

ROGER B. THOMAS



The
Accidental
MARRIAGE

A Novel

IGNATIUS

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Chapter One

Scott was in the house again, the house with the rice-paper walls. He was wandering from room to room, admiring the prints and the delicate branches painted on the walls—branches in bloom with flowers of some sort, blood-red at the center but fading to delicate pink toward the edges of the petals. As always, every room was a model of perfection: every piece of furniture in perfect proportion, utensils and other items arranged in harmonious order. A light rose glow suffused the rooms. He felt completely at peace.

Then, somehow, Scott was outside, but still among flowering branches. These weren't pink flowers painted on walls but real flowers on branches waving in the breeze. He recognized them: they were apple blossoms, just like there had been at the orchard on the farm where they'd lived when he was a boy. They'd rented a dingy old farmhouse from Mr. Martin, who kept his orchard and had let Scott run all over it. Scott had hated the cramped, drafty house, but he'd loved wandering around the orchard, especially when the trees were flowering. He fondly remembered the sound of Mr. Martin's tractor rumbling about the farm.

Why, here came Mr. Martin now! Rounding the end of the row, the old blue Ford turned to come between the trees. Mr. Martin was driving, but—no, this was all wrong. He was towing the sprayer, fogging the trees as he came. This was all wrong. He couldn't spray when the trees were in bloom. He'd kill the bees, and the flowers needed the bees to pollinate, or there'd be no crop. Scott ran down the row waving his arms. This was all wrong.

Mr. Martin saw Scott coming, and waved back, but kept driving and spraying. Scott came alongside the tractor and shouted up to him, but the engine was too loud and Mr. Martin kept leaning over and calling, "Hey? Hey?"

“The bees!” Scott shouted, jumping as he ran alongside the tractor. The sprayer roared behind, misting the branches with poison. “Your spraying will kill all the bees!”

“I got to, son”, Mr. Martin called back above the engine’s roar. “I got to!”

Scott was running beside the tractor, leaping to get Mr. Martin to pay attention even though the long grass whipped his shins painfully. It was Mr. Martin who’d told him about how important the bees were, and now he was killing them.

“Not now, Mr. Martin!” Scott hollered over the sprayer fan. “Not while they’re in blossom! After the fruit forms, when the apples will need protection against scale and bugs!”

“I got to, son”, Mr. Martin repeated as he kept driving. “I got to.”

“But . . . you’ll kill all the bees, and there won’t be a crop”, Scott cried, ceasing his jumping and standing in the grass, tears streaming down his face. Mr. Martin kept driving, and Scott was too distressed to attend to the howling behind him. It finally grew loud enough to demand his attention, and in alarm he turned just in time to see the sprayer almost upon him. He opened his mouth to scream, and—

Woke up. The sheets were twisted all around Scott where he’d thrashed them into knots, so he started to extricate himself. He was accustomed to stressful dreams; at least it hadn’t been . . . that one.

Scott was alone in the bed, which meant Greg hadn’t yet returned from wherever Greg had gone off to. Just as well. Scott padded to the bathroom and then to the kitchen, where he grabbed a pint of ice cream out of the freezer. The microwave clock said 2:35—great. Wolfing spoonfuls of ice cream, he sat down to check his e-mail. Nothing important, and nothing of interest on any sites. He brushed his teeth and headed back to bed, knowing it was probably futile.

It was. He lay there for ten minutes, trying to relax, until it became clear that it was to no purpose—he was awake. He sighed and threw back the covers. He may as well head to the office as lie here staring at the ceiling. He could at least get a few hours’ work in before the most recent “helper” whom Brian had assigned showed up and started getting underfoot. By 3:30 he was showered, dressed, and turning the Jetta toward the office.

About midday, Scott's phone chimed. It was a text from Megan.

"Lunch?"

Scott smiled, and texted back.

"Sure. Usual, .5 hr?"

"OK", came the response.

Meeting Megan for lunch would be a good break. He'd already put in a full day on little more than energy drinks and candy bars. He saved his work and headed out.

Megan was a great pal. She worked for the assessor's office, just a block or two away from his office. They'd first met at a local bistro one crowded lunch hour when he'd asked if he could sit at an unoccupied seat at her table. They'd hit it off immediately, sharing stories and frustrations about work and home situations.

Megan lived with her partner Diane. They weren't married. They'd planned to marry during the brief period when it had been legal, but then the window had closed. Diane had insisted on going through with the ceremony anyway, with the rings and vows and certificate and all, and Megan wore a wedding ring, but the relationship had no legal standing. Life with Diane was . . . well, complicated, and often a point of stress for Megan.

As it proved today. Scott noticed that Megan was wearing her "haunted" look as she sat down, so he decided to dispense with the pleasantries.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Pardon?" Megan responded.

"Something's bothering you. I can tell by your eyebrows. Spill it", Scott insisted.

Megan sighed. "It's Diane. You'll never guess what she wants now."

Scott grinned. Diane always had a new thing. Her most recent thing had been paleo dieting, and Megan had had to get rid of all her cookware and learn to use cast iron. Before that, it had been feng shui, and life had been nothing but acquiring new furniture and then endlessly rearranging it to make auspicious arrangements.

"Soul food?" Scott gibed.

"Ha, ha", Megan replied, unamused. "She wants a baby."

Scott cocked an eyebrow but checked the urge to make a smart remark. This was clearly distressing Megan, and he didn't want to make it worse.

“Specifically, she wants *me* to give her a baby”, Megan continued, her petite face falling further.

Scott had repeatedly been told that he had the social skills of a rhino, but even he could grasp that the situation called for tact.

“Okay”, Scott acknowledged. Situations like this were unusual but not unknown, particularly among lesbian couples. “Is there some, ah, problem with her having the baby?”

“She’s older, so the risks are higher”, Megan explained. “At least that’s what she said, and the fertility specialist concurred.”

Ah. That answered Scott’s next question, which was whether they’d sought medical help. “So that leaves you”, Scott said. “Do you want a baby?”

Megan made a wry face. “Well, I think that every woman, deep down, wants a baby at some point.”

This was news to Scott. He’d known plenty of women who seemed to have no interest in children. But Megan was continuing.

“The question is whether I want a baby *now*, under these circumstances. But Diane is convinced that she wants a baby, so that settles it. You have no idea how determined she can be when she sets her mind on something.”

Actually, Scott did have an idea. Reading between the lines of their lunchtime conversations over the past year, he got the impression that Diane was a manipulative, overbearing woman who viewed Megan as a combination pet, life-sized doll, and housemaid.

“But now”, Megan said, her voice catching, “not only does she want me to carry the baby, but she’s complaining about the cost of the fertility clinic. I wish she’d thought of that when she was insisting on the granite countertops and inlaid cupboards.”

“But”, Scott asked, mystified, “doesn’t your insurance—”

“Insurance doesn’t cover fertility services”, Megan interrupted, giving him what he called the “silly boy” look. “It’s voluntary medical treatment, so it’s all out-of-pocket. In this area a simple consultation runs about three hundred fifty dollars. A full treatment involves several visits, plus testing, AI, and sperm-bank costs, and—oh, excuse me.” Megan suddenly stood and dashed down the hall.

Scott knew what that meant. Megan had anxiety problems, and one of the manifestations was irritable bowel syndrome. She would be back shortly, so he munched his sandwich and thought. She’d tossed

out some jargon that he didn't understand. To him, "AI" meant "artificial intelligence"—but it would be easy to research. Shoving aside Megan's cranberry and pecan salad, he pulled out his phone and searched on "AI" and "fertility".

"Oh, my—Artificial Insemination?" Scott mumbled under his breath and continued researching.

By the time Megan returned, Scott was more knowledgeable about fertility matters than he had been—or wanted to be, for that matter (he'd never heard of "sperm washing" before). He had some thoughts that he was hesitant to offer, but Megan's distress gave him courage.

"Want some of my sandwich?" Scott offered. "You've got to have something more substantial than rabbit food. A steady diet of that can't be good for your condition."

"No thanks", Megan replied weakly.

"Look here", Scott said, pushing his plate aside and taking her hands. "I've been doing some research on your type of situation. Yes, you can go whole hog with the tests and experts and procedures, but there are simpler, less expensive alternatives. You just need some basic equipment—I've got the links right here—and a donor, who can be whomever you'd like. I'd be willing to be the donor, if you don't have anyone else."

"You?" Megan asked, looking at him wide-eyed.

After a moment's silence, Scott cocked a mischievous eyebrow. "What's the matter? Am I that poor a prospect?"

"No, no, it's not that", protested a flustered Megan. "It's just that ... you ... I wouldn't have dreamed of asking that of you."

"Asking what?" countered Scott. "It's not like donating is, ah, difficult."

"That's not what I meant", Megan replied. "It's more that ... with Diane and me ... and your baby ..."

"That's a question of perspective", Scott said. "So far as I'm concerned, it would be your and Diane's baby. I'd just make my small contribution and walk away."

"I don't know, Scott", Megan said after a moment. "It's very generous of you to offer, but—"

"Look, Megan", Scott said, gripping her hands. "I consider you one of my best friends. Every couple of weeks you and I meet here

and listen to each other's problems. That's helpful, but usually we can't do anything more than just listen. I don't know about you, but that sometimes frustrates me. I wish I could do more than just lend a sympathetic ear. This is an opportunity for me to help tangibly at hardly any cost to me. Please, at least seriously consider it."

Megan gave a tremulous smile. "I will. I'll talk it over with Diane."

"Good", Scott replied briskly. Megan squeezed his hands in return.

"And Scott, I really appreciate your concern. It means a lot—not just the offer, but the sympathetic ear."

"Bah", Scott said dismissively, waving his hand in slight embarrassment. "Anything for a friend."

On the way back to the office, Scott looked up a few more things and made a phone call.

Early the next week the expected e-mail came in. Scott scanned the results with satisfaction, and a little relief. He printed it out and tucked it in his pocket. Not having heard back from Megan, he texted her.

"Lunch?"

The response took a while, but came. "Today?"

"Yes. 12:30?"

"Great. See you then."

At the restaurant, Megan was looking a little less strained, but still tentative, when she sat down across from him. Again Scott dispensed with the niceties.

"For you", Scott said, handing her the printout.

"What is it?" Megan asked, unfolding the sheet of codes and numbers.

"Test results", Scott explained. "It occurred to me that one thing that might—and should—affect your consideration of my offer is the question of whether I'm carrying anything communicable. So I hopped down to the corner clinic for the full battery of tests. This"—he tapped the paper she was holding—"certifies that I am free of any pathogens that can be transmitted via bodily fluids."

"Aw, Scott", cooed Megan. "You shouldn't have."

"I know it's not the only factor you're considering, but it's one less unknown. By the way, those are just the unofficial test results that

they e-mailed to me. The certified results give the same information, but I have to sign for them, and there's an additional fee."

"I'm sure this will be fine", Megan replied, waving the printout and tucking it in her purse. "Speaking of fees, how much did all that testing cost?"

"Don't worry about it", Scott said, waving his hand. "How's progress? What does Diane think of my offer?"

"We've been talking it over", Megan explained. "And we discussed it with the fertility specialist. The specialist looked over the links you sent me and agreed that that was the proper equipment for at-home AI. She warned me that the results for at-home AI aren't as reliable as professional AI, but if cost is a factor, it is at least worth a try. Oh, she also told us to get you to sign a legal waiver, which she sent to us."

"No problem there", Scott assured her. "What about Diane?"

Megan gave a little grimace. "I'm working on her. She's not averse to the idea, and she definitely likes the lower cost. But she seems to be leery of the fact that I know you."

"What?" Scott asked. "Anonymous sperm is somehow better?"

"I know", giggled Megan. "That's what I was wondering, though I didn't put it to Diane like that. Diane kept asking questions about how I knew you and why I thought you might be offering to do this. I kept insisting that it was because you wanted to help, but she didn't seem to hear that. It was almost like she was jealous."

"Jealous?" Scott was incredulous. "Of what? It's not like I'm even going to be touching you."

"It doesn't make any sense, but Diane can be that way", Megan responded. "I asked her if she knew any guys who'd volunteer, but she didn't. I assured her that you didn't want any payment or favors, I told her you were gay, I told her about you and Greg, I told her that gay guys do this sort of thing all the time as favors to friends. That's true, isn't it?"

"I know that it happens", Scott admitted. "I can't say how common it is."

"Good enough", Megan said. "I think she's softening, and she's the one who wants the baby anyway. This"—she patted her purse where the printout was—"should help."

They spent the rest of lunch chatting about trivialities. Scott was glad to see Megan less stressed. He was also in better spirits—which he knew he would need—as he headed back to his office. Just before leaving he’d gotten an e-mail that Kumar, his helper, had given notice this morning, and that meant another tense meeting with Brian sometime soon.

Later that evening he got a text message from Megan.

“Diane says OK.”