



## **Babyville: A Novel**

*by Jane Green*

### **Excerpt**

Julia hoists herself around on the bed until her head's at the bottom, then sticks her legs straight up in the air and leans them gently on the headboard.

"You know, you look ridiculous," Mark snorts, walking out of the bedroom to grab some toilet paper from the bathroom, because that is their deal: She will allow the wet spot to be on her side of the bed as long as Mark is the one to clean it up, and she is only allowing it at all because she is thrilled, delighted, amazed that Mark has even agreed to this baby in the first place.

She was thrilled. Nine months ago. Nine months ago when she first broached the subject and told him that she was desperate for a baby, that at thirty-three time was definitely running out; that her mother had problems conceiving her, and it took her two and a half years. That last part was actually a bit of a white lie. Her mother conceived her on her wedding night, but that was the clincher, and Julia finally got her wish.

She watches Mark as he comes back from the bathroom. Tallish, broadish, green-eyed and mousy-haired, he would produce adorable children. They, together, would produce adorable children. They would have Julia's dimples and Mark's eyes. Julia's hair and Mark's physique. Mark's gentleness, calmness, and Julia's tenacity, drive.

They would have so much, if Mark and Julia were able to produce at all.

Nine months.

Ironic, isn't it?

If they had been successful that first time they decided to leave the condoms in the drawer, they'd be having a baby right about now. To be more specific, Julia would be having a baby next Thursday. Thursday the 30th of January.

He or She, or Baby of Mine, as Julia has termed the life that isn't yet growing, would be an Aquarius. Her Secret Language of Birthdays book says the following about people born on the 30th of January:

Those commanding personalities born on the 30th of January are born to lead. They have a great talent for guiding, entertaining, teaching, explaining, and in general making their ideas clear to others.

Julia's baby would have shared a birthday with Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Vanessa Redgrave, Gene Hackman, and a whole host of people allegedly famous but not worth repeating.

But Franklin Delano Roosevelt? Well. You can just imagine what Julia's thinking. She lay in bed for hours that first night, eyes wide open, thinking about her son, the future Prime Minister, or her daughter, the next head of the United Nations. Not that she'd planned it, but really, she had thought, is there a better sign in the galaxy?

Baby of Mine would have been lucky enough not to have inherited Mark's Cancerian moodiness or her dodgy Pisces sentimentality. According to Linda Goodman, Aquarian boys and girls can be calm and sweetly docile on the surface, but the north wind can turn them suddenly topsy-turvy.

Expect your February child to have a dream, she says, and hold it fast -- until he gets another one. Your little Uranian is, apparently, very special. He's a humanitarian. He loves people. Do you know how rare that is? As society moves into the Aquarian age, his unprejudiced wisdom is leading us. Aquarian boys and girls have been chosen by destiny to fulfill the promises of tomorrow.

All in all, not a bad deal. So rather devastating that Julia's baby chose not to make an appearance.

The first couple of months it was no big deal. It only became a big deal when Sam, Julia's best friend, fell pregnant without even trying. Of course Julia was delighted for her, could not have been happier or more excited, but somehow it raised the stakes, began to put pressure on, and suddenly Julia found this was no longer fun, this was business. For the first time in her life she found herself failing at something.

Julia had always been Golden Girl. Through university, then into her first job on a graduate trainee scheme at London Daytime Television. Someone somewhere must have been smiling on her, because she was quickly promoted to the better series, and now she's the executive producer of a leading early-evening chat show.

Lunchtimes she finds herself sitting with the President of Entertainment. He digs his fork into her chicken for a taste, in a manner that implies equality and intimacy. And possibly more, although she's not interested. The Head of Drama -- much to her continued amazement -- calls Julia to bemoan her love life. They sit in the bar after work, as production assistants try to worm their way into their affections by buying them drinks and feeding them office gossip.

Of course Julia has nothing to bemoan. This is what people say about her: I would like to be in her shoes.

She has always had what everyone else has always wanted. From her glossy dark hair--easily her best feature -- to her small feet tucked into beaded slippers or sexy pointed slingbacks; from her spotlighted career -- she is regularly included in those magazine features on "Ones to Watch" -- to her large Victorian house in Hampstead (actually it's Gospel Oak, but given that it's practically on top of the Heath, and that all the estate agents call it Hampstead, Julia is now doing the same thing). And, most of all, Mark.

Julia and Mark met four years ago. He was the company lawyer, had been with the firm for about six months, had become the heartthrob of the office. Julia, to her credit, was blissfully unaware of this, being embroiled in a relationship with one of those dreadful, difficult men who pretend that they love you, but who are actually far too busy with their friends and their lives to give you the time of day.

Perhaps blissfully unaware is not quite true. She was vaguely aware of a new lawyer who had set hearts a-fluttering, and vaguely aware that her fellow female researchers kept dashing upstairs to get something "legalled" that was quite patently legal in her opinion, and even though she knew she had met Mark, had even spoken to him, she didn't think of him as a man.

And then one lunchtime he came and stood by Julia's table, an overflowing plate of spaghetti threatening to tip off his tray, and asked if he could join her. She was Miss Doom and Gloom, having realized that the Dreadful Difficult man was turning out to be too dreadfully difficult, even for her, but within minutes Mark had made her smile. The first time she had smiled for weeks.

Julia never bothered ringing the Dreadful Difficult man to tell him it was over. Then again, he never phoned her either. She is sometimes tempted, four years on, to ring and say the relationship doesn't seem to

be working, just for a laugh, but even though the thought makes her smile from time to time, it's not something she would ever actually do.

They were friends for a while, Julia and Mark. She was working all hours, researching a fly-on-the-wall documentary about women having plastic surgery. Mark was, at that point, the junior lawyer. He pretended he was also working late, and would go to her office to persuade her to get a bite to eat after work.

But gorgeous as everyone else seemed to find him, Mark simply wasn't her type. Even now she's not entirely sure he's her type. She tells people she fell in love with him. Because he was kind to her, and treated her well, and because he was such a nice guy. And maybe, just maybe, because she was slightly on the rebound, although the only person she's ever admitted that to is Sam.

And if that were really true, there's no way she'd be with him four years on, is there?

Is there?

They still work together, and everyone still loves him. The researchers, much like policemen, may be getting younger and younger, but they still cluster round in excitement as he passes, or scurry down the corridor to his office, an endless stream of fluffy blonde chicks, desperate to impress. It makes Julia smile. It always did. Thankfully she is not the jealous, or suspicious, type.

They say the ones you have to watch are the quiet ones. That it is always the ones who are least likely to have the affairs that end up having the affairs, and sometimes Julia thinks this will be the case with Mark. But the truth is that she doesn't really care. If Mark had an affair, she's not sure she could even be bothered to deal with it. Maybe she would. Maybe it would be an excuse to end it.

Not that she's unhappy, exactly. But she's not happy either. She just is. For the last couple of years Julia has felt as if she's lived her life floating on a cloud of apathy, and she's really not certain what the problem is. Everyone tells her she's the luckiest girl in the world, and Mark does, did, everything for her, although now when she catches his eye as they sit on the sofa watching television, it shocks her to recognize herself in there; she turns away and blinks, unable to bear the thought that Mark is equally numb, because if that is the case, then what is the point?

A baby is the point, she decided nine months ago, when the numbness threatened to overwhelm her. Because while she may not be entirely happy with Mark; while they may not make each other laugh anymore; while they hardly talk anymore, except to argue, and they don't even manage to do that properly, Mark being the gentle, non-confrontational creature that he is . . . while she refuses to acknowledge that surely there is, there must be, more to life than this, there are things about Mark that she loves.

She loves the fact that he will make a wonderful husband. A heart-stoppingly amazing father. He is loyal, trustworthy, and faithful. He adores other people's children (even though he always said he wasn't ready for children. Not by a long shot. Not yet), he grew up with three brothers and one sister, and his parents are still married. And happy. They sit on the sofa and cuddle like a couple of teenagers.

"Too Good to be True," Sam stated firmly, after she had first met him, and been well and truly charmed.

"You think?" Julia was blasé, affecting a nonchalance it is easy to have when you are being chased by someone every single one of your colleagues would kill for, and you are not particularly interested.

"Too Good to be True, and In Love with You." That was how Sam said it. As a caption. As a statement that would not, could not, be questioned. A short and simple fact of life.

Julia had shrugged but Sam continued. "Don't let this one go," she warned, and Julia took it to heart. After all, Sam was the expert. Sam had already found Chris, the man she was to marry, so when she told Julia that Mark was a keeper, she took her advice and kept him.

He is a keeper. Sam was right. Julia watches him wash up every night, listens to him whistling as he carries the shopping home, and she knows he deserves better than this. She thinks she might deserve better than this too.

They have found a way of living side by side, without ever really communicating. It had been funny, at the beginning, how different they were. They had laughed and said how lucky they were that opposites really did attract, although even then Julia wasn't so sure.

They told all their friends that the key to their relationship was exactly that they were so different; they thought they would never be bored, each of them having their own interests. Only now can Julia see the chasm that's opened up between them, the chasm that was always there, but, as a hairline crack, was too difficult to see at the beginning.

Mark loves being at home. Julia loves being out. He loves his family, his close friends, and Julia. She loves being surrounded by people, strangers, anyone -- the more the merrier. Mark loves puttering around the house and garden, finds true spiritual happiness in Homebase, whereas Julia is at her best in a noisy bar, chattering away over a few Cosmopolitans. Mark would have a panic attack if he ran out of slug pellets. Julia has panic attacks when she can't get reception on her mobile phone.

When they first met he was renting a small flat in Finsbury Park; she owned a tiny, messy terraced house just off Kilburn High Road. Neither of them can quite remember how it happened, but a couple of months after they met Mark had moved in. They don't remember discussing it, just that one day he wasn't there, and the next he was.

And Julia loved it, in the beginning. She'd been on her own since leaving university, and suddenly there was someone to talk to, someone who would listen if she'd had a particularly good, or bad, day.

Mark quickly assumed the role of housekeeper, chef, organizer. The unopened envelopes piled in the hallway disappeared overnight, and Mark dealt with stuff. Grown-up stuff that Julia had never got around to dealing with herself. He fixed the leaking showerhead, a small annoyance she'd learned to live with. He created a terrace out of a courtyard filled with rubble. He turned her house into a home, and when, after a year, it became too small for both of them, he bought a huge house just up the road in what was then very definitely Gospel Oak.

And now they rattle around together in this big house that is far, far too big for Julia. Julia loved her tiny house, loves small, cozy rooms, has never felt comfortable in this house, never felt right.

Mark, on the other hand, loved it instantly. Because Julia thought she did not really care where she lived, thought if Mark was happy she would be happy, she agreed, even though she now finds she has always been intimidated by the vast rooms, the high ceilings, the floor-to-ceiling bay windows.

They meet in the kitchen, the one place Julia does like, the one room that makes her feel as though she belongs, the only room in the house that bears witness to the occasional times that Mark and Julia laugh together. Talk. Communicate.

Because every now and then they do have a fantastic time. Both of them are still clinging on, hoping that those fantastic times will increase, that they will be able to recapture some of the magic that was there at the beginning.

Which is why Mark agreed to the baby. Julia knew he wasn't keen, wasn't ready, but she has come to believe this baby is their best shot. Of course it's not right to use children as a means of grouting up the cracks in a relationship, but Julia is convinced she'd change if they had a child together. She'd be settled. Happy. They would be a family.

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