

Miss Julia Meets Her Match

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When long-time boyfriend Sam Murdoch pops the question, Miss Julia finds herself seriously contemplating the offer while the town is being turned upside down with rumors of infidelities and other events shocking to the Southern facade of gentility and family values. 60,000 first printing.

Ann B. Ross holds a doctorate in English from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and has taught literature at the University of North Carolina in Asheville. She is the author of fourteen previous novels featuring the popular southern heroine Miss Julia. She lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

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Chapter 1

"Where y'all gonna live?" Lillian asked, as she beat three eggs, one after the other, into a bowl of cake batter. "If you thinkin' 'bout tyin' the knot, somebody gonna be movin'."

"I'm not studying a move." I was at the kitchen table, folding towels taken from the dryer. The window rattled from a gust of late April wind, and I glanced outside to see more rain clouds moving across the sky.

"Huh. You better be studyin' on it, Miss Julia. 'Cause either Mr. Sam be movin' in here or you be movin' in there."

"That's too far down the road to worry about," I said, not wanting to worry about it either down the road or at the moment. "And, see, Lillian, that's part of the problem. Tying the knot. I don't know that I want to be tied to anybody, even Sam, who's as fine a man as I've ever known. But that's what happens when you marry. I've had a taste of doing things my way, you know, since Mr. Springer passed." I smoothed out a hand towel, smelling the packaged fresh air aroma rising from it. "Even if that freedom came too late in life to be of much use. Lillian, do you realize that I was married for almost forty-five years, and never had a moment's peace? Always fearful of what would set him off, what would displease him, what I was doing wrong, and on and on. Now, I don't have to answer to anybody, and I'm not at all sure I want to give that up."

"Mr. Sam, he seem like he pretty easy to get along with," Lillian commented as she greased three cake pans, then sprinkled flour in them. "I doubt he pull on that knot too much. 'Sides, he tied up, too. Least, the man s'posed to be."

"Yes, and isn't that the trouble?" I pushed aside the hand towels, folded, stacked, and ready for the linen closet. "Everybody expects a wife to toe the line, but a husband? I tell you, Lillian, the only change marriage makes in a man's life is he gets his food cooked and his laundry done."

"I don't know as I'd go that far," she said, as she poured the batter into the cake pans, then shook each pan so the layers would bake evenly. "'Course, I jus' look at other folkses' marriage, not mine. 'Cause you hit the nail on the head when it come to mine."

"Oh, Lillian," I said, just done in by all the decisions that were piling up, waiting for me to get to them. Well, actually only one decision, but from that all the others would flow. "I don't know that I want to marry anyone again, much less have to decide where to live when, if, I do." I rested my head on my hand. "It's more than I want to deal with."

I lifted my head then, as more thoughts on the subject jumped up in my mind. "You know, it used to be that where a couple lived was never a question. The man decided, and that was it. The woman was expected to pull up stakes, leave her family and friends and everything else and go wherever he said. And be happy about it, too." I bit my lip, remembering my own wretched experience. "I don't think it was ever even discussed when Wesley Lloyd proposed to me and, Lord knows, it didn't occur to me to question whatever he said. I took it for granted that I'd leave my home and move into his. Not that I wanted to stay home, but still."

"I think that what the Bible tell a woman to do," Lillian said. She opened the oven door and arranged the pans on a rack, the heat making her brown arms glisten with perspiration.

"Well, that's where you're wrong, because it's the other way around," I said. "It says a husband should leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife." She and I looked at each other, as we both recalled that while I'd done my share of cleaving to Wesley Lloyd, he'd done a good bit of his to somebody else.

But turning my mind back to the current problem, since Wesley Lloyd was dead and gone, I'd been up one side and down the other over it, and I still couldn't decide. Hazel Marie'd said she knew exactly what I ought to do, but her mind was filled with one romantic notion after another, so I wasn't a bit surprised by where she stood. Then she'd gotten serious and said, "Miss Julia, all you have to do is decide what you want, then just do it."

Well, of course that was the crux of the matter. I didn't know what I wanted-whether to marry again and run the risk of another betrayal or to stay a single widow and run my life the way I wanted to. I don't mind saying it-I had thoroughly enjoyed doing just that the past few years since laying Wesley Lloyd in his grave, especially since I had free rein of half of his sizeable estate, Little Lloyd being the beneficiary of the other half.

Actually, I'd hardly ever made a decision based purely on my own wants. There'd always been responsibilities and obligations to other people that came into play and, as I am of a generous nature, I usually bowed to whatever somebody else wanted.

So, ever since Sam had come up with the idea of us marrying, I'd been keeping myself busy, trying not to think about it in hopes that I wouldn't have to give him a final answer. I didn't want to lose him, but I wasn't sure I wanted him full-time, either. The fact of the matter was, I was about half mad that he hadn't left things as they were. But, no, he had to bring up something that put my life in turmoil.

Well, Lord knows, he'd hinted around about it long enough, but when he finally got serious, the actual thought of being his wife, with all that that entailed, made my heart leap inside

my chest. But I'd answered with my head, and my head said, "Don't rock the boat." Still, he'd kept on and on at me, telling me I'm not getting off the hook, that he's a patient man and sooner or later I'm going to give in and make him a happy man. And to tell the truth, the upshot of it all put me on edge so bad I could hardly stand it. I've prided myself on being a fairly decisive woman, but the agitation and indecision I'd been under made me ready to bite somebody's head off.

The one thing that did tempt me, though, was Sam's ability to make me laugh, which I did whenever he started rattling off his many admirable qualities. I don't think Wesley Lloyd made me laugh even once during all the years of our dour marriage. He made me frown a lot, cry on too many occasions, and nurse a sorrowful heart all the time.

Lord, I never thought I'd even consider such a thing as marrying again. Once you've done it and suffered from it, you're not all that anxious to get back into a similar situation. Of course, Sam was not Wesley Lloyd Springer, not by a long shot. I'd gone into marriage with Wesley Lloyd without an inkling that such a respected pillar of the church and the community could've ever done what he did—which was to enter into more than a decade of dalliance with Hazel Marie Puckett, produce a son and heir, and leave me to clean up the mess he left and end up with both mistress and son living under my roof. And if you think that's a strange arrangement, you wouldn't be the only one. But by this time I'd come too far to let what other people think bother me. Lillian says I'll have stars in my crown for doing it, and I don't doubt it, even though it hasn't been as hard as I'd feared or as one might think.

Still and all, I'm stuck with the conviction that men, as a general rule, can't be trusted as far as you can throw them. And I speak from painful experience.

I raised my head as I heard Hazel Marie's car pull in the driveway and, in a few minutes, she came through the back door, shrugging out of her raincoat. It was a wonder to me how much better she looked the older she got. Not that she was all that old, forty-something being an enviable age from my vantage point, but I'm talking about comparisons to what she looked like before she had the wherewithal to purchase suitable clothes and have her hair professionally done. Which was what she'd been doing that morning.

I smiled at her as she stuck her umbrella in the stand. "Your hair looks very nice, Hazel Marie." And it did, the highlighted streaks of blonde on blonde shone in the overhead kitchen lights. "Velma is finally learning how to do it right."

Hazel Marie pulled out a chair at the table and immediately began to fold towels, since I'd fallen down on the job. "Miss Julia, you'll never believe what I heard at the beauty parlor."

"There's no telling. What?"

"Well, oh, I'm sorry, Lillian," she said. "I didn't even speak to you, which just shows how stunned I am. I'm so full of the latest gossip that I can't think of anything else."

Lillian laughed, her gold tooth flashing. "Gossip do that to you sometime. 'Specially if it real good gossip."

"Well, this is as good as it gets." Hazel Marie took a deep breath, trying to calm herself before imparting her news. "Miss Julia, guess who's having an affair."

"I don't have any idea and, Hazel Marie, if you heard it at Velma's, you ought to consider the source."

"Oh, I do, but everybody's talking about it. I mean, out loud and everything. This wasn't something whispered and speculated about. It was told as a fact, because she's been seen coming out of the Mountaintop Motel."

"Well, my word," I said, drawn into the story in spite of my natural aversion to gossip, having suffered considerable anguish myself from wagging tongues. "Who?"

Hazel Marie leaned across the table, smiling with the assurance that she was going to shock me good. "Miss High and Mighty, Norma Cantrell, herself."

"No!" I reared back in my chair, suitably shocked. Norma Cantrell was our Presbyterian pastor's secretary, and she ran his office like a third world dictator. I'd never had much use for her, but the pastor thought she hung the moon. "That can't be true." Then I thought about it, rubbing my fingers across my mouth. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be. It was Mildred Allen who saw her at the Mountaintop."

"Well, I say." That iced the cake for me, until I thought of something else. "And what was Mildred Allen doing there?"

"Collecting for some fund or another," Hazel Marie said. "She had to go twice. They kept putting her off and still didn't donate a thing. That's a pretty ratty motel, from what I hear. A perfect getaway place if you don't want people to know what you're doing or who you're doing it with. Of course, Norma didn't expect anybody she knew to be there. Velma said that Mildred said she didn't think Norma saw her because she hid behind a laurel bush when Norma came out of one of the rooms. And not once, but both times Mildred was there." Hazel Marie stopped and thought about it. "I expect it was a pretty big laurel bush, considering Mildred's size. But, anyway, Norma thinks it's still a secret."

"Well, now, Hazel Marie, there could be a perfectly innocent explanation, you know."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe she has a sick friend."

"At a place like that?"

"It does sound suspicious, and I'll admit I'm not all that surprised. Norma's always struck me as having more going on underneath than she lets on."

"Yes," Hazel Marie said, "but it's hard to imagine that she'd get involved in a seedy affair since she's so particular about everything."

"Norma's been divorced almost all her life," I told her, as Lillian came to the table with cups and the coffee pot. She liked a little spate of gossip as well as the next person. "The way I heard it, she married right out of high school, but hardly a year later, her husband ran off with their next-door neighbor. Norma's been living off sympathy ever since. People think her heart was broken and that she'll never recover, but this just goes to show, doesn't it? So who is she supposed to be seeing at the Mountaintop?"

Hazel Marie smiled. "You'll never guess."

"Just tell me, Hazel Marie," I said. "I can't imagine who'd even be interested in her. Her husband certainly wasn't."

"Well, nobody knows for sure, but the Honorable Clifford Beebee was mentioned. Can you believe that?"

"My word," I said again, mumbling it this time as I tried to absorb this turn of events. "If this gets out, Clifford Beebee's political career is over in this town. To say nothing of his marriage, because I don't believe Gladys'll put up with it."

"Sound like to me it already got out," Lillian said, as she stirred sugar into her coffee. "But that man been mayor so long, he prob'ly think he b'long there."

"You're right about that, Lillian," I agreed. "Nobody's been willing to run against him for ever so long, so he probably thinks he can get away with anything."

"Well, not this time," Hazel Marie said. "Because I heard that Bill Denby's going to go up against him in the primary this spring. You know him, don't you? He's the service manager at the Chevrolet dealership. Somebody said his campaign slogan's going to be 'Fix It and Run It,' which is what he says the town needs, just like a car. Mayor Beebee just might get taken down a notch or two, considering how high-handed he is."

"I should say, high-handed. Why, it's gotten so that none of the commissioners dares do anything without his say-so. At least, that's what I hear. I'm not all that politically minded, myself. But what I want to know is why the mayor's name is being linked to Norma's? Did Mildred see him, too?"

"No, but she saw his car," Hazel Marie said, her eyes dancing with the image that produced. "You know that big ole thing he drives? You can't miss it, and everybody knows it. It was parked right outside the room, and Velma said that Mildred said that she waited as long as she could after Norma left to see if he'd come out of the room, too. But she had to go to

the bathroom real bad and couldn't wait any longer.

"But," Hazel Marie went on, a smile playing around her mouth. "You haven't heard it all yet." "I don't think I can stand much more. What else are they saying under the hair dryers?"

She put her hand on my arm and said, "Now, I'm not sure I believe this, but here goes. When Velma was combing me out, she whispered that there's talk going around about Emma Sue Ledbetter."

"What! With the mayor?" I was stunned, having no idea that the mayor was man enough for two women plus his wife.

"No, no," Hazel Marie said, patting my arm. "I've changed subjects."

"Well," I said with some relief that our preacher's wife was not linked with another man. "Thank goodness."

I knew that Emma Sue would no more make herself a topic of this kind of gossip than she would fly. Although, as I thought about it, she had been trying out her wings a little here lately.

"Besides," Hazel Marie went on, "Norma's got the mayor all tied up. At least, I guess she has. A few other names were mentioned in connection with hers, so nobody knows for sure who all she's catting around with. But what I wanted to tell you is that Velma said that Emma Sue made an appointment to have a complete makeover. And I'm talking hair color, makeup, everything."

"No!" I scrunched up a bath towel in my hands, unable to believe what I was hearing. "Hazel Marie, that is more unbelievable than Norma Cantrell traipsing around in a motel room. Are you sure?"

"Velma showed me her appointment book because I couldn't believe it myself. And there it was, Emma Sue Ledbetter, Thursday at seven P.M. Velma's doing her a favor by taking her after hours, so nobody'll be there with her."

"Pour..."

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