

Jules' Epilogue

It's six years now since we met and the love I bear him grows more, every day. When I came home two years ago, after spending three years abroad, I waited on the corner Warrick and I met on, hoping to see him again. I wasn't sure he'd still be single. I wasn't sure of anything, except I still loved him with my whole heart. A part of me had prepared myself to be knocked back and rebuked. A part of me hoped he still loved me, too. Another part of me was petrified and unsure of herself. Thankfully he'd been drinking across the road that day (as normal) and he saw me. The rest as they say, history.

I spent three years abroad because I had a lot of money to spend, my father's money to be exact. I told myself I'd spend it all and then go back home, except I've always been pretty good with money and I turned my holiday into a working one along the way, picking grapes in New Zealand, also waiting tables in Australia. So it took a long time for me to use all my funds.

I didn't spend three years running away from Warrick or my love for him. I spent three years healing. Three years making sure neither of us took up again with regrets. It had to be right, we had to do it right. It was five years ago – when he was meant to be in love with me – he got drunk one night and almost slept with his ex-wife. He did this, even after he repeatedly told me he'd protect me no matter what. Or, words to that effect! Before then, I never could have imagined how much it would hurt to have someone who loved me go behind my back.

The almost bit about it all was probably the worst bit. If he'd slept with her, I could've just moved on. I could have reasoned that our brief love affair was just one of those things – he saved me from a crippling existence of loneliness and I gave him his marriage back or something. I could've moved on if he had slept with her because it would have been easier to hate him, to sever myself from him. Except he didn't sleep with her, he just kissed her in state of undress (he said) and yes, almost slept with her. He stopped because he loved me. And yes, he'd been kissing her even when he knew it was me he loved. Mine was an inexperienced heart and I bolted. It hurt too much. Our love had always been powerful and I wondered how he could do that. Unlike him, I hadn't suffered the pain of divorce, so I didn't understand how much love could hurt until then. Before Warrick, I never knew real love – and the potential it had to cause damage was terrifying. So I left for three years as a test to myself; a test to him – and our love.

I see Anna now and again, of course. She divorced her second husband and hasn't remarried. I hope she does meet the right man eventually but so far, she has a stack of failed relationships behind her and it's the reason her and Warrick's son Joe has moved in with us. The boy got tired of his mother's emotional ups and downs and anyway, he's an upcoming footballer now and just needs somewhere to crash a lot of the time without all the hassle of questions she normally piles

on him. Anna admits she remarried too quickly and it didn't work out, her second marriage failed too. She's only now really spending some time getting over the break-up of her marriage with Warrick, not to mention the one that followed.

So. I spent three years healing. Yet as soon as I saw his face that Christmas Eve I returned, I felt the pain all over again. Such searing, fretful, agonising pain. I love him so much, I die every day I'm with him because I am so scared I am going to lose him one day. I'm terrified. Some might call me a control freak and if I don't have order in my life, I struggle to feel at ease. Warrick loves me and because of that, he abides my deficiencies.

When we first had the twins, I was frightened to death of dropping one of them. I was terrified of all sorts and I relied on Warrick for everything. I only know how to be a parent because of him, because I never really had a parent of my own, not one I remember well enough anyway. Everything before my eighth birthday, I've blocked out, because that was when Mum was alive and I don't allow myself to remember how happy I was before she was stolen from me.

Sometimes, I can't even cuddle my children for fear I'll lose them one day. I have troubles still, I'm not going to lie. Warrick tries to help me but he can't see directly into my head. He can't see the terror I still deal with everyday—her ghost, following me around—because I refuse to let her go.

Anyway, it's a Saturday. I've been sat here in the car with all these thoughts as I wait for Warrick. The babies (just turned one) are blissfully ignorant, asleep in their car seats behind me. My dad died on Thursday and I imagine he's pretty corroded already but Warrick insisted on seeing the body for me. We want to be sure.

My husband emerges from the funeral director's place looking casual but I know him, he's probably just trying to look strong for my sake. He climbs into the car without looking at me.

He sits in the driving seat of our Ford Focus and holds the wheel tight. He doesn't start the engine or even address me.

“Was it him?”

“Yep.” He stares straight ahead, his eyes looking at nothing.

“Wh—what did they say?”

“Funeral a week on Monday. And yes, he was ill. Early onset Alzheimer's. He was, I don't know—”

I touch his forearm, wondering what's wrong. I know my husband saw dozens of dead bodies throughout his career in the police. He's not squeamish, not like me.

“What is it?”

“He looked really, very old Jules. I couldn't believe it.”

“How, old?” I squint against the low, winter sunshine.

“Like, way older than his time. He was in his fifties, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“He looked a hundred.”

“Yeah but he’s fucking dead, Rick.” I sound annoyed, I can’t help it. Why is my husband showing my father mercy? “He’s bound not to look good.”

Warrick’s jaw sets and he stops himself retaliating, a skill I don’t possess.

He looks into the back of the car and gestures, “You gonna keep talking like that, even when they’re older? Eh?”

I grind my teeth together. “Why do you pity him?”

Warrick turns his dark eyes on mine and glares at me. “He was just a man, Jules.”

I frown. If Warrick can’t see what I still fight every day, he’s bloody blind.

I love my husband and my babies, but I am suffering here. Right now, I can’t compartmentalise all the emotions I’m feeling. They’re one, big mess.

“You should see his body. It won’t be real unless you do.”

“No,” is my flat, outright response. I repeat, “No.”

“You’ll just add this to the stack then, yeah? The stack of ghosts you’ve got racked up.”

Warrick still challenges me, every sodding day.

Why does he do this to me? Poking and prodding for a reaction. Most others just leave me to my moribund state.

“Please, just love me,” I say looking away, because I can’t stand it when he’s like this.

“It’s never enough, is it? I can’t rescue you, I am not the saviour you think I am. I’m just the man who agreed to stand by your side, and by ’eck, I will until the day I die. It’s you who needs to accept they’re dead and move on.”

I spent three years trying to find myself and all I found was a stubborn woman unwilling to face her demons. I might have kicked out some of the old Jules’s bad habits, like hoarding and being an anal bitch. However, the bitch still lives, somewhere, and comes knocking on our door at times like this.

“My dad’s dead... he was ill... and he never thought to tell me, he never thought to give me the chance to say goodbye.”

“Maybe he died twisted and bitter because he knew he couldn’t put things right with you.”

I turn on him, “That’s my fault, now?”

My face is hot. How dare he?

Warrick’s eyebrows meet. “All I saw was a bloke and now we’ve had kids, you know, when I look at them, he’s a part of them Jules. That’s how it is.”

“I can’t listen to this!”

I get out of the car and slam the door shut. I fold my arms and turn my back on him in the parking lot. The window winds down and Warrick shouts, “Have some time to cool down Jules. I’m taking these home before you start them off.”

He leaves me, here in my hometown, without a ride home! It’s only about 15 miles back to our house! The cheek. He squeals out of the gravel car park and leaves me. He actually leaves me!

What am I going to do?

My arms are still folded and I can’t move. I can’t help but look at the funeral director’s. I’m not going in. No way. I don’t want his dead image burned in my mind forever and ever. He’s a corpse now. He should have done the decent thing and let me see him one, last time while he was actually still alive. Part of me wants to bloody kill him! And he’s dead!

I shake my head and drag my hands through my hair.

Warrick’s my bloody husband now! I can’t just run off on him anymore.

I start walking and find myself out in the town centre. I pull up at my friend Amy’s shop. It’s still an alternative place and when I look inside, I see her in there. She’s not left.

I walk inside and stand opposite her. She’s at the desk and when she looks up, she doesn’t recognise me. I’m what you’d call voluptuous these days and I cut my hair short and dyed it lighter, to blend in with all my greys. I’m kind of rocking a blonde Anne Hathaway, not *Les Mis* – just a few months after, once it grew out.

After a few moments staring, she looks into my eyes and exclaims, “JULES!”

I grin awkwardly. “In the flesh.”

“Bollocks, it’s you!”

She dashes to me and throws her arms around me. “I heard.”

“Yep.” What else is there to say? Really?

She pulls back with red eyes. “I’m really, really sorry.”

“Thanks,” I say, though I don’t know what she’s sorry for. I’m not sorry. “It’s okay. I mean, yeah. Whatever.”

“Oh.”

She looks awkward and when I look down, I realise she has a bump.

“When are you due?”

She rubs her tummy. “April. Feel so fat already.”

I sniff. “You should have seen how big I got... I have twins, Charlie and Harry.”

“NO!” she screams, her hands over her cheeks, fresh tears emerging.

“Yeah. My husband, Warrick is the most wonderful man. He’s so wonderful, he actually just dumped me in this town.”

“What?” she says frowning.

“Yeah, we went to the funeral home and had a little row and he’s buggered off back home to Hull without me!”

She laughs, wiping tears with her index fingers. “He sounds ace!”

“Yeah, well,” I say stuffing my hands in my pockets, “he can be an arse but he knows when I need to be alone.”

She laughs incredulously. “So then, you came to my shop? To be alone!”

“Hmm. First place I came to. Must be like a magnet, this place of yours.”

I fold my arms and stare around. I last saw Amy just after I met Warrick but she and I haven’t really talked in more than ten years.

She shagged my dad.

Yuck.

I still love her but something like that isn’t easy to get over.

“I could shut shop if you want? Trade’s slow today and Julie’s at Mum’s, mister’s at work. We could go upstairs and have some tea and cake?”

Our eyes meet and I see she’s desperate for me to say yes, so I say, “Okay then.”

Amy is the opposite of me. I’m tall and she’s short. At school she was dark-haired, I was mousy. I was a swot and she always forgot to do her homework. I loved sports, she loved smoking behind the bike sheds. I won writing competitions, and she won as many remarks for her constant change of hairstyle. We just worked.

She’s platinum now but my do isn’t so severe, I’ve just got highlights. Even though she’s pregnant, she’s only carrying a tiny bump whereas I ballooned with the twins and I’m still trying to shift some to get back to my normal size ten. Warrick says he loves me with a bit of meat but I’d like to get back into some of my clothes or else I’ll have to finally give in and escalate my wardrobe beyond jumper dresses.

She closes up and we walk upstairs. Her home is exactly as I imagined, like a bomb’s hit it. Everything is all over the place; toys, blankets, supplies she’s stocking up on for her new baby, you name it. If it’s in her house, you can see it. There’s no such thing as a cupboard here.

She clears a chair for me and I sit in the kitchenette with her, twiddling my thumbs.

“Do you know what you’re having?”

“Another girl,” she says popping the kettle on. “Old man says he’s happy, but I know he secretly wanted a boy.”

“Yep. I’m the opposite. Warrick already had a boy from a previous marriage so I was hoping for just one girl but we have three boys.”

She turns quickly to stare at me. “Jules Simonovich? Is that really you?”

I chuckle nervously. "What?"

She coughs. "I just never thought you'd go for something so complicated. I thought you'd marry someone without baggage?"

I squirm because she's right. "People change."

"Where's his ex-wife then?"

"Living about half a mile from us."

I can't help feeling annoyed that Anna has entered the conversation, even with Amy, who doesn't know my husband's ex from Adam.

"I'm taking it she's a pain?"

I shrug but quickly change my tune. "Huh! Yeah! You got that right."

She places our teas down and carves two wedges of carrot cake. We're tucking in when I explain, "Few years ago, I met Warrick on a street corner. Somehow we became friends... it developed, you know. He's a social worker but used to be a copper. Early into our relationship, he started leaving the house all the time. I tried to find out why, he didn't tell me. Worst case scenario was he was having an affair but I knew that wasn't the truth. He still wanted me all the time and there was no lipstick on his collar. I eventually found out... You know that big paedophile case of five years ago? It was big news?"

"Oh my god, JULES!" she says spitting out cake.

"Yeah, tell me about it. I had to marry a hero, right?"

"That was HUGE!" she says, her eyes ablaze. "So, where does the ex come into this?"

I groan and stare into my tea. "There was a brief bit of time when Warrick and I were apart because he wouldn't tell me what was going on. He was a mess and she came onto him... they almost slept together. It destroyed me, I couldn't hack it. I went abroad for three years... told him I had to. I didn't say he had to wait, but I knew he would anyway. I came back and we're married, two kids later."

"Abroad? I never knew this! Three years!" She sits digesting it all, scratching her chin. "Why, Jules?"

"Went to try and find myself. Went to see if I was like her. Didn't I?"

Amy frowns. "Your mum?"

"Umm-hmm."

"Jules?"

I look up into her eyes. "Yeah?"

She holds the table edge and glares at me, disappointed I still haven't gotten over this. "You're nothing like either of them! You're you. You're so tender-hearted and you just don't realise it!"

“Not you as well,” I complain, wiping a tear. “He’s been like this too, all morning, ever since Dad died in fact. Trying to get me to react and face up to this.”

She nods like she understands. “I’m liking this fella of yours already. He sounds tough, I mean, you did leave him for three years!”

“Yeah, I know.”

We spend several moments thinking before I add, “Would you go see the body, if it were your parent?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. Not my bag.”

“Me either.” I’m glad she agrees.

“So, tell me about this man of yours then,” she begs, a cheeky glint in her eye.

I spend the next three hours telling her everything.

Several hours and two buses later, I arrive home. I walk in the hall and don’t hear anything but the telly, though I see Terry and his lady friend Wendy sat in the living room. They come round every Saturday and treat Joe to a takeaway and a DVD while the babies sleep and Warrick and I go have dinner on the Upper Avenue.

“Hi guys, where is he?”

“Upstairs,” Terry says and stands when he sees me. I walk into the room and ruffle Joe’s hair as he sits in the armchair hidden behind the door. No sooner have I entered, when I’m accosted by Warrick’s dad, who pulls me in for a hug and says, “I was sorry to hear your news.”

“It’s fine,” I say, and he looks at me like I’m mentally ill.

“Leave the girl be Tel, everybody deals with it different.”

I nod at Wendy. She’s not my favourite woman, but tonight she’s becoming more popular by the second.

I look down at Joe, who looks more like Warrick every day, “What mood’s he in?”

“The best,” Joe says, grinning with both thumbs up. That means my husband’s in a stinking, foul state up there. Boy have I got some work to do.

“I’ll be back,” I tell them all and Terry sits down even though I sense he’s desperate to lay down the law with me about how to deal with grief, given he’s an expert having lost his wife and all.

Like I said, the mega bitch is out.

I storm upstairs and hear him in the shower so I make a decision. I can avoid this, or face it, and right now I’d like to enjoy my evening.

So we need to face this, right now.

I undress in the bedroom and throw my robe on. I use a penny to release the push-button lock we have on the bathroom and let myself inside. After travelling the peasant wagon and sitting in Amy's pit today, I definitely need freshening up.

When he hears me enter, he turns and glares, angry to discover I know how to unlock the bathroom from the other side.

I can't help but chuckle to myself.

He turns away from me but I won't be shunned that easily. I lock the bathroom door behind me and disrobe, climbing in with him.

I wrap my arms around him from behind and rest my forehead between his shoulder blades. I rub my hands through his chest hair and squeeze his flesh, holding onto him. He pulls my hands into his and flexes his fingers through mine.

"Where've you been?" His words are curt to say the least!

"I went to my friend Amy's shop. We talked."

"*That*, Amy?"

"Yep."

"What's she say?"

"That I'm a lunatic, more or less."

"I like this Amy."

"She seems to like the sound of you, too."

He laughs and I feel his body shudder beneath my cheek. I can't help but laugh, too. I kiss his warm flesh and run my hands further, through the strong muscles of his lower abdomen to his pubic hair. I tug and stroke him gently and he comes alive because of me.

"Jules," he breathes heavily.

I run my hands up his arms, holding his biceps, his shoulders. I can't stop kissing his skin, the scent and textures so familiar, so absorbing. I adore my husband.

"She's pregnant and happy... and was so glad to see me, for some reason."

He turns and pulls me close, his arms wrapping around me. He looks into my eyes, concern in his, and I try to focus on the need that's growing between us instead.

I slide a hand over his buttock. "Just love me."

His smile is modest but lights up his eyes. "Close your eyes then, Julianne."

I do so. I feel his hands cup my cheeks and gently tilt my head back. He kisses my throat and along my clavicle.

"Rick," I gasp.

He pushes me up against the shower wall and with his hands in my hair, he presses his mouth to mine and kisses all my worries and cares away, his body completely salving my woes.

We entwine, I lift my leg around him and we make love. He smothers my cries with deep, desperate kisses and I thank the stars for every moment. I've not felt this free to love him since before I had the twins and I hope he realises, I need him now more than ever.

He caresses my face with his fingertips afterwards and studies me. "Still so beautiful."

"Still so infuriating," I bite back, and he pulls me against him and nips my earlobe.

Before he slips from me, he says, "Wear something pretty. I booked a table."

"Okay," I grin, and we set about washing each other lovingly, a task that takes long enough – those downstairs might wonder what's going on. Oh well. We're alive and whilst we are, life is for living.

I've always thought so.