

A Man of His Word

By

Sage Delouise

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Chapter 1

Heart pounding, Julia came out of the bedroom she shared with two of her thirteen sisters and followed Sister Mother Nora down the stairs to the dining room. The order to appear for company had come from their visitor, the prophet himself, and Nora's hands had been shaky as she checked Julia's high top button. Their shapeless cotton dresses were identical except for the colors. Today, Nora wore yellow, and she'd told Julia to wear her sky blue one, usually reserved for church or special occasions.

The two men seated at the polished oak table watched Nora and Julia walking toward them, their eyes fixed on Julia, intent and appraising. At just past noon, the room was at its brightest, sunlight falling from the windows of the large room. Only small shadows fell from the figures of the men.

"Prophet Wilmot, Brother Rob," Nora nodded deeply, almost bowing to them. Julia nodded, watching them warily.

"You have done well, Sister Wife Nora. Sister Julia looks healthy, strong, and well prepared to be a wife and mother." The older of the men looked Julia up and down with watery blue eyes.

Nora nodded once, and out of nervous habit, rubbed her palms, as if drying them, down the sides of her long dress. Lowering her eyes, she said quietly, "Thank you, Prophet Wilmot. All the sister wives share credit for raising her. And of course, we thank the Great One for bestowing on her an obedient nature and robust physical self."

"Praised be," Wilmot said. "She would have been wedded to Brother Rob six years ago, as promised when she came to us as a child of five." He spoke without halting his examination of Julia, "But as you know, Rob has been unwell. We are praying for his strength to return." Prophet Wilmot spoke as if Rob were not in the room, sitting beside him, pale as white paper.

Rob nodded and coughed, bringing a bony hand up to cover his mouth. "The Great One has seen fit to humble me by weakening my body." His voice was halting and husky. "And He will heal me when I have earned His Grace."

A pang of sympathy brought a smile to Julia's lips. "Brother Rob," she said, "you have always been kind to me, from the day Prophet Wilmot brought me here to Lovespring."

Wilmot waved dismissively, the signal for her to stop speaking. "As your only living relative, I was charged with your care when my younger sister and her husband, your father, were killed in the accident. They were not believers, but nonetheless, you needed a family." He sighed as if burdened. There was no kindness in his voice.

He brushed his fingertips through the few strands of hair on the top of his head, removed his thick glasses, and rubbed them on his shirt as he did when preparing to begin a sermon. Or before sentencing a sister wife to be punished by her husband.

When his glasses were back on the bridge of his nose, he said, “Now, Sister Julia, I have made a decision. As you are past the age when our sisters become wives, and though Brother Rob has long anticipated having you as his first wife, you will not be marrying him.”

Rob’s eyes widened in surprise. His lips tightened to a thin line and paled, but he didn’t speak.

“He may not be hardy enough to father the children we expect from the union of a man and woman. It is unlikely he will do so in the near future.” Wilmot raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Though none of us can presume to know the Great One’s plans for us.”

Julia inhaled deeply and breathed out in relief, pressing her hand against the high neck of her dress. Beside her, Nora gasped in surprise. In the thirteen years Julia had lived in the community, only death had changed wedding plans made for children. This was a reprieve. Rob had never aroused the feelings in her she imagined a wife should have for her husband, feelings she longed to experience. But she had resigned herself to a marriage of duty. She’d witnessed her sisters around her accepting life as sister wives with men who were indifferent, cruel or cold. And no man had any choice but to marry as many women as Wilmot brought to him. Sometimes the men were kind or attractive or both, and there was love in the marriage to begin with, as there had been for her sister and close friend, Winnie. Promised at the age of three, and married at fourteen, Winnie had been blessed to be united with a curly-haired, gentle husband, in a loving union. But after two years, he was ordered to take a second wife. Winnie suffered jealousy, anger and sadness. Wives here learned to bear their heartbreak in silence. The punishment for the sin of envy or resentment was harsh. Husbands were not allowed to leave marks, but if Wilmot took on the job of delivering a beating, he left bruises and cuts on their hands and faces that were visible proof of the wife’s failure to joyfully follow the Word of the Great One. And those were a sign that she might not be accepted into Heaven.

Julia had been lucky not to have become a wife before she turned thirteen as some girls did, and in spite of the sympathy she felt for frail Rob, she did not want to become his lover and the mother of his children. But out of duty to the Great One and the community, she would have done as the prophet wished.

Again, Wilmot removed his glasses and rubbed them on his shirt. He pushed them back onto the bridge of his nose and held out a hand toward Julia. “I have decided, Sister Julia, that I will have you for myself.”

Shock, then repulsion, chased through her system, and perspiration dampened her underarms and her palms. He was her uncle, at least a decade older than her mother. He already had seventeen wives. Apart from the horrific picture his announcement evoked, she’d occasionally heard muffled screams coming from the houses where his spouses

lived, at times when she knew he was visiting them. But not one of them had ever complained or appeared injured. The women talked about duty, and faith, and getting into Heaven to serve the Great One in the same way they served their husbands.

Rob's usually pale face drained to green. He stared at Julia, expressionless.

Wilmot waved her to approach him with the hand he had been holding out, impatient now.

And as much as Julia wanted to enter Heaven, and to be an obedient child of the Great One as she had always been, she could not will her feet to move.

A hand shoved against her arm, gently but firmly. Nora. The women of Lovespring were strong from hand washing the community's clothing, kneading dough for bread and doing housework without electricity. When Julia didn't move, Nora pushed hard at the small of her back until she was forced to step forward to keep her balance.

Wilmot's eyes narrowed and he grinned, baring yellow, uneven teeth. "Child, if you have to be prompted to do as I command, your future as my wife will not be a pleasant one. Come closer."

Julia wanted to say "no", or at least, to shake her head mutely. But the consequences of refusing the prophet were unimaginable. She would not give him an excuse to lay his hands on her until she was absolutely forced. By marriage. She shuddered.

As a child, the day of her union with a man seemed so far in the future, it didn't concern her. It was simply The Way. Her sister mothers were all sister wives, and all of her fifty-one sisters were destined for marriage. She hadn't questioned her path. But now, suddenly, she was eighteen, and, as she'd just been reminded, past the age where most of her sisters had been joined with Lovespring men. She gritted her teeth and took another step toward her fate.

Wilmot's strong, rough hand grabbed her wrist and yanked her to within a foot of his knees, and then let go of her. "This is a blessed day for me," he smiled, showing his stained teeth. Breath as sour as milk that had gone off blew across her face, and her stomach roiled. She swallowed.

"I will not touch you again until we are coupled. You will be a good wife, and produce many children for Lovespring. Now go and pray to the Blessed One for obedience to fill your heart, while I choose a day to seal you to me." He rose, and with Rob following him, he left.

Tears threatened and Julia blinked them into submission before she turned to her sister mother. "I'll be in the sacred hall of the church." She walked past the shaking Nora, then turned and hugged her. Nora sighed deeply. Julia was grateful she'd saved this woman, who had shared in her care for most of her life, guiding her with love and warmth, from the torment of incurring Wilmot's displeasure.

The back door opened onto a field, green with spring grasses, which usually brought a glow to her heart. But a bitter chill had gripped her and the sun made no difference. By going out the back way, she wouldn't see Wilmot on her way to her prayers. He might send someone to make sure she was in the church, praying, so she would go, and she would pray. But as she walked, her thoughts raced. *There had to be an escape.* Could she make herself so unappealing as wife material that the prophet would change his mind? Could she fake illness?

In the church, her prayers spun in the same hamster wheel as her thoughts, searching for a way out. At least she had time; she had as long as Wilmot took to decide on a wedding date.

* * *

Hours later, Nora's appearance in the chapel aisle surprised Julia. She wasn't late for her chores. She'd been keeping an eye on the light outside the windows. She was sure she hadn't become so absorbed in her prayers that she'd forgotten to watch the angle of the sun and return in time to help with dinner preparations.

Nora's work-reddened hands rubbing the skirt of her dress signaled that there was a more urgent reason for her to come and find Julia. "There will be a special dinner tonight." She stilled her hands by clasping them in front of her apron. "We have a visitor, an outsider who's with the police. Probably looking for missing people they think have been taken in here. So Prophet Wilmot has commanded us to welcome him, and to show that we are a contented and generous family." She held out her hand for Julia to take.

Hand in hand they walked through the long, late afternoon shadows that stretched on the ground from the bottom of the tree trunks dotting the field. Julia controlled the urge to grip Nora's fingers. "Sister Nora, has any woman Prophet Wilmot wanted for marriage ever ended up not married to him?"

Sister Nora's hand twitched. She sounded shocked. "I've been here twenty-three years and I've never seen a woman, or a man, go against the prophet. We follow his direction and get closer to Heaven and to the Great One every day. Prophet Wilmot has bestowed a rare blessing on you. You have been unfortunate in the prophet's first choice of husbands for you, with Brother Rob's poor health. But Prophet Wilmot is benevolence itself in offering to make you his wife. If you pray for obedience, Heaven will open its gates to you."

Nora paused, looked at Julia, and brushed a hair back from her forehead. "Now let's re-braid your hair and prepare to greet our guest respectfully."

They walked on. Julia's blood ran cold with the sense of betrayal by the one member of the family she had hoped would understand. She would have to keep her feelings and thoughts to herself. She said, "We rarely allow outsiders onto our land, much less invite them to dinner. Is he here to make trouble? Should we be afraid of him?"

Nora smiled. "With the Great One looking on, we need never fear."

Julia nodded, but she couldn't smile. Not with Prophet Wilmot's decision hanging over her.

* * *

At the head of the grand dining table, Wilmot ordered his followers to be gracious to their visitor, and to show that all members were there of their own free will, doing the works of the Great One with joy in their hearts. He said, "No one here is forced to stay or to do anything he or she doesn't choose to do." His smile implied a shared joke among them. Several people smiled back at the idea that others didn't understand the abundance of the Great One's love.

"Our visitor is a servant of the outsiders' laws." He warned them with a reminder that though he would love to share the bounty of their blessed life with more of the greater population, that could lead to persecution. And when the police took it in their heads to harass them, ensuing legal messes might be costly, and the publicity that always surrounded the criminal charges they fabricated, blackened public opinion of Lovespring.

When the outsider appeared in the great hall, flanked by two of the older brothers, Wilmot stood and waved him to sit in the empty chair that waited on his right, halfway down the side of the table.

Wilmot waved to the members on either side of an empty chair close to where he was, but remained standing. "Welcome to our family, Mr. Miller, "I am aware you are here to observe us."

The visitor sat across the table from Julia, but she kept her eyes on her plate. She had never seen a man from beyond the community before. In her thirteen years at Lovespring, no one had been allowed in.

"You seek evidence that we hold our believers captive, that we abuse our women and force our congregation to follow our laws. I have welcomed you, not only because we are a courteous people, but to allow you to see for yourself that all here are heartfelt in their belief."

The underlying command to demonstrate the prophet's words was clear. Julia looked up as everyone else did. All her sisters and brothers were smiling happily.

Even seated, Mr. Miller was taller than those beside him. His face was handsome, but not warm as he smiled politely at the beaming faces around him. The smile didn't touch his grey eyes.

Nora said, "Welcome to our table. You are connected with the police, are you not?"

Prophet Wilmot stared at Nora as he sat. "Sister Nora, do not impose your curiosity upon our visitor. His purpose in coming here is to question us, which he is welcome to do."

Julia knew that if a man had asked the question, Wilmot would have approved. The job of the men was to protect the family. Women were not expected to have opinions of their own.

The outsider turned to Nora. “Call me Laz, please. I’m not with the police; I’m FBI. Special agent.” His voice was deep, and although he didn’t speak loudly, it carried. “This is a routine visit, we like to keep tabs on the community in general. As you know, Mr. Steed,” he looked at Wilmot, “there have been instances of teens disappearing from their homes and schools over the years, and occasionally they’re located in group settings like Lovespring.”

Wilmot’s eyebrows rose. “I am addressed as Prophet Wilmot. And we don’t receive much news from outside. When we do, only I am exposed to it. The events of the world are too vile for our women and children to hear about.” He smiled. “I’m sure you’ll find no captive adolescents here, Mr. Miller.”

“I go by Agent Miller,” the stranger said, “if you’re not comfortable with Laz.”

Wilmot’s eyebrows twitched and his eyes narrowed.

If Laz noticed, he didn’t let on. “Thank you, Prophet Wilmot, for arranging for everyone to welcome me.” He ignored the implication that he was looking for vanished teens.

Fascinated by the square jaw and no nonsense set of his mouth, Julia watched him. The others ate, looking up at him politely. But she’d lost interest in her food. She couldn’t keep herself from studying his eyes and lips.

Special Agent Miller looked around the table, as if in greeting. But Julia saw an extra sharpness in his expression, beyond friendliness. He was searching for something.

His focus moved from one person to another. And then he was looking directly at her. He held her there. His eyes on hers kept her from looking away while a hot flush blossomed up her throat and into her face.

Wilmot’s nasal voice cut into Julia’s trance. “Sister Julia, do you wish to speak to our guest?” With a quiet clink, he placed his knife and fork on the edge of his plate, staring at Miller with cold eyes. His mouth compressed to a tight, angry line.

Miller looked at Wilmot. The room stilled.

The family’s leader stood and held out his hands, gesturing to his flock to remain seated. He reached for his bifocals and pulled them off. Glasses in hand he said, “I have happy news this evening, and I will share it with our family and honor you, Agent Miller, by allowing you to be among the first to hear it.”

He looked at Julia. “As we know, tomorrow is Sister Julia’s nineteenth birthday.”

Julia’s heart pounded rapidly and loudly in her ears. Her face heated with embarrassment as everyone’s attention swung to her, and she heard a buzz of congratulatory sounds.

Laz Miller watched her, silently.

Wilmot's hand reached for his shirtfront and he polished his glasses before returning them to the bridge of his nose. "And on that blessed day of her birth, which the outside world will agree confirms that she is an adult woman, she will become my wife."

Laz watched the flush drain from Julia's skin. Her mouth opened slightly, and her fists, beside her plate, clenched. *Clever bastard.* Wilmot knew that polygamy was controversial, but not illegal at this time. Child abuse was. He had chosen which pieces of his news to tell Laz. Julia hadn't moved, and her face was still white. He couldn't believe she would willingly consent to marry Wilmot.

After dinner, and before evening prayers, the community broke into small groups for an hour of silent meditation. Julia chose to pray in solitude. She walked to her favorite spot in the fields where a sliver of moonlight streaked down the side of a larch tree. She prayed for the strength to convince Wilmot he didn't want her, or for the wisdom to find a way out of the marriage without openly opposing him.

"Are you going through with this wedding? Do you really want to marry Wilmot?"

Julia jumped, spun to find the source of the voice behind her, and gasped. "How dare you sneak up on me like that? It's our time for meditation." She was astonished at her tone; she had never spoken to anyone that way. But nerves and despair had her on edge.

Laz stayed where he was, two feet away from her. "You didn't answer my question. Tell me the age difference doesn't matter to you, that this marriage is what you want and I'll let you get on with your prayers."

"It is the way. Our way. You wouldn't understand." She knew she was delaying, not answering him directly, but the words that would convince this outsider to leave her in peace wouldn't come to her. She tried to say, 'Yes, I want to marry Wilmot,' but her gorge rose when she pictured him.

Laz reached for her arm and Julia jumped back, but he held on. "I'm an outsider, I know. But you can tell me if your life here isn't voluntary, if you don't choose to be part of this cult any more."

Not be part of the only family she'd known? The idea terrified her. She raised her chin. "We've been warned that outsiders call us a cult. That word is an insult. This is my family. You're a stranger. Why would I tell you anything?"

Still holding her arm tightly, as if he thought she would disappear if he let go, Laz said, "Because if you are being forced to stay here and marry Wilmot, that constitutes detaining you against your will and I can take you out of here."

She had never, ever considered leaving. But, she'd never been faced with marrying a cruel, foul-smelling man the next day. Tomorrow. She didn't have much time to make the biggest decision of her life.

* * *

Word spread quickly, as it always did. A crowd gathered in the church, leaving a space on a pew at the front for Julia. Prophet Wilmot's other wives were scattered throughout the congregation, but for now, while she was newly chosen but not united with the prophet, Julia would be treated as a special and honored sister and daughter of the family.

Prophet Wilmot climbed the shallow stairs to the raised dais and looked slowly around the room, his eyes lingering on Julia. "We gather tonight, as we do every night, to thank the Great One for the bounty of love he bestows upon us." He began his sermon with his usual opening.

Julia watched the dust motes caught in a beam of the last light of the day. The prophet's speech blurred as her mind spun. Could she marry him? Be one of his wives? She would have her own house, and he didn't visit each wife daily. But when he arrived, he expected his wives to be ready for him in every way. The thought sickened her.

A movement behind her had caused all heads to turn toward the spot. Two rows back, Laz stood. One lanky leg bent at the knee gave his wide, leather belt a casual slant. Of course, he was an outsider and not accustomed to standing up straight in the church, or bowing his head toward the pulpit when entering.

"Prophet Wilmot," he said. "If I may, I'd like to thank the community for making me feel so welcome."

Wilmot's eyebrows lifted in surprise. No one ever spoke in the church unless asked to by him. But he nodded, benevolence itself.

Julia knew he had no choice. He had, after all, told everyone to be gracious with the visitor.

"Thank you," Laz said.

Wilmot looked more surprised that the outsider continued to speak. An eyebrow twitched as he kept his focus on Laz.

Laz remained standing. "I would like to spend the night here, it would be informative for me. I hope a member of this group will be able to accommodate me."

The prophet's eyes bulged. He took a deep breath and calmed his features.

"I'm sure that can be arranged." Something caught his eye. "Yes, Brother Gregory?" A thin man at the back pew had stood. Prophet Wilmot said, "Yes, you may speak."

Brother Gregory looked at Laz, and said, "I can offer you a bed at my house. It's humble but clean. I hope you'll be comfortable there."

As Laz thanked him, Julia stared resolutely at the floor. She would be suffering all night now, struggling to choose her fate. Laz would still be there in the morning. Now, she would have hours to battle with her conscience and question her faith. And torture herself with warring pictures of doing her duty with the prophet, and images of the tall stranger with his full head of hair and the smile that sent currents through her to places in her body it was sinful to think about. She would will them away, pray for

release of those forbidden thoughts. But she had a feeling that thoughts of Laz would win the war.