

Taming Julia

Jodie Wolfe

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Taming Julia
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Dedication

My first praise goes to my Lord and Savior who instilled in me a desire to share stories.

To my dear, sweet husband who encourages me daily to fulfill this calling. Thanks for being my biggest cheerleader.

To my friend, Joy. Thank you for all your helpful edits and insights.

To my fellow Scribes. Thank you for your help during the early stages of this project.

To Uncle Robert and Aunt Nickie. Thanks for helping with my Texas research.

To Nicola and Jamie. Thank you for your help in bringing this story to completion.

Finally, for my mom, for always believing I had a gift and pushing me toward using it.

What People are Saying

Taming Julia is the charming tale of an unconventional heroine who longs for a home and family and the reluctant hero who fears he's made a dreadful mistake by marrying her. Jodie Wolfe has skillfully penned a fascinating debut novel with colorful characters and an interesting plot that celebrates friendship, family, and faith.

~ Vickie McDonough, award-winning author of 27 books, including *Whispers on the Prairie*, a *Romantic Times* recommended inspirational read July, 2013.

Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
Psalm 61:1-2(KJV)

1

Matrimony News, February 6, 1875 edition

Minister bachelor aged 27, height 5 feet 10 inches seeks genteel, honest and first-rate homemaker with a desire to serve God. Must be willing to marry by proxy and arrive in Burrton Springs, Kansas by May 1.

~*~

Burrton Springs, Kansas, Saturday, May 1, 1875

Dear Lord, please don't let that creature be my new wife. Drew Montgomery swiped the sweat trickling a path down his neck and shoved the new hat back on his head. He squinted, taking in the lone passenger stepping from the stagecoach. At least, he thought it was a woman. He shielded his eyes from the sun, taking in the britches.

Britches? A gun belt strapped to a slim waist. He gulped. A rifle rested on her shoulder, and she wore a Stetson situated low on her brow. The figure shifted sideways, and Drew groaned, fearing his proxy mail-order bride had arrived by the look of all the curves. He squared his shoulders and crossed the street.

"Are you Montgomery?" Her coffee-brown gaze seared through him.

He snapped his gaping mouth shut and nodded. "Y-yes."

"Name's Jules Walker." She shoved her hand into his and shook it so hard his teeth clattered. "I reckon, Jules Montgomery since we're hitched." She waved a slip of paper in his face. "Got the paper here to

prove it. So are you my husband or not?"

Drew caught a whiff of dirt. He coughed and cleared his throat. She peered at him as if he were a chicken with one leg.

"I'm Drew." He managed to choke the words out. "Isn't your name Julia?"

She scrunched her face, pushed her Stetson from her head, and allowed it to dangle from the string around her neck. Her brown hair scattered in disarray, slipping from a shoulder-length braid. "I can't remember the last time I've been called Julia. Like I said, name's Jules."

"But..." Drew let the word hang between them. No matter. "Where're your things?"

"Got my knapsack and that there." She pointed to the top of the stagecoach. He expected to see a trunk, but a saddle rested there instead. What kind of woman brought a saddle into a marriage? What kind of woman showed up dressed like a man? *No. No.* Something was terribly wrong.

"I reckon you'll need to sign this here paper to make it all proper like. I already signed my name, and there's the judge's signature." She poked at the words on the page.

"Yes, I'll inscribe it when we reach our home." Drew shouldered the knapsack, hefted the saddle, and headed in the direction of the parsonage.

"Home. I like the sound of that." Jules smiled, a dimple flickered in each cheek, giving him the first hint that she was truly a female. She studied him for a moment then slanted her gaze to their surroundings.

"This is a town, huh? A heap of buildings tossed in one place." She gawked at each structure they passed.

Nothing seemed to escape her notice. The sun beat down with no mercy as they meandered along the street. He wished she'd hurry before anyone spotted her. What type of character had he agreed to marry? She didn't appear at all like the woman for whom he'd advertised, but now there was no way to change things. He forced his choppy breathing to slow. No avoiding it. He needed a wife by the next day, and his lone alternative, the one he'd chosen in order to keep his job, hiked along behind him. Drew cast a glance over his shoulder, moaned, and came to a halt. His bride plowed into him, causing him to stumble and fall to his knees.

"Sorry." She dusted him off with her hat and offered a hand.

“What’d you stop for?”

“Did you bring a horse?” He brushed at the dirt on his pants and picked up the saddle. His gaze drifted toward the stagecoach.

“Nah, Josh made me sell him afore I came here. Almost the worst thing I ever done.” She knocked the dirt from her hat before returning it to her head. “Here. There’s no reason to tote everything by yerself. Let me help.”

“No.” He shifted her belongings to a more comfortable position. “I’ve got it.”

“Don’t have to get testy.”

“I’m *not* testy.” A sigh hissed from his lips. *Give me patience, Lord.* He’d met his wife all of two minutes ago, and they already were having difficulty communicating. Had he been too hasty? *I must not have been thinking straight to order a woman sight unseen.* He shook his head. “A gentleman helps a lady.”

She snickered, and then her eyes narrowed. “Not goin’ back on yer word, are you?”

He gulped. Surely she couldn’t read his mind?

“I guess it won’t be bindin’ until you sign this.” She waved the document.

Drew pulled a shallow breath into his lungs, thankful she hadn’t pursued her question. “As I...I said, I’ll pen my name when we get to my place.” He took advantage of his long strides, and hurried along the street, grateful nobody milled around.

“What’s yer hurry?” Jules jogged to keep up with him.

Drew slowed his pace. “I assumed you’d be anxious to rest after the long trip. Where exactly in Texas did you reside? I don’t remember any mention of it.”

Her eyebrow lifted. “Seein’ as we just met, I don’t suspect I told you, but I last came from the Blanco area.”

“I’ve never been to Texas.” His arms perspired beneath the load of gear.

Jules moved the rifle to her opposite shoulder while marching along like a toy soldier. “Is yer place in town?”

“On the outskirts.” Drew nodded in the direction of his home, which was nestled beside the building that served as the schoolhouse during the week and church on Sundays. Beyond it stretched a fallow field that met the horizon. He didn’t want her to explore. He wanted to get to his house, hustle her inside, and close the door against any busybodies.

Jules scrutinized the homes and businesses, stopping every few steps to stare at them. "Guess it will take some gettin' used to."

"What will?" He tried to peer into her eyes, but she had shielded them with her hat.

"Livin' in a town."

"It's not much of a town yet, but perhaps we'll compare to Hutchinson before too long. Here we are." Drew swung the door open and moved aside, allowing her to enter the kitchen. "It's kind of small, but I hope you'll like it."

~*~

Jules scanned the room. Blue wildflowers sat in the center of a table, their scent wafting. "What's the big thing there?"

"A cook stove." His hazel eyes surveyed her.

How should she know what it was? She snapped her mouth shut. Better to not ask too much afore he signed the paper. Her brother had told her the marriage wouldn't be official-like until then. Josh hadn't said why she needed to come here and take a husband, but she trusted him. She sensed his decision had something to do with her safety. He'd told her returning to Texas wasn't possible.

Her new husband set the saddle near the door and motioned her toward the rest of the house. "Here's the sitting room."

Jules 'sposed it had the name because the thing in the center of the room was something a person sat on. Probably more comfortable than anything she'd ever been on along the trail. There were frilly things on the arms of the chair. She knew better than to ask.

Next they breezed by a small room. "That's my study."

"I ain't sure what a study is. Can't say I've ever seen one." She craned her neck as they passed the room.

Drew stopped short.

"Whoa there." She stumbled into him. "Wasn't expectin' you to hold up so fast."

His face got as red as a berry. He moved aside and allowed her to enter the last room.

She managed to contain a squeal when she saw the bed. Jules couldn't remember the last time she'd slept in one. Another large piece of furniture stood along the opposite wall. She walked over and ran her fingers along the smooth top. "It's right cold. What do you call

it?"

"A marble-top dresser," he replied. "It arrived last week. I thought you might want to have something special for dresses and..."

Warmth climbed into her face and neck while a swarm of bees took up residence in her gut.

The man's face darkened again.

She hoped he didn't have something wrong with him to make his face change like that each time they talked. "Feeling all right?"

"Yes." He gulped, taking on the likeness of a cornered critter. "Why?"

Jules wrangled how to answer. She stepped forward and removed his hat. The golden hair at his temples held a crease. For a few seconds, she fanned at his face to cool him off. A whiff of manly scent teased her senses.

He blinked rapidly and licked his lips. He captured her hand in his warm grip. "How about I endorse our marriage certificate?" Drew yanked her toward the kitchen. He shoved her into a chair and ran to the small room he'd called his study. He tripped and almost dropped the pen and jar of ink as he entered.

"I guess yer in a mighty big hurry to get hitched." Jules smiled, not sure why his face immediately repeated that cornered likeness. Her stomach did a funny flop, while her heart thudded in her ears.

He uncapped the jar and dipped the pen. With quick scratching, he made his mark on the paper and blew on it. "There, it's legitimate and right on time."

What did he mean? Jules puffed out a breath and stood up. It'd take a heap of patience to make sense of the man. Knocking her hat off, she let it dangle between her shoulders. A lump twisted in her throat. Her thoughts hadn't gone beyond arriving and meeting her new husband. Straining to recall memories of how her parents had acted, she came up with nothing. What 'xactly did a married couple do together? Warmth flooded her cheeks when she remembered the lone thing her brother had advised her concernin' the situation. "Josh said couples kiss after they're hitched. Should we try it? I've never done it afore, but I reckon we could give it a shot." She puckered her lips and waited.

Drew took a big step backward.

Had she used the wrong word? Jules wrinkled her brow, trying to recollect what her brother had said. Had he called it a peck? *Nah, couldn't be.* That's what prairie chickens did when they found a tasty

bug.

Her new husband sputtered.

She whacked him hard on the back. The poor man must still have something caught in his throat. "Got any willow bark?"

He shook his head.

"You keep havin' those coughing fits. Guess I need to get you healthy. You seem a might unfit."

"Unfit?" His eyes darted side-to-side.

"Easy there." She patted his arm. "I'm not gonna to hurt you."

~*~

Tempted to yank his arm away, Drew withstood her soothing. Unfit, indeed! Should we kiss? *Really, Lord? What kind of brazen woman is she?* Jules had sounded so sweet in her letters, but obviously there'd been some sort of miscommunication. How could he bring it up when he'd just made their marriage legal? His thoughts skipped to what would become their first night together. He'd been so busy trying to plan a way around the elders' stipulation to marry, he hadn't considered it. A bead of sweat pooled on his forehead. Would people talk if he started sleeping in the barn? His chest constricted.

"You sick or somethin'? Got all pale around the cheek bones." She motioned to his face. "Seen a doc lately?"

He tried to answer, but his lunch took up sudden residence in his throat. "Excuse me." Drew didn't wait for her reply. He clamped a hand over his mouth and dashed for the door, running toward the outhouse.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he entered the house a few minutes later and couldn't find Jules. Maybe he'd experienced a nightmare. Or he needed to accept his fate and make the best of it. *Give me strength for what's ahead, Lord.* His hand shook as he drank a glass of water. Setting it down, Drew went in search of his new bride. He found her kneeling just beyond the schoolhouse, beside a small campfire with a pot of water hanging above it.

Jules glanced his way.

Drew scraped his knuckles across his forehead.

She frowned, studying him. "Is yer head hurting too? Land's sake. Guess I got here just in time."

The woman has no idea. His bride stood and grazed her fingertips

across his brow.

"Hope you're not coming down with something. Sure didn't expect to spend my first day with my husband losing his food everywhere." She placed her hands on her hips. "It's a good thing Josh didn't know you were sick, or he would've never agreed to us marrying up."

It took sheer will power to keep his stomach under control and his feet from rushing for the little building behind the house a second time. His thoughts fuzzed and blurred. Jules had been spouting words about being sick and something concerning some man. *Josh*? She hadn't mentioned a last name, had she? A former beau? He racked his brain, trying to remember what she'd said in her letters. Nothing came to mind.

"Here, sit down." Jules pushed him on the grass and tried to press his head between his knees. She quirked an eyebrow. "Feeling puny, still? The tea will be ready in a bit. Rest a spell, and I'll fix you up right quick." She bent and stirred the pot with a stick.

He peered at her, motioning toward the house. "You could have prepared this inside."

"It's so much nicer out here." She shaded her eyes from the setting sun. "Besides, it don't take me long, and once you drink my willow bark tea, it'll help your gut." Her gaze darted about as if checking the perimeter.

If he'd known her better, he'd guess her nerves were drawn tight. His face warmed, and he ran his tongue across his lips. "Did you say willow bark?"

She examined him momentarily. "Yes, it's good for what ails a body. Josh and me use it all the time along the trail when one of us is feeling poorly. Glad I had some in my bag, or it would've taken me a heap longer to fix it. 'Course it'd taste better if I had some whiskey and honey. Don't s'pose you have any? Any willow trees around here? Sure is awful flat and not many trees. How do you stand it? Texas don't have a lot of trees neither, depends which part you're travelin' through. I guess each place has a beauty all its own. Sure do miss trees, though. The wind always blow like this? Might take some gettin' used to." She took a breath, "Don't say a whole lot, do you? Josh gets tired of me talking too. 'Course it's always worse when I'm nervous. Not that I'm nervous. Have you lived here long?"

Drew wasn't sure which question to answer first.

"Tea's almost ready. I'll fetch a mug from my pack. Hold on."

He opened his mouth to respond, but she'd taken off at a run, her lithe form covering the distance and returning in record time.

"Here we go." She used the edge of her jacket to grab the pan, poured the contents into a tin cup, and handed it to him. "Should I keep the fire going so I can cook us up some grub in a bit?"

A waft of the bitter brew accosted his nose. "No. Yes. I mean, our dinner's in the warming pan. I imagined you'd be weary from the trip, and I didn't want cooking a meal to be a concern on your first night here."

"That's right thoughtful, Drew. I 'preciate it. Josh would've never done something so proper. His gut always came first."

Drew formed the words to inquire concerning the elusive Josh. She startled him by bussing his cheeks with her lips. He refrained from placing his fingers where her lips had been.

Jules extinguished the flames and helped him to his feet. She was strong in spite of her petite frame.

"Say, you haven't drunk any tea yet."

Drew blew on the hot liquid then took a sip. He grimaced and shivered involuntarily.

"I reckon it don't taste the best, but sure does the body good. Makes one feel perky in no time. Let's go find some grub. I'm starving."

He allowed himself to be led to the house.

Jules kept after him until he drank the tea. He fought not to make a face as he handed the cup to her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Better?" Her intense stare made him want to squirm.

He lowered his eyes, surprised to discover his stomach *had* improved. "Yes, I appreciate it, Jules. I believe I feel up to eating some supper after all."

A smile crossed her tanned face. "Knew it would help. Glad I could lend a hand right away. You won't be sorry for marryin' me."

Her chattering followed him as he crossed to the cook stove, gathered their meal, and placed it on the small table. "There're cloth napkins and flatware in the drawer," he said motioning to one. He pulled out glasses and poured water into them.

"Aren't these fine." Jules ran her fingers across the fabric. "I've never seen nothing like it afore. What're they called, and what're they for?"

"Napkins. For wiping a mouth during the meal." His heart

pounded.

"Whoever thought to have a slip of material to swab yer mouth when food slopped on it? I thought that's what sleeves were for." She inhaled deeply. "Sure smells good in here. I'm hungrier than a hog at feeding time."

What sort of ruffian had he married? Drew held her chair, waiting for her to sit then found his own seat.

"What a gentleman."

A lump formed in his throat as he grasped her hand.

Jules blushed and interlaced her fingers with his.

He bowed his head and prayed, stumbling over the words. Her hand seared a permanent brand in his. The steady ticking of the clock brought him to the present.

"Did'ya want to hold hands all through the meal?"

"Amen." He hastily snatched his hand free and dug into the food. "No, just when we pray."

They ate in mutual silence, but Drew's mind was far from quiet.

Jules snagged his plate. "I'll wash these up right quick. We can do some kissing tomorrow." She yawned. "I'm plain tuckered out and need some sleep."

2

Jules stretched as dawn lit the sky and filtered through the window. She hadn't slept a wink in the big bed despite its softness. She was too used to her camp roll and ground sheet. Josh had let her sleep at a no longer used stage station once and she'd hollered with joy over the bed and the bedding before settlin' down. The sheets on this bed were now tangled in a heap. She rolled over and rested her palm where she'd expected her husband to sleep.

Drew had insisted on making a pallet on the sitting room floor. She didn't think it normal behavior for a husband and wife, but she hadn't questioned him. He'd been mighty edgy, and she didn't want to cause more bother for him.

Although he'd slept in a separate room, every deep breath or soft snore that had escaped Drew had kept her wide awake. Jules hadn't been that aware at night since the time her brother had spotted cougar tracks near their campsite a few years ago. Her heart galloped like Josh's gelding. She'd never minded hearing her brother's breathing or snores. What made her man any different? Body protesting, Jules slipped from the bed. While tempted to stay under the quilt longer, she reckoned Drew would hanker waking to a hot meal instead of a loafing wife.

She retrieved her clothes where she'd dropped them before slipping under the covers, ears alert to any sounds coming from the other room. On tiptoe, Jules edged past Drew. In the kitchen, she swung the door wide, stepped outside and closed it without a sound.

Jules inhaled the morning air as she tramped to the nearby stream. She filled a bucket with water, splashed her face, enjoying the familiar coolness. Moments later, she headed to the spot of yesterday's campfire. It took no time to have the wood blazing. She hurried to the house to drop off the water and withdrew a small frying pan from her pack, making a special effort not to awaken Drew. Outdoors again, Jules noticed a small henhouse and headed

toward it. After gathering eggs, she cracked them into the skillet, preparing breakfast for her new husband.

“Wish I had something more than eggs to make.” There hadn’t been enough room in her bag. “He’s sure to have an appetite after feeling puny last night and just pickin’ at his supper.”

She set a pot near the fire for coffee, using her last supply. Once breakfast was over, she’d poke around in the kitchen to see what kind of food there was to work with in the days ahead. She hoped he didn’t mind trail food. If they were hurting for meat, she could go hunting later that day, unless Drew had something else in mind.

The food prepared, she went inside to set the table. She peeked into the sitting room, but Drew didn’t twitch. *He must’ve been run to ground.* She gathered some wildflowers and replaced the wilted ones. Maybe she should let him doze, especially after those coughing fits he had. *Yes.* She’d better eat without him. Rest was good for a body. Jules placed enough food for Drew in the thing he’d called a warming pan and sat down to her cooling eggs. She chewed, spitting out eggshells. “Shouldn’t have been distracted this morning. Can’t remember the last time I was so sloppy with my cooking. Josh would never let me forget it.” She clamped a hand to her mouth. *Best not to wake Drew.* Her heart clenched with thoughts of her brother. Had she seen him for the last time? Belly full, she washed the few items in the nearby stream.

Jules stole through the house, stepping into the study for the first time. *Oh, my.* Books lined two walls of the small room. She ran her fingers along the spines. A whistle escaped. She’d never seen so many books in all her life. Growing up, she’d devoured the handful of McGuffey readers they’d owned until they’d finally fallen apart from use. Jules scanned the shelf in front of her. One book caught her eye and she withdrew it. Sitting in the chair by the desk she got caught up in the story.

The sound of a throat clearing pulled her from the tale. Her husband filled the doorway.

“Why didn’t you awaken me? We’ll be late for services.” A scowl filled Drew’s face.

Jules stood. “Late? I didn’t reckon we had anything planned today. Figured you needed rest. I’ve been up for hours. There’s some food in the warmin’ pan. I’ll fetch it while you wash up.” She put the book on the shelf and scurried to the kitchen.

A line from the novel played through her mind. ‘An elephant! An

elephant that belongs to an Indian but a hundred steps from here.' She'd dealt with many Indians throughout the years but didn't recall ever seeing an elephant. Maybe her husband knew about them.

Drew entered the kitchen, jamming the tails of his shirt into a pair of fancy britches. He shrugged into a jacket then sat at the table and bowed his head.

Jules poured him some piping hot coffee, thankful she'd kept the campfire burning. She smiled. Her fingers itching to smooth a piece of his hair, which stood on end. *Where had that thought come from?*

"Ugh! These eggs are cold. You said they were in the warming pan." He grimaced and placed a piece of an eggshell on the edge of his plate.

"They were."

Drew shoved his chair, stood, and crossed the room. "How do you expect it to keep my food warm when the stove isn't lit?"

"Light it?"

"Yes, light it. Honestly."

Jules shrugged. She'd have to learn his peculiar ways.

~*~

Of all the mornings, Lord. Why did I have to oversleep this Sunday? Drew raked his fingers through his hair. He regained his seat to eat his cold breakfast and took a sip of the coffee, nearly spitting it. The bitter brew almost curled his toes.

"Need me to whack yer back again?" Jules hovered by his chair.

He held his hand up to stop her. "No, I could use some cream and sugar though."

"I reckon I've gotten used to strong coffee." She grinned. "Uh, I don't know where the cream and sugar is."

"Never mind, I'll get it. Go on back and change your clothing."

She opened her mouth, closed it, spun on her heel, and headed to the bedroom.

I surely am going to need patience today, Lord. Drew stirred his beverage and nearly inhaled it. The coffee burnt his tongue, blazing a fire down his throat.

The dishes clanked together when he placed them on the dry sink a moment later. He rushed into the study to collect his sermon notes, shoving them into his Bible. Drew hesitated, swallowed hard, and

knocked on the bedroom door. At her response, he crossed the threshold.

Jules sat on the bed, dressed in the shabbiest garments he'd ever seen, running a comb through her brown hair.

His jaw dropped, and he struggled to cool the ire igniting in his belly. The rustic woman tried his restraint like none other. Yet, he couldn't take his gaze from her river of shimmering hair.

Her shirt billowed around her shoulders, appearing to be at least two sizes too big. She'd rolled the sleeves, but her hands were barely visible. The pants swam around her waist cinched by what looked like a length of horse harness. An unsure smile played at the corner of her lips.

"Weren't sure why you wanted me to swap my clothes. We fixin' to go huntin'?" She picked at a small hole in the knee of her britches.

"What? No. Why would you say something so absurd?"

"On account of you askin' me to switch my duds. Figured my others were too fancy." She frowned.

"No, apparently there's a misunderstanding here." He clenched his teeth tight. What was it about the woman that caused him to lose his ability to communicate?

"You're sure hard to read." She stood and clumped closer, her lips pressed together, eyes blazing fire. "I reckon my attire may not be to yer liking, but yer *stuck* with me." She stabbed her finger in his chest. "Sure didn't figure on my man being the type to look down on someone on account of how they're dressed. I don't know 'xactly how *you* are, maybe you *do* judge folks."

He barely managed to keep his mouth from gaping open. How had their conversation got so twisted? Had she accused *him* of being judgmental? He'd only meant for her to change into a dress, but perhaps his wishes should've been made clearer. He hadn't asked her to do anything out of character for a woman.

"Please change into something more sensible." *Like something more appropriate for church.* "I, we need to hurry." He bit his tongue, refusing to stir an argument on the Lord's Day. Drew shifted his Bible and pages of notes slipped and fluttered to the floor. He bent to retrieve them, peering up at Jules. Roses bloomed in her tanned cheeks. What thoughts were fluttering through her head? He didn't stay to discover them.

He paced the tiny kitchen, lifted the curtain at the window, and cringed when he saw the churchyard filling up with buggies and

buckboards. Drew breathed a prayer of thanksgiving when he heard his wife enter the room.

"I'm ready."

"Good." He turned toward her. "B-but, you're wearing the same clothes from yesterday. Where's your dress? I thought I made it clear to change to your *best* outfit." Drew wanted to shake her slim shoulders. What should he do with her? He wished he could leave her home, but he couldn't show up without a wife when today was the deadline.

Her eyes blazed. "This *is* my best set of britches and shirt, which is why I wore it when we met. I don't own a dress. Can't say I remember ever ownin' one, although I guess I might have as a young tyke. It'll have to do. It's all I have except for Josh's clothes, and those didn't meet your likin'."

"There's nothing we can do now. Most of the congregation is already there. I'll never hear the end of this," he grumbled, opening the door. It couldn't be avoided. She'd have to come along.

~*~

Jules glared at Drew's retreating back. What had he found wrong with her clothing? The only other piece in her wardrobe was her union suit, and she refused to strip down to that. Confounded man. She tried to calm her thudding heart. She'd thought being married would be the same as spending time with her brother, but this man completely befuddled her. She sighed and strapped on her gun belt.

Drew hoofed a full two strides ahead of her. She caught up and stared ahead at the clapboard building nestled in a small grove of trees. Her heart pained at the sight of tethered horses munching on grass. Should've kept her mount. She swiped her moist hands on her britches, while he yanked the door open.

Older women swarmed and clucked about like mother hens, pushing their daughters forward.

Drew sputtered as if he had something stuck in his throat.

Jules gave him a firm whack between his shoulders to get his lungs working. She'd have to make him more tea later, once they finished up at the school. There must be a special program because the bell was ringing.

"I reckon we find a perch, sugar." Jules nearly shouted the

words, so she could be heard over the cackling womenfolk. She'd remembered how a young married couple she and Josh had met on the trail last year had used the word when they talked to each other. Maybe using it would help calm his dander.

Drew's ears and face turned bright red. He yanked her toward the front of the building and sat her on a bench, then went behind a funny shaped box on top of a table. He cleared his throat and bowed his head. "Dear God, we pray for Your presence at our service this morning. May our hearts and minds be attuned to what You desire to show us today."

Jules could feel eyes boring into her head. Maybe she should've braided her hair instead of shoving it under her hat.

A small hand rested on her arm. A young woman with kind eyes smiled and offered an open book with words and some strange markings running across it. Jules opened her mouth to thank the lady, but the folks were already singing.

"Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves."

What were sheaves and why were the people rejoicing about bringing them? Jules surveyed the room but didn't see anything peculiar. She opened her mouth to ask the woman beside her when the next song began. This song told about soldiers marching off to war. The war had ended. She waited to see what happened next.

Jules hoped Drew would sit beside her once he finished his announcing, but he didn't. Instead, he opened a book and removed a stack of papers. Did he plan on giving a speech? Her brother had told her sometimes that happened when a town held a special celebration. Not that he had ever let her get close enough to hear one.

"Turn to Genesis 2:7-25. Let's stand while we read God's Word." Drew's gaze shifted to hers.

Jules caught most of what he said, although her mind tended to wander. She stared at her husband.

He finished with the line, "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed." His face went bright red. He ran his finger between the collar of his shirt and his neck.

Maybe she should fetch the poor man a cup of water. Too bad the twosome next to her were so close to her side. Jules decided to stay put and keep an eye on her man. If he had another coughing fit, she'd stomp over them to get him a drink.

~*~

Drew's collar tightened it seemed. He could kick himself for choosing that passage. Somehow, earlier in the week it'd been a good idea since he would have a new bride to show off. What better way to share his news to the congregation than to talk on marriage? His thoughts rambled, and his gaze bounced to the previous verse. *'Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.'*

The room grew at least ten degrees hotter. What would people say if he opened a window and thrust his head outside? They'd probably think he'd lost his mind. He'd probably wind up with apoplexy.

His voice shook as he spoke the first line of his message. How could he talk on the topic of marriage when he hadn't been married for one full day yet? Sweat poured down his sides, and he debated whether he should change his epistle midstream. Would anybody notice?

Drew thumbed through his Bible, trying to find something else to present. The words from a passage in the book of Judges leaped at him. *'And he found a new jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand, and took it, and slew a thousand men therewith.'* Definitely not appropriate. Resigned, he closed his eyes and decided to proceed with the original discourse.

Each tick of the clock reverberated. He stumbled his way through his notes, not sure if he made any sense. He breathed a sigh when he could finally sit while the congregation sang the closing hymn. Drew kept his head bowed in prayer throughout the singing, not wanting to see any questioning stares. When the music finished, he struggled to his feet, feeling like he'd run a long distance.

"Let us pray. Dear God, thank You for this glimpse of marriage from Your word. Help us to be ever mindful of how we can follow and serve You in our homes and families. May we desire to spread Your word to the lost world. Help us not to judge others without first taking the beam from our own eye. May we be ever attentive to Your presence in our lives. In Jesus' name, amen."

The congregation drew to its feet.

Erma Miller made a beeline to the front of the church.

It was now or never. "Excuse me. Before everyone heads out this

Taming Julia

morning, I want to introduce you to this wonderful woman on the front pew. I'd like you to meet Mrs. Julia Montgomery, my wife."