Leslie had been looking after for her. Since her house was five blocks one side of the subway stop and Leslie’s apartment three blocks the other way, they exchanged house-checking duties when one traveled, as well as sharing the commute to work. It was just like Leslie, first, to know that she would appear at the office before going home and, second, to choose the most interesting of her week’s mail to deliver to her.

She glanced at the envelopes splayed on her desk, but delayed opening them. First, she’d finish her report

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on the conference. They had to come up with ways to fund these projects. Somehow.

When Leslie returned in exactly forty-five minutes, Tris had finished a letter from her mother and another from her sister. She held a third letter open in her hand, almost as if she were still reading it. But she was staring out the window, past narrow-slatted blinds to something no one else would have recognized even if they'd seen it.

"Bad news?"

"What?" Tris refocused, looking at the paper in her right hand as if she had no idea how it had come to be there. "No. Not bad news."

"Good news, then."

"I—I don't know. Not exactly either."

Leslie's eyebrows arched dramatically. "That sounds fascinating. Tell Leslie all." She propped herself on the edge of Tris's desk and waited expectantly.

"It's just a letter from my cousin. Paul."

"The one getting married in August. And you're in the wedding, right?"

"Yes. He says he and Bette have arranged to take time off from their businesses, and he wants me to come and spend the whole week before the wedding."

"I bet the bride loves that idea."

"Actually, Bette probably does. She's not the type to get too uptight—probably because she'll have everything done a month ahead of time. She grew up in the area, but her parents retired down to Arizona a few years ago, so I'd imagine she and Aunt Nancy are doing the arranging, and I can guarantee between the two of them they'll have every detail organized way ahead of schedule. Besides, Paul says it's the only wedding present he's asked for."

"Emotional blackmail." Leslie nodded. "I like his style."

Tris grinned halfheartedly. "He says Aunt Nancy and Uncle James are looking forward to having us all stay at the house. And he has all sorts of plans of things to do

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together. All of us. Ball games, sailing, parties.”

“Sounds like fun,” said Leslie without much conviction. Then she straightened. “What do you mean, ‘all of us’?”

“Paul and Bette. And . . . um . . . some of the rest of the wedding party.”

“Some of the wedding party?”

“Bette’s brother’s in the wedding and he can’t get away until the weekend, and neither can one of Bette’s childhood friends who’s the other bridesmaid, but the maid of honor is Paul’s sister, Judi, and I’m sure she’ll be there along with, urn, the other guys in the wedding.”

“Ah-ha! Meaning Buddy Michael and Gorgeous Grady.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call him that.” They both knew Tris’s protest was aimed at the description of Grady Roberts, not Michael Dickinson.

Leslie ignored her protest. “Sounds great to me. It’s about time you showed Gorgeous Grady that little Tris has grown up. A week ought to be plenty of time.”

Leslie had first heard about her college friends five years ago when, over a series of after-work dinners, they’d exchanged life stories and forged a friendship. Sometimes Tris thought that in those long sessions she’d talked herself through post-divorce trauma and right into maturity. And Leslie had listened. If she’d somehow also directed the conversations and the growth—and knowing her as Tris now did, she suspected Leslie definitely had directed—it had been very discreet and very deft.

Tris laughed, partly in genuine amusement, partly in exasperation. “Leslie, I don’t know how many times I’ve told you that I’m long past my infatuation with Grady Roberts. I was a freshman in college and—”

“And Juliet was thirteen when she went gaga over Romeo.”

“It’s hardly the same thing.”

“No,” Leslie agreed with abrupt and uncharacteristic seriousness. “I’ve often thought that if Juliet had stuck it

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out a little longer she would have seen that Romeo really wasn't the right man for her. But she never had a chance to grow out of it, to find out if she'd really found love, or only infatuation. It's kind of the same thing for you, Tris. Grady was a major college crush that you've never had a chance to check against adult reality."

Tris said nothing. What could she say? Leslie was right. As a freshman in college she had fallen for Grady Roberts with the depth and breadth of her seventeen-year-old soul. But Grady—a handsome, popular senior and part of the triumvirate, with her cousin Paul and Michael Dickinson, that had adopted her as a little sister—had never seen her as anything but a kid.

The infatuation belonged to the distant past. It had waned even before she left school, and certainly had been over before her brief, ill-considered marriage had knocked the inclination toward infatuations out of her for good.

But some questions about Grady had lingered. What would it be like to meet him now, now that the four-year age difference had narrowed to a blink of experience rather than a gulf of worldliness? Would there be any spark? Not the infatuation of twelve years ago, but perhaps something different. Maybe Leslie had a point. Maybe it was time to get the questions answered.

And it would be wonderful to spend time with Paul and Bette before their wedding.

And to see Michael, of course.

\* \* \* \*

"Goodbye. Enjoy your stay in Chicago."

As Tris stepped from the airplane, the airline attendant's professional farewell started her heart pumping fast. She'd spent the flight pushing thoughts of the past few difficult weeks at work from her mind. If thinking about the worries would have solved them, they'd have disappeared weeks ago. She'd done what she could for now; pushing too much too soon could in fact undo her efforts. So she waited and hoped and tried not to worry.

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She'd promised Leslie that much, and she'd do her best to keep the promise.

But she hadn't been as successful avoiding thoughts of the coming week. As the plane had circled across Lake Michigan and slipped lower to show her the familiar settings of her college days, she'd played a game with herself, naming the buildings as fast as she could before the campus disappeared from sight and the plane continued west to O'Hare. Much safer than thinking too much about memories.

But as she passed through the walkway connecting plane and terminal, she couldn't put the thoughts off, because the memories were about to merge with the real-life people who'd created them.

What if I don't recognize them? The thought hit her with enough impact that she almost stumbled when her heel ticked a metal strip on the corridor's floor. Eight years. That was how long it had been since she'd seen Grady. Since the day all three of them had returned to campus for her college graduation.

She'd seen Michael only once since then, a little more than a year later. Just before her marriage. But she talked to him at least three times a year—his birthday, her birthday and Christmas. Some years those calls had been oases. And from them she knew Michael was still Michael.

Paul kept her posted on what both Michael and Grady were up to in their lives, the way, she knew, he kept them posted on her. But he never said anything about such mundane items as looks. What if tall, burnished, blond Grady looked totally different?

What if he'd gotten fat?

What if he'd gone gray?

Or bald?

That image pulled a chuckle from her tight throat, shaking Tris out of her momentary panic and propelling her through the entryway and into the glass-arched waiting area.

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A strong hand took her carry-on case from her and an equally strong arm wrapped around her shoulders, corraling her out of the stream of passengers.

“How are you, Tris?”

“Michael?”

The voice was familiar but, without the telephone’s distortion, deeper than she remembered. And the hard band of arm around her, surely that was different.

She tipped her head to look up at the eyes just a few inches above her own. Michael’s eyes. Oh, yes. With a faint creasing at the corners as they smiled at her. The pleasure not quite masking signs of weariness and— And what? A shock quickly masked? She dismissed the puzzled surprise in his eyes to focus on the light of warmth and friendship in their hazel depths. Definitely Michael’s eyes.

Michael with his slightly unruly, thick, dark hair, his little-boy’s grin, his reliable salt-of-the-earth nature. Michael with his generous heart.

“Michael! It’s so good to see you!”

She stopped their progress to throw her arms around his neck. “It’s been too long, Michael.”

She felt his arms tighten around her, drawing their bodies into firm alignment. His voice sounded even deeper when he said, “Yes, it has been too long, Tris.”

Her blood gave the most peculiar lurch through her veins. Almost as if his hug had set off some sort of shock wave. She started to pull away from him with a vague feeling of discontent. Over his shoulder, she saw three figures hurrying toward them.

As burnished and blond and handsome as ever, Grady definitely hadn’t gotten fat. Or gone bald. Fleeting, she wondered if she’d sensed his presence without even knowing it. That could explain that odd surge in her blood.

“Tris!”

Paul’s arms formed a vise around her ribs for an intense second. Bette Wharton’s more gentle embrace

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gave way to a hug from Grady. How many times had she dreamed all those years ago of these long, muscular arms around her?

Maybe after all those dreams, this feeling of anticlimax was normal. Especially with everyone else around her discussing the mundane subject of getting lost in the airport.

"Should have known you'd get here first, Dickinson," grumbled Paul.

"I thought you were going to park the car," said Grady over the top of her head. He still had his arms looped around her waist, but it seemed almost absentminded.

"I did. Then I came straight out here. Where were you guys?"

Identical looks of embarrassment came over Paul's and Grady's faces, and Tris had a sudden impulse to hug them all again. It was all so familiar. Count on Michael to be the organized one.

"I knew I should have stayed with Michael," said Bette with a long-suffering sigh.

"Whaddya mean?" demanded her fiancé with a fine show of huffiness. Which none of them believed. "I got us here, didn't I?"

"Yes," Bette acknowledged. "You got us here. By way of the international terminal and just under thirty-two miles of walking."

Grady gave Tris's shoulders a final squeeze. "Aw, c'mon, Bette, it wasn't that far out of the way."

"No, and certainly not without its rewards," she said.

Paul guffawed and Grady looked ever so slightly abashed. But neither did any explaining.

Tris sent a raised-eyebrows look toward Michael. He responded with a small shrug and a half grin that indicated he didn't know what they were talking about, either.

"Tell, Bette," she demanded of the most susceptible of the trio.

Bette Wharton cast her a searching look that rather

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surprised Tris. On the way to a Caribbean vacation late last winter, Paul and Bette had stopped in Washington for three days—to get Tris’s approval, Bette teased. If her approval had been required, Tris gave it wholeheartedly. The two women had hit it off immediately, and Tris had seen how well Bette and Paul complemented each other, sharing basic values but with enough surface dissimilarities to keep the mix interesting.

Now Tris wondered at the appraising look being sent her way, a much more serious look than the topic seemed to warrant. And, if she wasn’t mistaken, a look that Bette had been careful would be unobserved by any of the three men.

Bette’s deep blue eyes abruptly changed from thoughtful to mischievous, but her face stayed neutral. “Oh, it was just another of Grady’s conquests.”

A spurt of laughter escaped Paul.

“Aw, Bette . . .” Grady made the appeal with little apparent expectation that it would be heeded.

Another of Grady’s conquests. Tris waited for her smile to freeze to stiff discomfort. It didn’t happen.

Catching Michael’s frowning glance at her, she nudged the smile another notch brighter without any effort to reassure him. Of course Michael had known immediately how that casual comment would have hurt the old Tris. How many times had he soothed those old hurts? But this time, there was no need. Amazing what eight years of maturity could do for you.

“Only this conquest informed Mr. Roberts—after he’d graciously helped her translate the directions to downtown from English to her oh-so-native French—that she was a nun. You should have seen the look on Grady’s face when he finally got that bit of information!”

“Well, how was I supposed to know?” complained Grady amid his friends’ laughter. “She didn’t have on one of those nun uniforms. How’d I know there was a nun convention in Chicago this weekend?”

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“Oh, poor Grady,” Tris got out between giggles, “all that charm going to waste . . .”

She saw surprise in Michael’s face as he looked at her. She felt rather surprised herself. She didn’t mind. She really didn’t mind. She felt like doing a cartwheel down the long, straight expanse of O’Hare Airport hallway. Only there were a lot of people in the way, and some might wonder what she’d found to celebrate. Even if she told them, they wouldn’t understand how it felt to finally know, really and truly know, that she was no longer little Tris Donlin, waiting for a scrap of attention, of approval, of interest from the great Grady Roberts.

Leslie had been right. It was time. Well past time to shake off the adoring girl and the distant idol and replace them with the people they’d become—a woman and a man.

“Thanks for the sympathy, Tris. I knew I could count on you,” said Grady. But his voice didn’t sound as certain as his words. He looked a little puzzled as he met her smile.

A man and a woman, Tris thought. And who knew what might happen when a man and woman got together.

She looked to Michael to share the moment, but he had turned away.

“Luggage ought to be at the baggage claim by now,” he said, apparently focusing on a plane backing away from the opposite terminal.

Another pang of anticlimax slid through Tris. Probably natural. Despite her efforts to keep her thoughts off the reunion, she must have built up unreasonable expectations.

“Yeah, we’ll get the luggage and get you settled at Mom and Dad’s, and then we can go see the campus,” said Paul. “Show Bette all our old haunts. She’s been asking to see them.”

“Begging to see them,” concurred Bette, deadpan. “You know how Paul hates to dwell on the past. But for

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my sake he's willing to relive some of the moments from his four horror-filled college years. The sacrifices the man makes for me."

She was still shaking her head, when her husband-to-be wrapped an arm around her waist and started her down the corridor toward the baggage claim. "That's right, woman. Horrible sacrifices."

Looking at the way they fit together, Tris felt surprisingly alone as she followed, walking between Grady and Michael.

\* \* \* \*

Michael welcomed the details of getting the luggage, loading the car, paying the parking fee, maneuvering through the toll-road traffic, following the route to the Monroes' Lake Forest home. All the details that kept him from dwelling on what had happened when Tris walked into his arms.

He checked the rearview mirror before changing lanes and caught sight of her in the back seat next to Paul and Bette.

Little Tris had grown up.

Her legs, once coltish and invariably clad in jeans, now stylishly filled a pair of sheer stockings beneath a pale float of a skirt.

Her hair, once a waist-length, sun-streaked tangle, was pushed from her face in casual sweeps that turned under just above her collar, leaving a tantalizing sliver of nape exposed and framing ears decorated with oblong gold earrings.

Her Wedgwood-blue eyes, once vulnerable and shy, now studied the world with self-confidence tempered by good humor.

Her body, still as youthfully slim as it had always been, now moved with graceful assurance . . . and had fit against his for one instant as if it belonged there. The way he used to dream it would. Long ago. Before he knew better. Before he realized that unlike the world he'd grown up in, there were worlds where some things didn't

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change. Some people who didn't shed their loves with each season's wardrobe. People like Tris.

That very stability of heart—so different from what he'd grown up with—was part of what had drawn him to her in the first place, all those years ago. Even while part of him had longed for her to have a change of heart. But Tris Donlin—girl or woman—still looked at Grady Roberts with dazzled eyes. Looked at Michael Dickinson as friend and buddy.

The damnable surprise was to find that his feelings hadn't changed, either.

He'd been so sure he was over her years ago, that the spell was in the past. Ancient history. He sure as hell *should* have been over her. Good Lord, he'd fallen for a seventeen-year-old girl who was now a twenty-nine-year-old woman. How could he still feel the same way about her?

But the instant she had come through that doorway, framed by the opening and with the light slanting sun highlights into her hair, he had felt a slam to his chest like he'd been tackled by the Chicago Bears' defensive line.

Great, the guy renowned for seeing the tiniest of flaws in a plan hadn't spotted a weakness in himself the size of the San Andreas Fault. He'd plunged headlong into a pit he would have sworn he'd long ago escaped—wanting Tris.

Those first few minutes hadn't helped any. The little jolt of surprise in her eyes when she looked at him, as if she were seeing him anew. The way she melted against his body, the rightness of the feeling. The glances exchanged that said their old communication still operated.

Then he'd seen the smile she focused on Grady.

Yes, Tris was definitely a woman. But she still wanted the man that the girl Tris had longed for, so hard and so long.

With his grip on the wheel only slightly tighter, he

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eased into the left lane to pass an overloaded van, the move so smooth no one else in the car noticed. But beneath the disciplined muscles, anger surged through him. Silently, he swore to himself, at himself. He'd be damned if he'd let himself go on this way any longer.

In this world of inconstancy, he'd always valued the things that didn't change. But his feelings for Tris didn't have to count among the unchanging. He would get over her, once and for all.

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