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## Another Life

Jillian D. Bailey

*East Tennessee State University*, [jilly.bailey2@gmail.com](mailto:jilly.bailey2@gmail.com)

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Chris looked the same and somehow like a stranger. The lines by his eyes and mouth were new, and his brown hair was graying; the curls she'd ran her hands through in their youth were shorter. Instead of age detracting from his beauty, it had somehow made him more handsome. She reminisced looking at his face and wondered what happened to him in the ten years that had passed since she'd seen him.

"Julie, it's good to see you." A woman with fuzzy, dyed-red hair and too much blush hugged her. The smell of stale cigarettes filled her nose.

She smiled. The woman blocked her view of Chris. "It's nice to see you." She tried to put a name to the face, but she couldn't. She wondered why people didn't wear name tags.

"Oh, honey, it's fine, I'm sure you don't remember me. You've been away from home for so long. A big fancy writer I hear." Her drawl was thick, and each word was articulated slowly. Julie had forgotten how different home was, and the entitlement these people felt to know the intimate details of a stranger's life.

"I wouldn't say fancy," Julie said. She smiled at the woman and hoped she'd take the hint and leave her alone.

"I'm Donna," the woman replied, "I dated Lyle, Chris and Tate's daddy."

Julie couldn't stop staring at the pink lipstick smeared across the woman's yellowing teeth. She remembered a younger Donna standing under the meaty arm of Chris's dad. She wondered if that was why the make-up was caked on her face. Was she still trying to hide bruises or was the thick make-up a habit she'd never stopped? The thought of Chris's dad sent gooseflesh across her skin. The man sickened her, and she didn't want to be standing with this if he showed up.

"Ya know, we thought you and Chris were gonna get married."

"Donna, we'll catch up soon." Julie smiled and side-stepped the woman. She looked over her shoulder at Chris.

Julie thought about Chris as he had been that last fall before he turned eighteen. Even

as a kid, Chris had been the opposite of his dad. The last time she had seen Lyle, she had been riding four-wheelers with Chris since early morning, and they were hot and covered in mud. She'd ran out of water two hours before the sun went down and her mouth was dry from thirst. They had stopped at Chris's to rest. His trailer sat behind where they stood. Dark mold covered the siding, and Chris's dad stood shirtless in the kitchen window. When he smiled, the crooked, black teeth made her nauseous. She glanced at the exposed flesh of Chris's upper arm. The yellow tinge of a bruise peeked from his shirtsleeve. The bruise had been distinct fingermarks days before. She wondered how he survived a childhood with that man.

Lyle's eyes followed her, and her palms were wet with sweat. The last time Lyle caught her alone he ran his hand over her shoulder, and the sour smell of his breath filled her nose.

"You are a mighty pretty girl, too pretty for Chris."

"You want to come in and get a drink?" Chris asked.

She looked at the leering face in the window.

"It feels too good outside," she responded.

Chris nodded his head and looked at the window. His dad raised a hand and waved.

"Excuse me!" A kid yelled and bumped into Julie's leg. She was brought back to the present and had to grab the door frame.

"Sorry about him, he's a little rambunctious." A woman with orange-blond hair and leathery skin walked behind the boy holding a baby.

"It's fine. I'm fine."

"You're Julie Clarke, right?" The woman moved closer. The smell of a dirty diaper was so strong that Julie had to stifle a gag.

"I am."

"I thought so you dated Chris growing up and then moved away. I heard you're a bigshot now. Everyone always knew you were goin' places though."

Julie nodded and crossed her arms over her chest. "What did Chris do after high

school?"

"The way I remember, he was kind of lost after you left. Went to community college for a while, was gonna be a... I don't remember now, but then he got married."

"Chris has a wife?"

"He did. They got divorced. You probably knew her in school, everyone did. Lauren Bryant."

Julie did know her. They were best friends in high school. Lauren hadn't seen Chris as a person, only a name. He was the son of Lyle Jenson, a 'no good woman beater and a drunk, thank you very much,' if you listened to Lauren and her mother. Everyone in town seemed to. Julie ended their friendship long before high school graduation.

"Why did they get divorced?" she asked. Hot acid filled her throat, and she wasn't sure she could listen to the story.

"No one really knows for sure, but the talk was that he caught Lauren in bed with another man. I heard it was something else, but no one ever found out. He wouldn't say a word against her, and she moved away."

"Why'd the two of you break up? No one ever knew."

Julie studied the woman's pudgy face. Her make-up caked her cheekbones and highlighted the wrinkles in her leathery neck.

"I need to use the restroom if you'll excuse me," Julie said. "We'll catch up later!" The woman yelled. Julie wondered what her name was so she could deny the friends request if it came.

The bathroom was a nauseating pink, but the door locked. A small chair sat in the far corner; she wondered how many people escaped to this room over the years. The people in the other rooms were suffocating in their need for gossip. She sat in the chair and leaned her head against the wall. She held the locket Chris had bought her for graduation. Inside was a picture he'd taken of them. Unintentionally, it was the last picture of them together; they broke up a few months later. In the picture, they were both laughing. "I'll love you forever"

was engraved the opposite side of the locket. She'd worn it since he'd given it to her, at times forgetting it hung from her neck.

They broke up the week before she moved to her dorm. Chris had moved into an apartment after graduation, and they were lying naked in his bed. Her head was on his chest, and his hand ran through her hair. She drifted in and out of sleep while a soft breeze blew through the open window.

"I love you, Jules."

"I love you too."

"You could come with me, you know. I'm sure you could get a scholarship to help with school. It'll be hard not seeing you until fall break, but there will be some weekends I can come home, or you can drive to see me."

He didn't speak for a while, and she listened to the thump-thump of his heart, trying to commit the sound of it to memory. She'd almost drifted off again when he spoke.

"I'll always love you. You're the love of my life, so maybe one day we'll get another chance. You need to leave here and not worry about me. You have greater things to accomplish than being my wife."

A knock at the door brought her back to the small pink room.

"Just a minute." She splashed water on her red face and wiped away a small trail of black mascara running down her cheek

She walked back into the room with her head down and found a shaded seat away from the crowd. She could see Chris through the crowd. The light fell on his face and the years seemed to melt away. The lines became less pronounced, and his hair seemed more brown than before. She remembered the thump-thump of his heart as if in a dream. The sound filled her ears and her thoughts.

"Even after he married Lauren, it was always you."

She turned to see a man who looked like Chris, except for the eyes. His were brown instead of Chris's blue. He was smiling a little, the crooked smile from his childhood. Chris's kid

brother. "Tate."

"He called the other day and asked to see me," Julie said.

Tate sat in the chair beside her. "Did he tell you that he was a photographer?"

"No, he said, 'I know you're a writer, but I don't want us to know anything else until I see you.' You know him, always one for surprises."

She laughed and looked in Chris's direction again. "He asked for an autographed picture."

"He was taking pictures for magazines and books, and even families. I think the families made him think about you more than anything. He married Lauren, but she wasn't you. He didn't even blame her for cheating on him. He wanted her to be happy."

"I'd heard he was married to her."

"They weren't married long, not even a year. After the divorce, he started with photography. After a while, he decided he needed to find you instead."

"He called three days ago. I'm not sure how he even got my number."

"I might have helped there. He asked if I could find your number. It was hard, you hadn't called anyone from home in years. I eventually found your momma's number, and she gave me your cell phone number and told me you were single. That was all Chris needed to know."

She laughed. "When I answered he asked if I still loved Chris Jenson. The phone call was so brief, but at the same time, it lasted a lifetime. He could always make me feel like the only person on the planet."

"I reckon to him you were just about the only person on the planet," Tate said and rubbed the palms of his hands on his pant legs.

She looked at Chris again and weighed the question for several minutes.

"What happened to him, Tate?"

"He was coming to see you. He called me while he was packing. He was so excited, Jules, I hadn't seen him that happy in years. I swear he rambled on about you for twenty

minutes before he ever took a breath to tell me where he was going. He bought the plane ticket before he even called you. He was gonna see you whether you wanted him to or not.”

“He called me from the car. He said he was ten minutes from the airport. Four hours later I got your call,” Julie replied. The words were hard to form, and the heaviness in her chest threatened to stop her breathing.

He nodded like she'd told him something he already knew. “Three minutes after you got off the phone he was driving through the lights at Main and Second. A car ran the light, drunk and high on opioids. Chris died on impact.”