

# Wife for Hire

## Chapter One

At the turn of the century the Bigmount Brick Company hired new arrivals from Eastern Europe to work in the New Jersey clay pits. The immigrants settled in the company town of Bigmount, and in the neighboring town of Riverside, building modest brick and frame houses on small lots. They kept their streets and windows clean, built bars on every corner, and poured time and money into the construction of their churches. Five generations later the population had been Americanized somewhat, but Riverside was still a blue-collar town with clean windows. The Russian Orthodox women still brought their bread to the church to be blessed, and the Polish National Hall was still booking weddings.

Ever since Maggie Toone was a little girl she'd wanted to hold her wedding reception in the Polish National Hall. The country club in Jamesburg was prettier and any number of area restaurants more comfortable, but the PNA Hall had a paste wax dance floor that was smooth and dusty. It whispered during the slow numbers and thumped like a heartbeat when the stout ladies came out to polka. The hall was a place for weddings, Christmas parties, and silver anniversaries. It was as much a part of Maggie's childhood as braids, cream of tomato soup, and the sound of the freight train clattering through town in the middle of the night.

Over the years the hall had lost none of its appeal to Maggie. She couldn't say the same about marriage. It wasn't that she was against the institution... it was more that she didn't have time to seek it out. Finding a husband seemed like a real pain in the neck. Especially now that her life was at a crossroads.

She sat at the head of the picnic table staring at the chocolate cake. She gave a silent groan. It was the beginning of July and it was ninety-two degrees, and the cake was ablaze with twenty-seven candles and one for good luck. The candles were melting the frosting. Molten candle wax slithered in red, yellow, and blue streams across the top of the cake, spilling over the sides and collecting in small pools on the cake plate. Ordinarily Maggie loved birthday parties- especially hers- but today she had other things on her mind, so she took a deep breath and blew the candles out without further ceremony.

"Isn't this nice?" Maggie's mother, Mabel, said. "A perfect day for a birthday picnic." She'd made tuna salad and deviled eggs and bought little dinner rolls from the bakery on Ferry Street. She'd even cut the radishes to look like flowers. "Did you make a wish, dear?"

"Yes. I made a wish."

"You didn't wish something crazy, did you?"

Maggie felt her left eye start to twitch. She put her finger on it to halt the tic and answered her mother. "Of course my wish was crazy. I wouldn't want to disappoint you and Aunt Marvina."

She smiled because it was a family joke. Her mother and Aunt Marvina rolled their eyes and sighed to each other because that's what they always did when Maggie made a joke about her craziness.

She was a problem child. Always had been. Always would be. It didn't matter that she was twenty-seven years old today, she was a continuing source of frustration to her family. She was a throwback to her flamboyant Irish grandfather- the- only Irishman in Riverside.

"Twenty-seven years," Aunt Marvina said. "Where did the time go? I remember when she was a baby."

Mabel cut into the cake. "Even when she was a baby she had a mind of her own."

"She wouldn't eat her green beans," Aunt Marvina said. "Remember that?" Mabel shook her head. "It's the green beans all over again. No matter what's good for her, she does what she wants anyway."

Aunt Marvina waved her fork. "When Maggie was nine years old, I told you she would never get married. She was such a tomboy. Was I right? Was I right?"

"You were right. She should have married that nice Larry Burlew. Or Jimmy Molnar. He would have married her." Mabel stared at her daughter who was pouring coffee at the opposite end of the picnic table. "Now she's quit her job. How is she going to live with no man and no job? Six years of college. A master's degree. For what? Two years of teaching down the drain."

Maggie's eye was twitching worse than ever. She'd spent too many afternoons with her mother and Aunt Marvina, she thought. If she heard about the green beans one more time, she'd start screaming. And Larry Burlew was a slug. She'd join the Foreign Legion before she'd marry Larry Burlew.

"She's always been stubborn," Mabel said. "Once she gets an idea into her head, there's no turning her around. So, tell me again," she said to her daughter. "Tell me why you're not going back to teaching this year."

Maggie helped herself to a second piece of cake. "I'm going to write a book," she said, picking congealed wax from the icing. "I'm going to write a book based on Aunt Kitty's diary."

There was more eye rolling from Mabel and Marvina. "That's craziness," Mabel said. "How are you going to live? How are you going to pay your rent?"

"I'm looking for a job that's not as demanding as teaching. Maybe something part-time that will allow me to spend most of my day writing. In fact, I have an interview

this afternoon." She stared in amazement at her empty plate and wondered how she'd eaten that whole huge second piece. Even the wax was gone. She cracked her knuckles and cleared her throat, wondering if anyone would notice if she took thirds.

"So, what kind of job is this?" Mabel asked.

"It's going to be a wonderful book," Maggie said. "Aunt Kitty's diary is filled with information-"

Her mother wouldn't be distracted. "The job. I want to know about the job."

"This has been a terrific birthday luncheon, Mom and Aunt Marvina, and the cake was great, but I'm going to have to run." She was on her feet, with her purse slung over her shoulder, and her gifts tucked under her arm. She kissed her mother and gave her aunt a hug.

"The job," her mother insisted.

Maggie started off across the lawn to her car. "Nothing to worry about. Some man wants to hire a wife, and I'm meeting him for coffee at three-thirty." She slid behind the wheel, slammed the door shut, locked it, rolled up the window, and turned the air-conditioning on full blast. She punched a tape into the tape deck and looked back at her mother and Aunt Marvina. Their mouths were moving, but Maggie couldn't hear a word they were saying. She watched them for a moment, feeling the tension leaving her. Yes, even her eye felt a little better.

She smiled pleasantly, waved good-bye, and pulled out of the driveway.

She really was going to have to stop drinking coffee, Maggie thought. Her heart was jumping around in her chest, and she knew it couldn't have anything to do with the fact that the man sitting opposite her was drop-dead handsome. It had nothing to do with his soft, raspy voice or warm chocolate-brown eyes. Too much caffeine, plain and simple, no doubt about it. She pushed the cup away to avoid the temptation of one more sip, but she wasn't very good at avoiding temptation, so she pulled the coffee back and took another deep swallow.

Now that she was set to take on the role of wife, she gave one last wistful thought to the PNA Hall. "Do you think we should have some sort of party?" she asked Hank Mallone. "Do you think we should have a wedding reception?"

A look of shock registered on Mallone's face. He could barely afford the hamburger sitting in front of him, much less a fancy wedding reception. He didn't own a pair of black shoes, he hated pomp and ceremony, he didn't know how to dance, and most important of all, Maggie Toone wasn't at all what he wanted in a wife. "No," he said flatly. "I don't think we should have a wedding reception."

Maggie gave a cursory glance to her surroundings. It wasn't a terrible restaurant, but it wasn't great either. It was only one step up from a fast food place. The plants hanging from the ceiling were real, and the floor was relatively clean. It could be worse,

she decided. He could have taken her to Greasy Jake's for chili dogs. "It was just a thought," she said, smiling at him. "I love parties."

He caught himself smiling back and then immediately hardened his expression again. This was supposed to be a business luncheon. He was here to hire a wife, and he had very specific ideas on the subject. He'd told the employment agency he'd wanted a cool blonde with blue eyes and long sleek hair pinned in a chignon at the nape of her neck. His ideal wife would be sophisticated and reserved. She'd be the perfect hostess in a tailored suit or little black dress. She'd be someone he'd absolutely hate.

Maggie Toone was none of those things. She was devilishly cute with orange hair flying all over the place in tight little curls. She had a turned up nose, snapping green eyes, and freckles everywhere. She was several inches shorter than the statuesque wife he'd ordered, and her voice was much too husky, her laugh far too infectious.

"I'm sorry, Miss Toone," he said, "but I'm afraid you're not exactly what I'm looking for."

"What are you looking for?"

"A blonde."

"I can be a blonde."

"Yes, but I wanted someone taller."

"I can be taller."

"Nothing personal," Hank said. "If I were in the market for a real wife, you'd be right up there at the top of the list, but I'm afraid you won't do for a fake wife. I need something different."

Maggie leaned forward, one elbow on the table. "Mr. Mallone, I don't know how to break it to you, but it's me or no one. I'm all the agency has. Nobody else is crazy enough to take a job as someone's wife and go move up to the boondocks of Vermont for six months."

"Are you kidding me? This is a great job. It's pretty in Vermont. There's free room and board and a salary on top of that. I've even hired a housekeeper." He looked at her closely. "If this is such a bad job, how come you want it? What's the matter with you?"

It was a question that caused Maggie a little confusion because deep down inside she harbored the same concern. What was the matter with her? Why wasn't she ever comfortable with the conventional? Aunt Marvina said Maggie did crazy things because she liked to attract attention. Maggie knew differently. She had never cared about the attention. She simply had different priorities. She pushed her doubts aside and defiantly tipped her nose up a fraction of an inch. "I teach high school English, and I've taken a year's leave of absence to write a book. Vermont would be perfect for me."

Anything more than two hundred miles away from Riverside would be perfect, she thought. She loved her mother and father and Aunt Marvinna, but she needed to get away from the little brick town with its winding streets and clay pit ponds. She studied Hank Mallone and wondered if she was doing the right thing. His hair was dark, almost black, and a shade too long for the business mogul she'd been expecting. The employment agency had said he was chairman of the board of Mallone Enterprises, but he looked more like a model for a beer commercial. His eyes were overshadowed by thick black eyebrows and set deep into a tanned face. His nose was straight, his mouth was soft and sexy, his body was perfect- broad shoulders, slim hips, and a lot more muscles than she'd expected to find on a CEO.

"The employment agency said you were chairman of the board of Mallone Enterprises?"

The color in his face deepened. "I'm afraid they gilded the lily a little. I own Mallone Apple Orchards, and we have a factory that goes with it. Actually it's not a factory. We call it a factory because we don't have any real factories in Skogen, Vermont. Really it's just a big corrugated metal shed where Mrs. Moyer and the Smullen twins bake pies. Then we sell the pies at Big Irma's General Store."

This wife hiring had seemed like a good idea yesterday when he'd talked to the employment agency, but now that he was face-to-face with his prospective bride, Hank Mallone felt like a damned fool. Normal, intelligent men did not go around hiring wives. How could he possibly explain his reasons for needing an instant wife without sounding like an idiot? And the last thing he wanted was to sound like an idiot to the woman sitting across from him.

He'd wanted to hire someone he could easily ignore, but he'd ended up with a freckle-faced firecracker who had him thinking about sleeping arrangements. His scheme was doomed. If he took Maggie Toone home with him, she would make his life a living hell.

He briefly thought about trying another employment agency, but he knew it was too late. He was hooked. He wasn't sure exactly why, but he knew he was incapable of refusing anything to this adult version of Little Orphan Annie. If she wanted to go to Vermont to write a book, he'd move heaven and earth to get her there. He set his mouth in a grim line. "So, what do you think, do you still want the job?"

She'd already decided she wanted the job, but she thought it wouldn't hurt to grill him a little.

"The employment agency said you simply wanted a woman-in-residence, and that I'd be expected to act as hostess once in a while?"

"Yup."

"Nothing else would be required of me?"

"Nope."

She gave him a long, considering look. If he wanted a wife so bad, why didn't the man simply fall in love and get married? It was a little suspicious. "What's the matter with you anyway? Are you weird?"

The color returned to his cheeks. "No. Jeez, I just need a wife for a few months!" He pushed his hand through his hair. "I want to expand my business, but none of the local banks will advance me any money. They say I'm not a stable member of the community."

She raised her eyebrows. "Why would they think that?"

"I was born in Skogen, but I took off as soon as I could read a road map. I'd played hockey all my life, and I was pretty good, so I tried going pro. I was this close to making it." He measured the air with his fingers. "I was always good enough to get picked up in the draft, but never good enough to make final cuts. When that didn't work out, I bounced around for a while, trying to find something else that interested me. I guess I looked pretty shiftless to the folks in Skogen. Finally I decided to go back to school. I went to the University of Vermont and studied agriculture and business, but I never graduated."

The grin he'd been holding back finally broke through. "Exams were always at the beginning of fishing season, or when there was good powder on Mt. Mansfield. It didn't seem right to waste good powder just to prove I knew something."

She nodded her head sympathetically; she'd often had similar sentiments. "Most people think I have an irresponsible attitude," he said.

"I suppose it depends on what you want out of education. If you want the knowledge but don't need the grade, then you can go skiing at exam time. Of course I'd never stand for that baloney from one of my students."

"I didn't actually skip all my exams. We had a lot of rain for the first two years. Anyway, everybody in Skogen thought I was just wasting time and money, except for my Granny Mallone. She owned acres and acres of rolling fields that weren't being used for much of anything, and she let me come in and plant apple trees. There'd never been any pesticides used on the fields, so I kept them organic. Everyone in Skogen thinks I've got only one oar in the water, but I know there's a market out there for good organic food."

He forked in a mouthful of french fries. "My Granny Mallone died last year, and she left me her house and the orchards. The apple trees are finally maturing. I need to build a cider press and some sort of bottling plant, and I need a better facility for baking. I could eliminate almost all waste from my orchards if I produced more apple products."

"I think it sounds terrific, but I don't see what this has to do with me."

"You're going to make me look respectable, so I can get a loan to expand. You're going to get Linda Sue Newcombe off my back. And Holly Brown. And Jill Snyder . . ."

He saw her mouth fall open. "I've had some bachelor ways," he explained. "But that's all in the past."

Maggie rolled her eyes.

"It's a small town," he said. "The people are fine, but they're stubborn, and it's damn hard to reshape opinion. I like growing apples, and I want to make a living at it, but I'm going to go down the drain if I don't get money from somewhere. I've been turned down for a loan once, but the bank has agreed to reconsider their position after the fall harvest. You help me look like I'm married and settled, and I'll help you write a book."

"Why don't you marry Linda Sue Newcombe or Holly Brown?"

Hank sighed and slouched back in his seat. "I don't love Linda Sue or Holly. I don't love Jill Snyder or Mary Lee Keene or Sandy Ross."

Maggie was beginning to feel peevisish. "Just how many women have you had traipsing through your granny's house?"

He saw her wrinkle her nose in annoyance and heard the alarm bells go off in his bachelor brain. "You're not going to start making wife noises, are you?"

"Listen here, Hank Mallone. Don't you think for one minute you're going to go running after every skirt in Skogen while I sit home playing the pitiable wife. I have some pride, you know."

Yes sir, she was definitely going to make his life hell, Hank thought. She was going to sink her teeth into this wife thing. She was going to make him put down the lid on the toilet seat and stop putting empty milk cartons back in the refrigerator. And worse, she was going to tie him in knots. She was going to stand naked in his shower with a big Hands Off tattooed across her delicious bottom. She was going to show up for breakfast every morning in a T-shirt and no bra, and his insides were going to turn to liquid. He had to be crazy to even consider this harebrained scheme.

"One more question," Maggie said. "Why did you come to New Jersey for a wife?"

"Last year I attended a six-week workshop on entomology at Rutgers. I figured I could say the romance started back then. And I'll be honest with you, I want someone who is far enough away not to be a burden or embarrassment when this arrangement is terminated."

"Lucky me."

Damn. Now she sounded mad. "No need to take it personally."

She sunk her teeth into her burger, and chewed it vigorously. She didn't like being dumped into the possible burden category. It was practically implying that she would fall in love with him, or be a social buffoon.

"Why would you automatically assume your hired wife would be a burden or an embarrassment"

"It's just a worst-case scenario."

"Well, I can assure you, I won't be a burden or an embarrassment."

"Does that mean you still want to be my wife?"

"I suppose so. As long as I don't have to iron."

"I've hired a housekeeper. She's a little old, but she seems capable enough. She answered an ad I ran in a Philadelphia paper."

Now that it was settled, Maggie felt a rush of excitement. She was going to live in Vermont, and she would have time to write her book. Her eyelid had almost entirely stopped twitching, and the soles of her feet practically buzzed with the desire to get moving.

"When would you like me to start my wifely duties?"

"How soon can you get packed?"

She thought about it for a minute, calculating what had to be done. She had to notify utilities, the phone company, the newspaper boy. It might take a while to sublet her apartment, but she could put it in the hands of a realtor. "A week."

A week seemed like a long time to Hank. She could change her mind in a week. She could find another job. She could fall in love and get married to someone else. "I'm kind of in a rush to get a wife on board," he said. "Do you suppose we could shorten that to tomorrow?"

"Definitely not."

"You aren't one of those stubborn redheads, are you?"

She hated being called a stubborn redhead- mostly because she knew it was true. "I'm not a stubborn redhead," she said. "Tomorrow is totally unreasonable."

"Okay, day after tomorrow."

"I'll need three days minimum."

"Fine," Hank said. "Three days."

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