

## The Pajama Girls of Lambert Square

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### Excerpt

Julia was standing at the counter sorting paperwork when Exa Stabley came in from the heat with her cheeks all flushed and her eyes shining.

"Here comes a whopper," said Mayme. "Brace yourself."

This was the way the work day began at Cocoon: the three of them getting ready to open the shop while Exa shared news, gossip, observations, and her philosophy of life. In the first month after they opened, Julia had been at a loss on how to handle Exa, who had been hired not so much for her retail experience as her excellent sewing skills and her connections. She was related to everybody in Lamb's Corner — including Mayme, who was as dark skinned as Exa was light—and prided herself on getting along with every one of her blood kin. Exa had dozens of stories, and a determination to share them. After a month Julia began to wonder if there wasn't some way to turn her off, or at least down a notch.

"When it comes to Exa Stabley," Mayme said, "here's what you've got to do. Listen to her like you would to a radio station. Sometimes you listen real close, and sometimes you let your mind wander off to more important things. The radio won't take offense, and neither will Exa."

Between Exa, Mayme and the rest of her female employees providing insight and direction, Julia had eventually learned how things worked in Lamb's Corner with a minimum of missteps.

Now Exa was wound up by excitement. "Guess who I just talked to?" She spread out her hands, palms up, and wiggled her fingers.

"John Dodge," said Mayme.

"John Dodge!" Exa beamed. "Who says there are no good looking single men left? Now maybe he's a little too young for me, but y'all had best get a move on. He won't last long."

"We'll get right on that," Mayme said. "Just as soon as I've got this display case sorted, I'll go on over there and offer him my hand in marriage."

Mayme was divorced and sour on the subject of men in general, something Exa knew but refused to take as the final word on the matter. A woman as beautiful as Mayme Hurt deserved a man, Exa told her to her face. And Bean deserved a daddy. Sooner or later, Exa was sure, she would find the right candidate and then it would just be a matter of getting them in the same room together.

"John Dodge is more your type anyway," Exa said, turning her smile in Julia's direction. Which was code for the fact that she was white and so was John Dodge. Mayme closed her eyes and shook her head at Julia, which meant: *don't bother*.

"I've got those boxes to unpack," Julia said. "Call if you need me."

But Exa was not so easily deterred. She just raised her voice an octave while she told Mayme about the new owner of Scriveners.

"He's just as sweet and polite as he can be." Exa's voice wavered in earnest delight. "Joe Don says he's a good old boy and even LRoy don't have much to complain about. And fine looking?"

Dodge don't sound to me like an Italian name, but he's dark. Do you suppose he might be Spanish or maybe even Jewish?" The emphasis on this last proposal was for Julia's sake.

"And something else, he goes by his last name. Says it's a tradition in the family for the first born son to be called Dodge? Now personally I like the name John. And it suits him. John Wayne. John Kennedy -- father and son. John Travolta-- "

"John Wayne's name wasn't John Wayne," Mayme interrupted.

Exa drew in a shocked breath. "What are you talking about?"

"It's true," Mayme said. "His real name was Marion Morrison. He changed it to get into the movies."

"You are the worst tease," Exa said. "If you think I'm going to believe a big strong man like John Wayne had a girl's name--." She laughed. "You know it's encouraging when you get into a silly mood. You have to fight that somber streak you got from the Hurt side. Your great granddaddy Stabley was a cheerful sort."

To Julia's relief this conversation on Mayme's family tree was interrupted by Marnie Lambert, who stopped by most mornings. For a moment Exa got sidetracked in a discussion of Marnie's new skirt and blouse, the fabric and weave and cut and how much it had cost and where it was made and really, the lining hung a little odd and could Exa take care of that for her? It would only need a bit of a minute.

The crisis past, Julia turned her attention to the three large cartons on the worktable. All from her buyer in Italy, six month's worth of her best finds. There was a pleasant shiver of anticipation when a box arrived from Rosa, the thrill that was usually reserved for children on Christmas morning. She adjusted the blade on her pen-knife and began the delicate business of separating fragile goods from the box they came in.

In the other room Marnie Lambert said, "Well you are right, Exa. He sure is fine looking. He's got that rangy build, like a cowboy. And not one of those television cowboys neither, the real ones who work for a living. Or you know what? He could be on one of them recruiting posters for the marines."

"He's got the right hair cut for that," said Mayme. "At least he's not trying to hide the fact that his hair is thinning."

"A man who is losing his hair," Exa announced, "is a man with an excess of testosterone."

Mayme snorted. "I swear, we have got to cancel your subscription to Cosmo."

Bean came up behind Julia. She said, "I fed the dogs and got them settled upstairs. Can I help with this?"

Julia glanced down at her. "I'll miss you when start back to school tomorrow."

Bean's mouth pulled down. "Me too you."

The girl listened for a moment to her mother debating Exa and Marnie on the educational value of fashion magazines. Then she said, "I'll take out the trash."

"No, stay," Julia said. "Wait and see what's in this box."

In the front Exa said, "You know Link was all set to hate the man but he never had a chance. Dodge started right away by asking questions, and you know how Link loves to show off that memory of his. If you let him he'd recite the whole inventory with his eyes closed, like he was telling scripture verses at Sunday school."

Julia peeled away layers of plastic, linen, and archival tissue paper to reveal a bed sheet with a five inch border of elaborate silk embroidery, white on white. She reached for a fresh pair of white cotton gloves.

"Oh, look," said Bean. She had clasped her hands together tightly to keep herself from touching.

"It is pretty," Julia agreed.

"I can't ever imagine sleeping between sheets like that," said Bean. "Does it feel like heaven?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you." Julia lifted the sheet out to reveal the next layer. "But these antique linens tend to be fairly heavy and stiff, with all the embroidery. That's why they've survived so long, they were never put to use."

"Like jewelry for the bed?"

Julia grinned at her. "Something like that. Art done with a needle instead of a brush."

"Everybody says my Granny Pearl's quilts are art, but I've got one on my bed and so do all my cousins."

"Your granny's quilts are art," Julia said. "So are your mama's. And I guess someday you'll be making quilts of your own, and maybe you'll bring some of them down here for me to sell. After you make enough for your own grandchildren."

At that Bean wrinkled her nose.

"No interest in quilting?"

"Quilts are fine," Bean said. "But I don't think I'll ever want a husband."

In the front of the shop Exa said, "It's a pure waste, a man like that without a woman on his arm."

At noon Julia took over so Exa could go to the dentist and Mayme could take Bean home for lunch. Help was no farther away than a call to Big Dove and Trixie on the second floor if it came to that, but most likely Julia would be able to handle things on her own.

She liked having the shop to herself now and then. If it was quiet, as it seemed it would be today, she sometimes found a book and sat in one of the three displays that took up the whole front of the shop, each made to look like a section of a bedroom a person would actually want to sleep in. Right now her favorite was the one Exa called country style: one of Mayme's quilts in pale yellow and white, a hand-woven butter yellow blanket, and a pile of pillows in perfectly ironed cases, all vintage, all embroidered.

Julia worked hard on putting the display beds together and sometimes she was so successful at making them look inviting that people walked right past the sign that asked them to refrain from reclining. More than once she had had to help a tired shopper up and out, striving for the right combination of gentle admonishment and amusement.

Just a few months after Julia had opened Cocoon, a woman from Atlanta, her arms full of packages, her complexion wan and drawn, had simply thrown herself down across a handmade Belgian lace coverlet that was over a hundred years old. When Julia came over she had held up one manicured hand and a wrist weighed down with a diamond tennis bracelet.

"I will give you a thousand dollars if you let me stay here just like this for fifteen minutes."

Her name was Dorothy Bainbridge, and in the end she allowed Julia to escort her to the divan on the second floor, where the Needlework Girls made her tea and listened to her troubles and admired her very expensive and uncomfortable shoes.

When Dorothy left it was with two sets of hideously expensive Italian sheets and a plump pillow in a Victorian linen case roiling with embroidered silk briar roses. At the door she had turned back to Julia with a great smile. "I'll be back," she said. "You can count on it."

Julia always thought of Dorothy when she took the time to sit and look at one of the display beds. She had become a steady customer and something like a friend. Last Christmas she had sent the embroidery sampler that hung on this display wall: *A well made bed is a wondrous thing.* Julia was considering that statement when John Dodge came in.

She knew him from Exa's description and because he could be nobody else, not the way he looked around himself, sizing things up. He paused first to examine the hand-painted vintage saucer that hung on the wall just beside the door. Violets and pansies and in beautiful calligraphy: *if you're smoking in here you'd best be on fire.*

One brow lifted, in admiration or disapproval, and really, Julia didn't care which. He wasn't that good looking.

He came toward her. She had the sense he missed nothing at all, but what seemed to interest him most were her pajamas: polished cotton scattered with big blowsy pink roses. Men were usually interested in her pajamas. She tried not to take it personally.

He said, "Haven't seen a living display in a while."

John Dodge had a friendly smile with nothing too personal behind it. A courtesy visit, then. She was the acting head of the Merchants' Cooperative, and there were still some legal issues to settle. She had heard a lot about John Dodge from Bob Lee Cowper and even more from Exa. One had described a dry businessman of discerning judgment and the other a prince from a fairy tale. In actuality John Dodge struck Julia as a type out of her past. Downtown Chicago was full of men like this one, ambitious and single-minded, brimming with charisma when they wanted something.

She said, "Can I help you?"

He came closer and held out his hand. Julia shook it: big, firm, warm.

"John Dodge. I'm looking for Julia Darrow."