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LIANN ZHANG

Julie Chan Is Dead

A NOVEL



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Julie Chan Is Dead

A NOVEL

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To the early 2010 internet personalities who raised me.
But mostly to my mom, who actually raised me.

One thing needs to be made clear: I did not kill my twin sister.

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February

Are you filming a video?”

“What?” I glance at the blond teen across the counter as I scan her box of supersized tampons. Three girls of similar font trail behind her in a cluster, their spidery eyes orbiting me with equal curiosity.

“A video,” she clarifies, rather unhelpfully. “Is there a hidden camera somewhere?”

Her friends, thrilled at this proposition, examine the dusty ceiling beams, raking manicured hands over trashy tabloids as if a DSLR could hide between flimsy pages of celebrity scandals. One points toward the door. “I see it! There!” She smiles and waves.

I resist rolling my eyes. “That’s a security camera. And please stop messing with the magazines. I don’t know what you’re going on about.”

Only, I do.

I know exactly what they’re talking about—*who*.

“You’re Chloe Van Huusen, right?”

There it is.

Chloe Van Huusen.

“I’m a huge fan! Been watching since I was ten.”

I flash a stiff smile, gritting my teeth. “I’m not Chloe. Would you like a plastic bag for ten cents?”

“Nah.” She inserts her card into the reader. It’s a Black AmEx. Of course. This golden-haired teen with rich parents and no credit limit is exactly Chloe’s demo.

“But, like, you are filming a video, right? I mean, why else would you be here? Let me guess! *Being a cashier for twenty-four hours challenge?*”

“Oh!” chimes another. “*Trying new jobs for a week challenge?*”

“Nope! Sorry!” I rip the receipt from the dispenser and shove it in the girl’s hand. “Thank you *so* much for shopping at SuperFoods. Have a *super* day. Bye!”

She backs up, startled at my snippy tone, before scurrying away with her chattering pack, their hushed voices like buzzing mosquitos.

“That lady was kind of a bitch.”

“It can’t be her. Chloe is *so* nice.”

“Oh my god.”

“What?”

“Do you think it’s her twin? From that video?”

A gasp. “Oh my god, *yes*.”

“What was her name? Janice?”

“Jordan?”

“Jade?”

“It’s Julie!” I scream.

They jump and spin toward me, eyes wide. One of them lets out a squeak. The first girl drops her tampons. She picks up the box and they bolt out of the store as if I’m a rabid animal about to attack.

“You can’t yell at the customers,” Vera, the cashier in the aisle next to me, says. Her gold Employee of the Month badge catches the sunlight. “Everyone should feel *super* after leaving SuperFoods.”

“Whatever.”

Her jaw drops, eyes glinting with an opportunity to lecture me on the Ten Tenets of Super Employees at SuperFoods. Thankfully, a man walks up to her aisle, and she whips toward him. “Welcome to SuperFoods!” she chirps. “I hope you’re having a super day!”

Stifling a yawn, I lean my hip against the counter when I notice my manager squinting at me through the grimy square window of his office door. Wary of his

vigilance, I pull out a Kit Kat box and rearrange the red rectangles as a pretense of productivity while I zone out, thinking of the girls. Maybe I was too harsh. Being a young woman is already like existing in the seventh circle of hell. Not to mention one of them is on her period. Your internet idol's doppelgänger shouting at you is the last thing anyone wants.

But the last thing *I* want is any mention of my twin.

The mere whisper of her name short-circuits my brain and I tend to grow a little cross. Just a little. Like, the teeniest bit.

Although, if you knew my twin like I do, you'd applaud my reaction.

Here's the hard truth that Chloe Van Huusen fans fail to realize: she's far from the pretty little angel she pretends to be.

I only had to spend one afternoon with her to come to this conclusion.

We were twenty-one during our brief and highly publicized reunion, a whole seventeen years since some drunk driver crushed our parents under his pickup. The state had separated us before we learned to grieve, since the couple that fast-tracked Chloe's adoption only wanted one kid. I was sent to our aunt, a penny-pinching, foul-mouthed Cantonese woman who uses old Cheeto bags as folders for her tax returns, while my twin was adopted by an affluent white couple in New York City, legally rebranding herself a Van Huusen. She probably lived in a brownstone with *Sex and the City*-style steps, stomping into cliquy private schools with cashmere plaid skirts and pink feathery pens, while I shared a bunk bed with my cousin, who'd flick my bra strap for fun.

I knew of Chloe's high-profile life because people often looked at me with furrowed brows, a spark of recognition in their eyes. *Hey, you look like Chloe Van Huusen*, they'd say. My twin's luxurious lifestyle content had attracted over one million Instagram followers and six hundred thousand YouTube subscribers. While she was enjoying sponsored island retreats to the Bahamas and Bora Bora, wearing outfits from The Row and Loewe, I was scanning coupons behind a cash register. (Still am!) At night, I'd spend hours scrolling through her pages, passively absorbing our disparate lives through the screen. My thumb sometimes hovered over *Message* before swiping away.

Reaching out risked forming a connection. And forming a connection meant I'd have to acknowledge our differences, cementing the fact that I—someone

born from the same womb, formed from the same clump of cells—had failed everywhere she hadn't.

But then, out of nowhere, she popped into my life again.

I was working my usual morning shift, ringing up bananas (4011) and a bag of chia seeds for a platinum-haired lady with a shrieking baby clawing at her breast. Out of nowhere, a film crew ran up to my lane. One camera was pointed at me, the other pointed at the entrance.

Chloe sashayed through the sliding glass doors like the main character of a 2000s movie, her kitten heels *click, click, clicking* against vinyl, a ridiculous pink beret poised on her head, sun pooling on her back.

"Julie?" She gasped like she didn't know she'd find me here.

Seeing Chloe IRL was like looking in a fun-house mirror installed with Facetune. Her silky hair fell down her shoulders in loose waves, while mine resembled inked hay with split ends. Her skin was radiant from all her complimentary facials, while I looked like I hadn't slept for three days. And her hands looked soft, pliable, not a trace of labor in her sharp, shellacked nails, while I had chewed mine down to raw skin, tender hangnails clinging dryly for dear life.

"It's been so long!" Tears flooded her eyes as she wrapped her toned arms around me, cameras hovering. "I've missed you so much, Julie."

I was squished in Chloe's perfume-aisle-scented hug, immobile from shock. A million questions ripped through my mind—how she found me, why she was here—but they never left my gaping lips, since I was too overstimulated by the crowd thronging around our sisterly reunion.

My answers came when I watched her video. Turns out, Chloe had hired a private investigator to locate me months ago. He had tailed me in a dark SUV, collecting footage of me obliviously staring down at my phone while walking to and from work, which was later edited over doleful royalty-free music like I was some endangered marsupial in a nature documentary. A week before her arrival, she had contacted my store manager for permission to film. Every employee on the clock that day knew she'd show up and they were delighted to play along in the production.

After our dramatic reunion, the manager dismissed me early (without pay!) so I could film the rest of my twin's video. In the parking lot, Chloe wrapped a blindfold tight around my eyes, stuffing me in the passenger seat of a car rigged with cameras for a "surprise." As we drove, my twin told an invisible audience the story of our childhood, narrating our parents' deaths and our separation, lacing her narrative with heartfelt details I didn't quite remember but that could've been true. Every now and then, she'd punctuate her sentence with a high-pitched "Right?" leaving a beat just long enough for me to nod, before continuing her exuberant song and dance down memory lane. After fifteen minutes, she let me out of the car, pushed a key into my fist, and released me from my blindness. Before I processed that we were on the other side of town, Chloe pointed to a house just down the block and shrieked: "It's your house now!"

"W-what?" When I watch the video back, I always cringe at my expression here. The ugly confusion next to my shiny twin. I looked like the *after crack* example of an antidrug campaign.

"With the cost of living these days, I figured you must be living paycheck to paycheck working at a grocery store. So, I decided to buy you a house!" She giggled as she took my clammy hand, traipsing through the newly renovated home.

I couldn't believe it. Both the fact that Chloe's fingers were intertwined with mine after so many years, and the fact that she had bought me a house.

A whole damn house.

On the dimly lit porch that reeked of fresh paint, we filmed a segment where she professed how much she had missed me. Her speech was breathless and cloying, so eloquent it must have been prepared. Yet, in the moment, once she whispered, "I've missed you so much, Ju-Ju," I unraveled entirely.

Ju-Ju sounds similar to "piggy" in Cantonese: 豬豬. I know, I know, that seems mean, bordering on fat-shaming. But it was affectionate—I swear. It meant I was cute and small, something to be coddled and adored, like McDull. As soon as that childhood nickname slipped through Chloe's glossy lips, she pried open the gates of my repressed emotions and released a flash flood of hot tears. I believed her lies with unbounded hope: she missed me, thought of me,

loved me—she wanted me in her life again. I didn't realize how profoundly lonely I was, how much I had craved family and belonging, until she showed up. Until she called me a little pig again.

She was a messiah. A beautiful angel plucking me out of the gutter. *Creation of Adam* shit.

Then a crew member said, "That's a wrap." The cameras stopped rolling.

Chloe stepped away from me. Her eyes flickered, brightness displaced by an eerie distance. "Bye, Julie." Then she was gone.

In her wake, she left me with a renovated home (featuring the landlord special: crumbling foundation, painted-over appliances, mushrooms sprouting from dank corners) and a YouTube video the next week: "*Finding My Long-Lost Twin and Buying Her a House #EMOTIONAL*." It hit ten million views in two days. People squealed about Chloe's generosity, how they'd cried watching the reunion, how lucky I was.

But she never called after the video—never gave me her phone number. Not even an Instagram follow.

I was demoted to a lurker, a measly data point within her growing subscriber count. Lost in her crowd of fans, I watched as she broke one million, then two, then three, then somehow skyrocketing to six million followers. As she opened a TikTok account. As she networked with celebrities at #NYFW. As she hard-launched a boyfriend, some ratty, tattooed white guy who looked one bad hair day away from starting a men's rights podcast. As she posted a breakup announcement shortly after.

When the occasional commenter asked: What happened to your twin? She'd reply: Julie isn't a public figure. We all need to respect her privacy. People believed her because she was the adored Chloe Van Huusen, who could do no wrong. Sometimes I wanted to reply, Hey! I'm here! She only used me for her video! And she's actually a huge fucking cunt!!!! But I could already imagine her rabid fans spamming me with hate messages, foaming at the mouth to defend their internet fave. She already bought you a house, what more could you want? You're just a knockoff, uglier version of her. No one cares about you! Desperate much?

Despite the explosive views (sitting pretty at twenty million!), people moved on from me quickly. I had my ten seconds of viral fame and after that, no one cared. I am a redundant replica floating in my twin's orbit, a footnote in her grand life, a fun fact in her fan Wiki—Did you know Chloe has a twin?

I accepted she'd never reach out after a year of silence, and I'd blocked her socials as a weak attempt to protect my sanity. But an online barricade can't be imposed onto reality.

My twin's soaring success meant more and more people mistook me for her. Now, I rarely go two weeks without a stinging reminder of her betrayal. Every time my twin is mentioned, I spiral, and at night, I sometimes hear her when the crumbling house shudders. *Ju-Ju*, the rooms groan. It's like her voice is trapped in an echo between walls, scraping at the dozen layers of white paint, desperate to crawl out.

"It's inappropriate to yell at customers," my manager says now. I have a feeling Vera snitched. Behind him is a photo of her, smiling with her dumb Employee of the Month certificate and a \$50 coupon to SuperFoods. She bought forty-five cans of mushroom soup for our local charity. I hate her.

"Sorry."

"I'm also docking the gum you stole from your paycheck this week."

I was sure the gum rack was in a blind spot. Did Vera rat on me for this too?

He leans forward, his voice stern and low, breath pungent with the salami sandwich he had for lunch. "You've been a vital part of SuperFoods for a decade and that's why I'm being lenient. But this isn't the first nor the second offense. Don't let it happen again. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I nod, staring at my dry cuticles.

He dismisses me.

I dread going home, knowing Chloe's voice will leak through the walls tonight. As a consolation, a packet of gummy bears finds itself in my bag.

I'm decapitating a white pineapple bear when I receive a call. Glancing at my screen, I almost choke on my candy.

The location under the number: *New York*.

I know only one person from New York.

Chloe.