

"A WARM AND WITTY TALE THAT WILL GRAB YOU
BY THE HEART!" —DENISE HUNTER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF THE RIVERBEND ROMANCE SERIES



JULIA MONROE BEGINS AGAIN



REBEKAH MILLET

✧ BEIGNETS FOR TWO ✧

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MONROE
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AGAIN**

REBEKAH MILLET



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JESUS, THANK YOU FOR PLANTING THIS STORY
IN MY HEART AND KEEPING IT THERE,
EVEN WHEN IT WAS AGAINST THE ODDS.

1

IN HINDSIGHT, SCHEDULING MY FIRST routine mammogram on my fortieth birthday may not have been a wise choice.

I sat in the empty waiting room of the New Orleans Women's Clinic, clipboard on my lap and pen in my hand. A fountain wall dribbled to my left, trying to emit calmness and having the opposite effect on my bladder.

I sailed through the beginning of the patient form: name, birth date, address. The next section, though . . . My pulse slowed as I read the question of my relationship status. *Single* and *married* were the only options. Where was the *widowed* box? And why did they need to know this information? Did my marital situation really impact my breasts? Well, maybe it did. Today would be the first day in ten years my North American regions had seen this much action.

With the paperwork completed, my gaze swept the pamphlets on the end table. Colonoscopies and mammograms and colorectal screenings, oh my! Didn't they want women to willingly return to this place? There should be *People* magazines, a coffee bar, and one of those mall masseuses set up in the corner.

The fountain continued calling to my bladder as though it were the Pied Piper. I'd already scoped the reception area for a

bathroom and had come up empty. Curse that café au lait I'd had on the drive here. Of course, that was what having two babies did to you.

My boys. The urge to text them distracted me from the call of nature and the impending doom of being squeezed like an orange in a juicer. My youngest had started his first year of college in North Carolina at the same university where my oldest was now a sophomore. They had each other and my in-laws, who lived fifteen minutes from the campus. Those two reasons, and the fact that they had full scholarships, made the distance between us somewhat bearable.

"Julia Monroe?" A nurse in pink scrubs stood next to the back door, a folder in her hands.

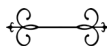
I pushed my self-dyed brown hair from my shoulder and grasped my purse.

"Are you a healthcare worker too?" She motioned to my black scrubs, ironically appropriate for today.

"Oh. No, I'm a maid."

She nodded. "I bet the last thing you want to do when you get home is clean."

If I had a dollar . . . A forced chuckle matched my smile.



"I can't believe you put Harry in mourning clothes." I shook my head at the life-sized Harry Connick Jr. cardboard cutout and my friend Kate Landry, who owned Beignets & Books. The eatery operated within a historic house handed down through her family. The tourist and local hotspot nestled on the edge of the neighborhood known as the Garden District. Each room on the first floor held dining tables and shelves brimming with well-loved books ready for perusal on everything New Orleans.

Kate, also dressed in black, took a seat across from me at the round table for three. "Since you wouldn't let me throw an

official over-the-hill party, I had to make do.” She set a plate of fresh beignets on the black tablecloth spread before us. Powdered sugar drifted from the dish, dotting the fabric. Matching streamers mummified our chairs.

“I’ll be sure to return the favor when you hit forty.”

“I plan to stay in my thirties forever.” Kate rubbed her index finger between her brows, smoothing a crease she’d recently become obsessed with.

The rest of the establishment was empty of customers, Kate’s business having closed half an hour ago. The murmur of voices, laughter, and dishes clattering drifted from the kitchen at the back. Smooth jazz music piped in through the speakers.

We were breaking the cardinal rule of not wearing black while eating these confectionary treats, but considering the occasion, spilled powdered-sugar stains could be overlooked. I sank my teeth into a puffy square-shaped pastry. Soft sugar dusted the crispy outside, giving way to a melt-in-your-mouth tender middle. This week’s food cheat had been worth the wait.

Kate’s sideswept auburn bangs cascaded over one eye. “Do you know what I realized today?”

“That you need to get Harry a kilt for when St. Patrick’s Day rolls around?”

A smile unfurled, bringing a sparkle to her blue eyes. Grabbing a packet of raw cane sugar, she ripped the paper and added the crystals to her mug. “Other than that.”

“What?”

“With the boys gone, it’s like you’re really single again.”

“I’ve been single for a decade.” I placed the last bite of beignet into my mouth and sagged back in my chair in ecstasy.

“I know that.” She poured decaf coffee from a French press, stirred her brew, and rested the spoon on her saucer. “But now you don’t have the boys to take care of or to keep you from going out. Have you thought about dating again?”

“Have you?” I boomeranged the question, raising my brows for good measure.

Kate tucked her bobbed hair behind her ear. “What about Hayley?” She had adopted her niece when her sister had died around the same time as my husband.

“She’s eleven with internet access. I think she knows adults date. Where is she anyway?”

“Spending the weekend with my parents. And nice try, but I know you’re *stal-ling*.” Kate sang the last word.

Grumble, grumble. My attention wandered past Harry’s soulful eyes and beyond the front windows. Lampposts dimly lit the neutral ground of St. Charles Avenue, and a streetcar stuffed with passengers glided along its tracks. “Why would I want to pretend I don’t belch or pass gas? Or worry about shaving my legs?”

“You shave your legs.”

“Only for church and not in the winter.” I raised my mug, eyes lifting to the ceiling. “Thank You, Lord, for knee-high boots.”

“I’ll toast to that.” Kate lifted her cup too. “But I’ve read that people who had great marriages have a higher likelihood of happily remarrying.” Her head tilted. “Is it because of Mark?”

“No.” A feeling of sorrow descended, having nothing to do with the mentioning of my departed husband’s name. Time, counseling, and God had shepherded me and my boys through our abrupt loss via a car accident. “Mark would’ve wanted me to move on.”

I busied myself with pouring coffee I had no interest in drinking. If there was one thing life had taught me, it was that if you loved someone—one way or another—they could be taken from you, and I didn’t have the strength to go through that kind of pain again.

2

"I THINK HENRY CAVILL JUST GOT SAVED or joined our church."

Kate's whispered words jarred me from my prayers during the invitational part of our service. She inclined her head to the altar of the large sanctuary while the congregation sang "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus."

My gaze channeled on the back of a tall, broad-shouldered man. Recognition feathered my brain. Was he a former client? No, I'd remember a stature like that. And it wasn't only his physique that stole my admiration but how he carried himself. He oozed military. A thin leather strap ran along his shortly clipped brown hair. If this man was half as appealing from the front—*Ack!* I screwed my eyes shut. What was I doing? This was exactly why hot men should not be allowed in church, and unquestionably not in a pastoral role of any kind.

The guy turned, confirming the eye patch pulled flush against his face, and my feeling of recognition crystallized.

Samuel Reed.

One of my ankles caved, my heel slipping out from under me. I seized the seat-back before me, righting myself.

No. No way.

My instinct to haul butt was stopped by Samuel heading in the other direction through a side door with the pastor. They

exited, all buddy-buddy, and my stomach dropped. Why was he in my church? How had he lost his eye? Had he seen me?

Kate nudged my arm. “Are you okay?”

I managed a nod. Intense warmth rushed my neck and face. Was I having my first hot flash? The blood thrashing in my ears muted the congregation’s singing of the hymn’s last verse.

The service concluded, and we poured into the modern welcome center, where members made their way to leave or stood in line for one of the coffee carts. My floral-print dress swished around my legs as I beelined for the exit. I faked smiles and good mornings to people, and prayed I wouldn’t run into Samuel.

Maybe he was only traveling through town and wanted to ask the pastor to pray for him. Or douse him with holy water. Goodness knew he needed it.

I winced. Oh, how easy it was to slip into old judgmental ways.

Kate kept pace, which was a good thing since we’d driven together. “Why are you rushing out of here? Do you know the sexy pirate?”

I pushed through the glass doors, September’s humidity drooping my hair. “Yes.” I lowered my voice, the noonday sun beaming a spotlight on me. “I dated him before Mark.”

“Whoa.” Kate’s steps slackened. She recovered, catching up quickly in her cute flats. “I thought I knew pretty much everything about you.”

“You do.” My throat constricted. “Mostly.” Ten years ago, Kate and I had met and bonded at Grief Share, a group counseling program through our church. We’d been inseparable since. She certainly knew all my clean and dirty laundry from my marriage on—but before that, not so much.

“‘Mostly’ should include me knowing you went out with a Superman look-alike.” Sass tinged her tone. “How long were y’all together?”

I rummaged through my purse as though a serial killer were

approaching. *Keys, keys, keys.* “Two years.” My fingers stilled over my pepper spray. I paused. Glanced back at the building. *No.* It would definitely be frowned upon to assault someone at church. Even if they deserved it.

“Here.” Kate handed me her Bible and took my handbag. “I don’t think you should be driving.” She swiftly located my keys and advanced on to the parking lot, she toting two purses, me carrying two Bibles and a crawfish sack of emotional baggage.

We slid into my old-but-trusty Toyota Highlander.

She fastened her seat belt and cranked the ignition. “I take it things didn’t end well with the pirate.”

I reached for the A/C, rotating the knob to full blast. “That would be correct. And his name is Samuel.”

“Did he have both eyes when y’all were together?”

I clicked my seat belt into place. “Why would that matter?”

“It doesn’t.” Her voice pitched guiltily. “I’m just curious.”

“Yes, he had both eyes.” I grabbed my sunglasses, using them as a barrier from the sunshine and a shield in case Samuel happened to be leaving too.

The flawless azure sky stretched outside, contradictory to the storm clouds I imagined invading my soul. One glimpse of that man had thrown open a door to a past I had kept sealed for over twenty years. My head pounded with each heartbeat. I peered at Kate.

Her softening features displayed everything I needed to know. Her steady eye contact conveyed comfort and no intent to be intrusive. Even after our time in Grief Share had ended, we still clung to the cardinal rule of not pushing the other to talk about things we weren’t ready to. But counseling had also taught me that sharing what I could helped lessen the anxiety load.

My breaths calmed. “We met my senior year of high school. I was working at Blockbuster, and he was a barista at a coffee-house.” I rotated my neck, easing the tension forming. “Or is it a baristo if it’s a guy?”

She reversed from the parking space. “How old was he?”

“Twenty. He was attending Tulane, gorgeous, and had his own apartment. I was young and foolish, and fell for him hard.”

Kate pulled from the lot, departing the church campus situated on the outskirts of the city. “What was your relationship like?”

Within seconds we accelerated onto the interstate. Vehicles zipped past us, but not even their speed rivaled my racing thoughts. Samuel was back. It seemed unfair to be blindsided. And in church no less. Shouldn’t there be a commandment about that? Thou shalt not step foot inside thy ex’s place of worship.

“Being with him was . . .” A cocktail of nostalgia and devastation swirled through me. My stare coasted from my beige heels to the Bibles on my lap. I flattened my hand on my leather-bound guidebook from God, as though I were being sworn in to testify. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. “Being with him was exhilarating. Confusing. He had this wry sense of humor.” My reflection in the side-view mirror revealed a small, traitorous smile had snuck into place. I sobered to a scowl. *Don’t think of the good times.*

Kate flipped on the blinker and switched lanes. “Was he your first boyfriend?” Skyscrapers glinted in the sun to our left, the white, curved roof of the Superdome emerging. How could everything look so normal while a tornado spun in my mind, wreaking havoc?

“I’d gone on group dates or to school dances with other guys, but they weren’t anything special.” I bullied my cuticles with my thumbnail. “Looking back, the red flags were everywhere with Samuel. For a long time, I hid him from my mom and dad. But after I’d turned eighteen and things became . . .” I licked my dry lips, wishing for a sip of water and searching for the right PG-13 words to use. “After things became intimate between us, I told my parents about him. When it was all said

and done, he had only come to my house once in the two years we were together. My parents were not fans.”

Kate cringed.

I held up my hand. “Young and foolish.”

We passed the millionth billboard for a personal injury attorney and took an off-ramp.

“A couple of months before I graduated, he told me he wasn’t ready for a commitment.”

“Oh no.” Kate readjusted her grip on the steering wheel.

“Oh yes. He stopped calling and stopping by Blockbuster. I was miserable.”

We made the familiar turn onto St. Charles Avenue. Old and new architecture surrounded us. Condo buildings, store strips boasting services from tattoos to pizza, and several boutique hotels.

“The summer after graduation, he randomly showed up at Blockbuster. He offered to show me around Tulane, where I’d be starting in the fall. For the first time, he said that he loved and missed me. I was ecstatic. The funk I’d been wallowing in vanished. I dove right back into it with him.”

The smattering of live oak trees along the sidewalks grew thicker the closer we came to the Garden District and its beautifully kept historic homes. Kate swerved, avoiding one of the many potholes plaguing the city.

I clutched the bar above my door. “Every now and then, he’d say he wasn’t ready to settle down.” And every time it had been a bullet to the middle of my chest. “He’d pull away for a week or so.”

“I don’t know if this makes it easier, but his ring finger was bare.”

“You noticed?”

“It’s the first thing I look for on a guy.” Kate’s freckled nose wrinkled, and she continued on to Beignets & Books, which sat majestically with its white two-story columns and wraparound

porches. It occupied a corner lot, enclosed by elegant iron railings. She pulled down the side street and parked in the driveway at the back of the house and the private entrance to her residence on the second floor. “Did he say he was seeing other people?”

“No.” I unbuckled, letting the seat belt sling back into place. “And I was so desperate, so sure he’d realize how great we were together, that I rolled with his not being ready, thinking I just had to be patient.” My sight blurred on the gate to Kate’s courtyard. Like the many naïve women before me, and all those who would come after, I had thought I could change a man. “Then out of nowhere, he dumped me.” My ribs tightened, a shudder rolling through me. I couldn’t permit myself to think about the details of that day, or the dark time that had followed, let alone reveal them to Kate. Not now.

She turned the A/C down and aimed the vents she could reach away from me. “Was that the last time you saw him?”

“Yes. Until today.” I leaned against the door. My eyes burned with the tears I wouldn’t allow to shed. “I hate who I was with him. How much of a doormat I was and how I left my relationship with the Lord behind during that time.”

“You were young.” Kate’s cool hand rested on my shoulder. “And you returned to God.”

She eased away, a crease between her brows and her teeth scraping at the red lipstick on her bottom lip. “Considering your reaction today, I think you may have some unresolved issues with him, which makes sense since he was your first great love.”

“A great love? No.” I reached for my door handle. “He was my worst love.”

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