

The Matchmaker's Daughter

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Girls plan ahead, guys don't. That's the big, fat difference, and also the reason for problems. Juliet shrugged her backpack off and slung it onto the Corolla's hood, a little harder than she'd intended. She lifted the backpack and checked for scratches. Satisfied, she turned around and leaned against the car, adjusting her bra for the gazillionth time that day. It was new, it didn't fit right, and she couldn't wait to take it off. She watched the stream of cars flowing out of the parking lot, many of them for the last time. The seniors were honking their horns and shouting.

Planning ahead meant thinking about the future. If Donnie were thinking about the future right now he would know that this day—this last day of high school—would be one they'd remember throughout their life together. Did he really think it was okay if what she always remembered was waiting by his car while everyone else hooted and honked and headed to their parties?

Juliet heard shoes scuffling the pavement behind her, and she turned, hopeful. It wasn't Donnie; it was Luna. Her car was parked next to Donnie's Corolla.

“Hey, Juliet.” Luna walked around the Corolla and embraced her. Luna was a hugger, and Juliet liked that about her.

Luna gave her an understanding look. “I saw Donnie talking to Ben and those guys in Pritchard’s room. You want to ride with me? I’m going home to change, then I’ll pick up Jenna. We decided we’re going to Project Grad. I can swing by your house. Hell, girl, you can come with us.”

Juliet smiled but shook her head. Juliet had wanted to go to Project Graduation, an all-night event at the Community Center, but Donnie really wanted to go to Ben’s party. He’d even suggested they could each do their own thing that night. But what kind of night would that be to remember? Guys didn’t think about the future.

Luna studied her for a moment. “Jules, it’s me, hon. I’m fine with whatever you want. But I kind of miss my friend—my Juliet.”

Juliet smiled again, but it felt a little hollow. Luna’s expression hinted at something almost like pity. That was not okay. Juliet was in love. She and Donnie had a future together. Her friends should be envious.

“I miss you, too,” Juliet said. “But Donnie will be here in a minute, and we’re—”

“Speak of the devil,” Luna said, looking over Juliet’s shoulder.

Donnie was actually jogging across the parking lot, and he had that amazing grin on his face. Juliet couldn't be mad at that grin.

"Sorry, Jules," he said as he came to a stop. Had some guy talk to take care of." His shoulders rose up as he tried to visibly flex his pecs. This motion was stupid but adorable, and even Luna smiled at him.

Luna said, "Juliet and I decided you two are doing Project Grad tonight. What do you say, Donnie-boy?"

Donnie frowned and glanced at Juliet. "I thought we made plans."

Luna gave Juliet another hug. "We'll see you guys there, huh?" She then got in her car and backed out. She smiled and waved as she drove off.

Donnie said, "Does she even like me?"

Juliet kissed him. "She'd better not." She scooped up her backpack and saw that Donnie eyed the spot for scratches. They both got in and buckled up.

Donnie didn't start the car. "I told Ben we'd be there."

"Luna was just screwing with you. She knows we're going to Ben's."

Donnie watched the last few cars leaving the lot. "You guys must have talked about it, though. She must think you want to go to Project Grad. Do you?"

Juliet sighed. What would her mom say right now? "I do miss doing things with Luna and Jenna. But it's not a

big deal. I just want to be with you on a night we'll remember."

Donnie considered this. "Okay, we'll go to Project Grad for a while, then we'll leave and go to Ben's. How's that?"

"You can't leave Project Grad. It's a lock-in." Juliet knew she should just drop it, but now she was curious as to where this would lead.

Donnie tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. He was either thinking, or he was playing a song in his head. Finally he started the Corolla and flashed that grin.

"I want to be with you too, Jules." He backed out. "Luna had better like me after this."

Juliet squealed and leaned over to kiss him, but her seatbelt stopped her halfway. She kissed her hand loudly and slapped his cheek with it, a little harder than she'd intended.



"Jules, breakfast!"

Juliet stared at her hair in the mirror. She shouted at her mom, "I'll be right there!" She made a face and then plucked a scrunchie from a basket held up by a ceramic frog on her dresser and cinched her long hair into a ponytail. Today would be a ponytail day. She turned to the side and inspected the hang of her t-shirt. Not bad. Her eyes

narrowed as she looked at the bra hanging from a knob on the top dresser drawer.

“I have a new home for you, you bastard.” She grabbed the bra and then dropped it into the trashcan as she left her bedroom.

The kitchen smelled of egg and spinach casserole. A stupid country song was playing, and Juliet’s mom and dad were actually dancing. Juliet stopped in the doorway and watched them. It was embarrassing, but it still made her insides feel warm and fuzzy. Theirs was the life she wanted, and the future she imagined with Donnie looked just like that.

Her mom noticed her standing there and stopped. She put on an oven mitt. “Your reception is in an hour. I thought you’d be dressed.” She pulled the casserole from the oven.

Juliet sat down at the breakfast table. I’m wearing a t-shirt. My friends are wearing t-shirts.”

Her dad sat across from her and smiled. “You look pretty good, Jules, for someone who got home at seven in the morning.”

Her mom put the dish on the table and sat. “Are your friends wearing t-shirts without bras?”

Her dad looked directly at Juliet’s chest and then nodded at her, indicating his agreement with her mom.

“Really, you guys? I think I’m an adult now.” But Juliet smiled. It mattered to her that her parents actually cared

about how she dressed. She scooped up a large square of casserole and started digging in.

Her dad said, “I assume Donnie was a gentleman at this all-night lock-in?”

“I’d kick his ass if he wasn’t.”

They both stared at her.

“Sorry,” she said. “I guess I’m tired. Yes, Donnie’s a gentleman. You guys already know that.”

They all went back to eating.

Finally, Juliet put down her fork. “Donnie and I talked some last night.”

Her parents exchanged a glance. That meant they were afraid of what she might say.

“No, we’re not getting married if that’s what you’re worried about. We’re just moving in together.

Two more forks were placed on the table.

Juliet tried looking serious but couldn’t. “Jesus, I’m kidding! But we did talk about our future. We both want to stay together, even if I go to CSU and he keeps working at the store. We’ll probably get married when I’m done.”

Her dad picked up his fork and stuffed the last of his casserole into his mouth. He spoke around the food, “Now Donnie’s not going to CSU?”

“He’s just not ready right now.”

Another glance was exchanged. It was infuriating.

A truck’s horn sounded from the street out front. Her dad stood up. “That’s Chuck. Gotta go.” He dumped his

plate and fork into the sink and grabbed a soft cooler from the fridge. Instead of giving Juliet's mom a peck on the cheek, he stood next to her chair waiting until she stood up. He then gave her a full-on passionate hug with a long kiss. Juliet shook her head and looked at her plate, but the warm and fuzzy feeling returned.

Juliet looked at the front door where her dad's fishing rod and tackle bag were waiting for him to grab on his way out. She said, "Kiss a fish for me, Daddy." She had said those words to him every time he'd gone fishing since she was four.

"I always do, Jules. It's a wonder your mother will still kiss this mouth of mine."

After he'd gone, Juliet and her mom sat in silence for several minutes, drinking coffee and eating.

"You're not going fishing with Dad?"

Her mom sipped her coffee. "Too much work to do today."

"I thought your project was almost done." Juliet's mom worked as a programmer for a consulting firm. They were doing a big job for a company that was building some kind of dating service. Juliet hadn't asked much about it before, but at this moment it seemed more relevant to her life.

Her mom smirked. "I don't know if it will ever be done. Enchantech keeps adding more parameters. It's become the largest project I've ever been involved in. They've recently

added more than a hundred biological parameters into the mix.”

This piqued Juliet’s interest. “What exactly are they trying to make?”

“The short answer is that it’s a database for matching potential partners. A matchmaking service. But it’s becoming the most complex one ever constructed.”

Juliet glanced at the clock. The graduation reception didn’t start for forty-five minutes, and she didn’t really want to be on time anyway. “Okay, what’s the long answer?”

Her mom also looked at the clock, obviously anxious to get started on her work. But she did almost all of her work from home, in the next room, and would not have to get dressed or drive anywhere.

“It started like other matching services, with just a handful of parameters that clients provided in a questionnaire. Those would be compared to the same criteria from other clients in a database, and matches would be found based on how many criteria were similar.”

Juliet made a face. “Does that work?”

Her mom shrugged. “Probably not any better than meeting people on free social media sites. But this project has grown far beyond that. Apparently, Enchantech has caught the interest of some major investors. How, I have no idea. But they’re pumping serious money into it. They

hired my firm to create something that's incredibly comprehensive. In fact, it's almost scary."

Now Juliet was really attentive. "Scary how?"

"Well, they're trying to include in the database every person in the United States over sixteen, whether they've signed up for the service or not."

Juliet frowned. "Can they do that?"

"All the data we're using is publicly available. One example is a person's virtual footprint. That's the trail you leave behind every day of your life as you use the web. You'd be amazed at how extensive that is: your emails, social site interactions, purchases, web browsing history, even your school records like grades, attendance, discipline issues—everything."

"So they help you find the love of your life by matching up your virtual footprint with someone else?"

Her mom waved her hand dismissively. "That's just the tip of the iceberg. Now they've expanded it into areas that have never been considered before, not the least of which is biological criteria—medical data. The blood tests you've had done, sicknesses and accidents, any medical procedures." Her mom hesitated, like maybe she shouldn't go on. "But most recently, they've added various aspects of the NPGA, the National Public Genome Archive."

Juliet knew about the NPGA. It had started a few years ago, and it was supposedly a public database with a complete DNA analysis of just about every person. All they

needed was a blood sample to do the analysis, so parents routinely had it done to their kids to get a comprehensive review of the risks of genetic disorders and psychological tendencies like addiction or depression. And most adults had done it for themselves for the same reasons. Juliet's whole family had done it within a month of when it had started.

Her mom looked at the clock again. She got up with her coffee but left everything else on the table. Juliet followed her into her home office. Four computer monitors snapped on as her mom took a seat at her desk.

"Do you mind putting away the breakfast stuff, Jules?"

"Sure," Juliet said. But she wanted to know more now. "Are you guys supposed to use the NPGA for something like this?"

"I'm just a programmer, Jules. But who knows? Maybe not. The NPGA is fairly new. Enchantech is trying to establish this service before anyone decides it's an inappropriate use. So they're kind of in a hurry." Her mom was hinting that she needed to get busy.

"Don't let me keep you from it." Juliet stalled, looking through the books piled on her mom's desk. Most of them were thick hardbacks about the science behind relationships and love. She picked one of them up: *The Biochemistry of Romantic Love*, by Dr. Lacey Gibson. She flipped it open. The copyright was from 2018.

“I thought this was a cutting-edge project. This book is five years old.”

Her mom leaned back in her chair and sighed. “The nature of love hasn’t changed in five years. What’s new is that we have developed a way to identify the one person who is most suitable as a partner, using parameters never used before, including the DNA analysis of every person in this country.”

Her mom leaned forward and pushed some things around on the touch surface of one of her screens. “Look at this, Jules. It’s actually going to be a remarkably simple interface, if I do say so myself. You don’t fill anything out, because everyone is already in the system. Everything known about them is already there. Let’s say I’m...” She scrolled through a list of names and randomly picked one. “I’m Jeter Simmons in Anoka, Minnesota. I’m lonely and want to find out who is my best match for a life partner. What I do is select a few criteria for limiting the search.” She pointed to a list of only five things, including age range, gender, ethnicity, income, and marital status. But she didn’t select any of them. “Or, I don’t. I let the system select the best match regardless of any of these. And then I hit *Match*. And I wait.” A large spinning heart appeared on the screen.

She looked at Juliet. “The heart was my idea.”

“It’s cute, Mother. How long does it take?”

“A few minutes. The system engineers are working on that.”

“Is this going to be free?”

Her mom snorted a laugh. “Far from it! The current rumors suggest it will cost someone in the range of ten thousand.”

Juliet blinked at her. “Dollars? Are they crazy?”

Her mom shrugged. “Nothing like this has ever been done before.”

The heart stopped spinning and faded away, revealing a list of names. The name at the top was highlighted in red. It said, *Harrington, Jason*. The next name on the list said, *Miller, Teresa*.

Juliet was confused. “Jeter is a guy, right? His best match is another guy, and his second best is a woman?”

“It happens more often than you might think. I didn’t select female as a criterion, so the system found the one single person best suited as a romantic love partner. It must know something about Jeter that we don’t.”

Juliet stared at the screen. A line from one of her favorite old movies formed in her head and spilled out. “I was thorough when I looked for you.”

Her mom raised her brows. “Chasing Amy?”

Juliet nodded.

“I like it. I’m going to figure out a way to work that quote into the interface.”

Juliet was still staring at the screen. “Do you think it actually works?”

“Who knows? I guess Enchantech will have to do longitudinal studies of their clients—see if they get married, live happily ever after.” She grasped her daughter’s hand, finally pulling Juliet’s gaze away from the screen. “It’s only a database, Jules.”

Juliet smiled at her. “Mother, you’re the biggest romantic I know. You must think there’s something to it.”

“What do I care? I have the man of my dreams.” She gently pushed Juliet toward the door. “Go to the reception. Take my car. And put on a bra, like the brand new one you picked out last week.”



Three hours of sleep had not been enough. Juliet mingled with the other seniors for as long as she could, but it became impossible to continue acting interested in their nonstop talk about college, boyfriends, and girlfriends. Finally she left the reception and drove her mom’s car to Donnie’s. Donnie’s mom said he was still sleeping and asked if Juliet wanted her to wake him up? It was the middle of the afternoon, after all. Juliet said no but thanked her anyway. She then left before Donnie’s mom could ask her in for a cup of tea. His mom did that sometimes, and it

typically involved discussion of Juliet's future with Donnie and awkward silences.

So Juliet drove home. The house was empty. There was a note on the fridge from her mom saying her dad was still fishing and that her mom was going for a walk to clear her head. Juliet grabbed a banana and ate it while thumbing through a book her mom had left on the table. It was about the statistical analysis of data regarding successful and failed marriages. Every page contained formulas with mathematical symbols she didn't even recognize. But there was a summary at the end of each chapter that was in plain English. Each chapter was about specific characteristics of the couple and how those affected their chances of a successful relationship. It even looked at such things as blood type and history of disease.

Juliet flipped the hardback cover shut with a pop. She looked again at the note her mom had left. As always, she had written the time. Juliet glanced at the clock; her mom had left fifteen minutes ago. She would probably be gone another forty-five.

She tossed her banana peel in the trash and went into her mom's office. The computer hadn't even gone to sleep yet. She looked out the window to make sure her mom wasn't walking up to the house and then sat in the chair. The main computer screen was covered with a window of complex programming code. Juliet minimized the window, being careful to not close it entirely. She double-clicked the

same Enchantech icon on the desktop her mom had selected earlier. A new splash screen appeared, displaying the quote: *I was thorough when I searched for you.*

Juliet scrunched her mouth to the side. “That needs a little work, Mother,” she said out loud.

Abruptly, she was staring at the familiar search screen. It all seemed so simple, like she was doing a Google search. Again she spoke out loud, “How could they think of charging ten thousand dollars for this?”

Suddenly Juliet’s scalp and neck prickled, and she was aware that she was doing something she shouldn’t. She got up and looked out the window again and then sat back down. What could it hurt to try the system out? It wasn’t like they were already charging people to use it. Juliet just wanted to see what kind of person the system would select as her most promising partner.

She pulled up the list of people in the database. It was ridiculously long, so she typed *Juliet Larrison* in the search bar. The list shortened to only those people with her first and last name. She scrolled through the list. There must have been several hundred of them. They were listed by state so she scrolled to Colorado. There were less than ten in Colorado and she quickly found her own name. She selected her name and then gazed at the five criteria she could set. She considered selecting her age range but decided to leave them all blank. After all, that was the only way to find out who her one best match would be.

Juliet moved the pointer to the *Match* button. She paused, listening. She got up and looked out the window again. Then before she could change her mind she clicked *Match*.

She stared at the spinning heart. What if her best match was a girl? What if it was someone twice her age, or three times her age? Suddenly she wasn't so sure she wanted to see the results.

The heart kept spinning. Juliet paced the floor, checking out the window with every turn.

Finally the heart faded away and there was a list of names. Juliet sat down and gazed at the top name, highlighted in red. It said: *Louderback, Elijah*.

The only thing provided on the list was the name, and her mom hadn't gone any further than this when showing her how it worked. So Juliet double-clicked the name. A profile page for Elijah Louderback appeared.



There was a click. Someone was coming in the door.

Juliet blinked. She shook her head to clear it and looked at the clock in the corner of the computer screen. She blinked again. It wasn't possible. She had been staring at the screen for something like twenty minutes. Her mom was home.

Juliet stood up as a rush of panic engulfed her. She started to close the Enchantech screen but then paused. She yanked her phone from her pocket, selected the camera app, and took a photo of the screen.

Juliet heard her mom taking off her shoes. Within seconds she would walk into her office. Juliet closed the profile page and returned to the main name list before closing the program. She brought back up her mom's window of programming code. She quickly looked over the desk to make sure things were as she'd found them, and then she stepped quietly out of the office.

Her mom was taking a long drink of water in the kitchen. "Hey, Juliet. I didn't call out to you because I figured you probably needed a nap. You been home long?"

Juliet yawned and stretched. "No, not long. But I am headed for a nap." She walked to the sink to get her own glass of water. Her face felt hot and she was sure it must be flushed. She turned to go. "I'll be in my room."

"Sleep tight, Jules."

Juliet paused in the doorway. Then she walked back and put her water on the table. "Mom, what was it like when you met Dad? What did you feel that very first time you saw his face?"

Her mom frowned. "Honey, did you and Donnie have another argument? You know, you're only eighteen. There's no reason why you two have to—"

No, Mother! I was just wondering what it was like. What did you feel the first time you saw his face?"

Her mom took a seat at the table. "We were both still at CSU. Juniors, I think. My friend Aggie introduced us. To be honest, I don't think I was very impressed at first." She smiled. "And I'm pretty sure your father wasn't, either."

Juliet stared at her glass of water.

"Jules, you know your father is the love of my life. Things don't have to be perfect from day one. Heck, things aren't perfect for us now, in spite of the fact that you like to think they are."

This was the kind of thing Juliet hated to hear her parents say. She picked up her water and headed for her bedroom.

"Jules," her mom said. "Do you know why I insisted on naming you Juliet?"

Juliet turned. "You've only told me a hundred times."

Her mom smiled. "And you've only told me a hundred times that Romeo and Juliet doesn't end well. But that's beside the point. There's only one thing in this world I love almost as much as you and your father."

"Love," Juliet said.

"That's right. And love is out there somewhere for you. You just have to be willing to grab onto it when it comes along. But there's no hurry, is there?"

Juliet sighed and turned away. "I'll be in my room."

She didn't bother taking off her clothes. In bed she stared at the stars her dad had painted on her ceiling when she was younger. Her mom's words ran through her mind again and again.

You just have to be willing to grab onto it when it comes along.



It was just getting dark when Juliet awoke from a hard, dreamless sleep. Apparently her dad had returned from fishing because she could hear the two of them talking and watching television. Juliet pushed her pillows against the head of her bed and sat up against them. She picked up her phone from the nightstand and opened the photo she had taken of her mom's computer screen. She used her fingers to zoom in on the profile of Elijah Louderback.

The profile was dominated by what was obviously a school photo. But there was other information on the page. Elijah's date of birth was June 3, 2006, which meant he was one year younger than Juliet. He lived in Mountain Home, Idaho—only two states away. But Juliet had only briefly processed this information. It was the photo that held her attention. Elijah had eyes that were large and dark, and he had been looking at the camera lens, so it seemed like he was gazing directly into Juliet's eyes. He had curly brown hair that covered his ears and almost covered his

eyes. He wore a broad smile, a little goofy or mischievous. He wasn't terribly cute, but he wasn't bad looking, which was how Juliet thought of herself.

But there was something else about the photo. It wasn't the individual characteristics that transfixed her; it was all of them combined. Just about every guy had something about him that Juliet liked: the angled cut of the eyebrows when some guys looked at her from the side, the dry smoothness of the cheeks of others, a smile that revealed that a guy was only kidding and did not intend for that last comment to be hurtful. With Donnie it was the muscles on the sides of his neck, the ones that ran from his ear to his collarbone. They were defined and somehow made his face seem stronger, more mature.

Juliet contemplated Elijah's photo. No, it was not any one thing. It was all of them, as if someone—God, maybe—had watched her dreams and then had built this face.

Juliet realized she had become lost in the photo again. How many minutes had passed this time? She took a deep breath and then scrolled around on the enlarged photo of the profile. The other information there included a home address and phone number. At the bottom was a row of links to even more information, such as medical records, school records, and one that said *Genetic Profile*. Another link said *Photos*, and Juliet wanted desperately to return to her mom's computer to click this one. But she didn't dare

with her parents still in the living room. Juliet prided herself on the fact that her parents trusted her. That trust would be shattered if they knew what she had done.

Juliet slid the screenshot down and stared at the phone number. She glanced at her clock. It was 8:00pm. What could it hurt to call the number? She could hang up any time she wanted to.

She tapped the number with a finger. Nothing happened and she remembered it was only a photo of the number. She said the number aloud to remember it and then switched to the phone app and typed it in. She tapped *Call* before she could change her mind.

After only one ring, a woman answered. “Hello?”

Juliet sat up straight. “Um. Hi. My name is Juliet. I’m calling for Elijah?” She ended this like it was a question.

The woman paused before answering. “Okay, Juliet. I think Elijah is downstairs. Just a moment.”

There were rustling sounds, like the woman had put her hand over the phone’s mic. And then silence. Juliet could hear her own heart pounding.

“Hello?”

Suddenly Juliet’s heart stopped pounding and she was confident. “Hello, Elijah. You don’t really know me, but my name’s Juliet. I know this sounds weird, but I just wanted to talk to you.”

There was a long pause. “Juliet, can I call you back at this number from my own phone?”

Juliet's thoughts swirled, and her confidence began to waver. Like the photo, there was something about Elijah's voice. It was a voice constructed from all of her dreams. She just wanted to hear him speak. And she wanted to see his face.

She said, "Um, sure. You can video call if you want."

"I'll do that. Don't go anywhere, okay?"

"I won't. I swear I won't." She hung up and realized this was a stupid thing to say.

Seconds passed, and then a minute. Juliet had to remind herself to breathe.

Her phone chirped, startling her. On her screen was an icon for a phone and one for a video camera. She tapped the video icon, and just like that she was looking at the face of Elijah Louderback. She had studied his still photo for so long that it seemed surprising that his eyes and mouth were now moving. Elijah Louderback was a real person.

He spoke. "Sorry about that. I wanted some privacy. My mom is, you know, interested in everything about my life. You said your name is Juliet?"

Juliet stared at the screen. She wanted him to keep talking. She wanted him to smile, and frown, and turn to the side so she could see parts of him she hadn't seen before.

Then he did frown. "It's Juliet, right?"

"Yes, Juliet," she stammered. "You can call me Jules if you want."

“Juliet, could you turn a light on? Your face is just a shadow.”

Juliet realized she was sitting in the dark. She switched on the light next to her bed. “Is that better?”

His eyes grew wide for only a moment. But then he scrutinized her for what seemed like a long time.

“Do I know you?” he said. “I don’t remember you from school, but I feel like I’ve seen you around.”

“You haven’t seen me before. It’s kind of a long story. Do you want to hear it?”

Elijah’s background shifted like he was sitting down on a bed or a chair. “Yes, I want to hear it—all of it. But Juliet?”

“Yes?”

“If our connection gets dropped or something, will you wait for me to call you back?” His gorgeous eyes were pleading, almost like he was afraid she would say no.

“I swear I will. I’ll wait.”



An hour later they were still talking. Juliet had explained how she’d found him, leaving nothing out. She couldn’t lie to him. She had learned that he went to Mountain Home High School, and that he would be a senior next year. He’d bought his own car, a used 2013 Subaru Forester. He wasn’t so much into sports, but he liked rock climbing. He

only had a few good friends, and his last girlfriend had dumped him for one of them, but he was okay with that. He liked to wear t-shirts of bands from the 80s and vintage Converse All Stars. He was shy but sometimes talked loud to compensate for it. It had gotten him into more than one fight. He lived with his mom, and his dad was somewhere in California.

And Elijah now knew just as much about Juliet, but he wanted to know more. They both wanted to know so much more.

“Elijah?” Juliet said after a long, comfortable silence. “I want to see you.”

He flashed a skeptical look, but he didn’t laugh. “I just looked it up while you weren’t talking. Seven hundred and nine miles. And I want to see you, too. Are you serious?”

“What do you think?”

He gazed at her image on his phone, his eyes looking slightly below the camera. “Yeah, me too. I don’t know, though. My mom’s... you know.”

“I’ll come there if you want me to.” Juliet had just blurted this out. It was crazy.

“I want you to.”

There was a knock on Juliet’s door and her dad opened it enough to stick his head in. “We’re going to bed, Jules. Who are you talking to?”

Juliet glanced at her phone and back to her dad. “A new friend I made today. Goodnight. Tell Mom goodnight.”

He shut her door. Juliet returned her attention to her phone.

“I have to go now. Their room is next to mine and they’ll hear everything I say.”

Elijah nodded, but he appeared to be disappointed. “I understand. We’ll talk again, right?”

Juliet knew that they would. “Very soon.”

They said goodbye and disconnected. Juliet undressed, brushed her teeth, and washed her face. She turned out the light and lay in the dark. She knew she needed her rest, but how could she sleep? Her entire life had changed in one day.

She thought of Elijah’s face and a warm, tingling sensation spread through her body. But it wasn’t the same feeling she got when she thought about her parents. No, it was definitely not that.



Juliet crossed the Utah state line into Idaho at 6:30pm. On the side of the highway was an unimpressive blue sign that said, *Welcome to Idaho*. Otherwise, everything else looked the same: rugged mountains in the distance and dry, scrubby flatlands all around except for green patches that were irrigated.

After a second night with only a few hours of sleep, Juliet had decided to borrow her mom’s Fiesta and sneak

away. During the hours that had passed since then, Juliet's thoughts had churned with uncertainty and guilt. But most of all there was anticipation. The warm sensation had returned every time she'd talked to Elijah on her phone, and Juliet's excitement had grown with each hundred miles of progress. In just a few hours she could look directly into his eyes. She could touch the skin on his cheek. She wondered how that would feel, and what his hair would smell like.

Juliet crossed a bridge over the Snake River and then exited the interstate to a truck stop in a town called Burley. She gassed up the Fiesta and paid with her debit card. She hadn't thought to bring any cash. Her mom and dad had called and texted over and over, but so far she hadn't responded. She felt bad about it, but she didn't want them to try to talk her out of this. They just wouldn't understand. Donnie had tried to call, too. He definitely wouldn't understand.

As Juliet used the gas station's restroom, it occurred to her that her parents might be getting worried enough to call the police. The police could probably find where she was from her phone and from her gas purchases. She returned to the car and sat behind the wheel considering this. She looked at her phone. There were nine missed calls from her mom's phone and three from her dad's. And two from Donnie.

She opened the texting app. The messages from her parents were frantic. They wanted to know if she was okay. Juliet tapped the microphone and spoke aloud to her phone.

“Mom and Dad, please don’t worry about me. And please don’t call the police. There is something I have to do. I will try to explain when I get home. I love you both.”

She watched the words appear as text and then tapped *Send*.



It was getting dark, but Mountain Home looked like all the other towns she had passed: a splotch of fast food places and green trees in an otherwise brown, desolate landscape. But Elijah was here. He would be waiting for Juliet in the Wendy’s right off the exit. Juliet could already see the red sign for the restaurant. Her hands tightened on the wheel, but she felt oddly confident. She pulled into the lot and parked next to Elijah’s Forester, which was empty. As she got out of the Fiesta, he ran out of the restaurant. They stood there, face to face, between the two cars.

Juliet’s life imploded. Everything she had ever done seemed to go into a dizzying spiral and condense into this one moment. Her knees were not weak, and her heart didn’t flutter. Instead, she was overcome with absolute, crystalline certainty. There was nothing here to fear. She stepped forward, and so did he. They embraced, and then they

kissed. It was the most passionate moment Juliet had ever experienced.

Finally they stepped back. Elijah's smell and taste lingered. Juliet was not ashamed. Everything about this was right and okay.

"We have to talk," Juliet said.

He nodded. "Let's take my car. I know a place."

Nothing more needed to be said at the moment. They got in his Forester, and he drove under the interstate and north until they were up in the hills. As he drove, Juliet hardly noticed the changing terrain. Instead she gazed at his face in the fading light of the day. Each time he glanced her way she did not look away; she just smiled. Neither of them spoke.

Elijah turned onto a gravel road that took them to a sprawling lake. He stopped in a slot for RVs surrounded by a few trees. Next to the slot were a picnic table, charcoal grill, and electrical hookup. He got out, came around the car, and actually opened Juliet's door. They sat on top of the picnic table with their feet on the bench as the red light of the sunset faded beyond the rugged hills.

Finally, Elijah broke the silence. "Out of nowhere you call me last night. Seven hundred miles away in Colorado. Now tonight you're here with me. My mom's really not going to understand this." He looked at her and his eyes seemed to be pleading for an explanation. "Do *you* understand this, Juliet?"

She put her hand on his and their fingers intertwined. His hand felt warm and smooth, and it fit perfectly. For a moment Juliet even thought that the skin of her palm could smell the chemistry of his hand. It was as thrilling as their kiss had been.

Juliet's confidence didn't falter. "I'll never lie to you," she said. "So no, I don't. My parents are freaking out. But I'm glad I'm here."

His hand squeezed harder for a moment.

"Elijah, do you know how many people are in the database my mom is working with? Two hundred and fifty million. Pretty much everyone in the country over sixteen."

He smiled slightly. "Maybe there's a better match for you in, like, China."

She matched his smile. "I don't think so."

He raised his hand, bringing hers up with it. "This is going to sound crazy, but I think my hand can smell your hand."

"I know, right?" she said. "I thought that, too!"

He nodded at that. "I like it. I don't want it to ever go away."

And then he kissed her again. This time she seemed to smell his presence with her mouth, and her arms, and every other part of her that touched him.



Hours passed. The night air grew colder, forcing them to return to the car. Juliet told him every detail of the events that had led up to their first kiss in the Wendy's parking lot. She listened to him do the same. They talked some about their growing up years, but the past didn't seem very important. It was the future that mattered. Juliet described the life she had envisioned: endless moments of intimacy, trust, and shared challenges. It was the life she saw her parents living. Elijah told of his own vision. He had dreamed of someday owning an outdoor equipment store, selling climbing and camping gear. This vision of his had always included a wife working in the store with him. They would work side-by-side, never needing to be apart.

As they talked late into the night, the two separate visions merged, changing form gradually as if they were two intricate vines growing toward each other, drawn together by an invisible chemical cue. And as the stars gradually passed over them, the visions intertwined, each of them reshaping to fit the gaps and curves of the other, until they were one vision.



Juliet's eyes fluttered open. The western sky was orange and it was cold in the car. She turned to Elijah. He was awake and watching her.

She wiped her mouth. Good—no drool. “You didn’t sleep?”

“Not really,” he said.

“Sorry about that,” she said as she rubbed her sore neck. “I went two nights without much sleep. Guess it caught up to me.”

“Do you still feel it now, Juliet?”

She gazed at his eyes. He was worried, and she understood what he meant. She took both of his hands in hers and held them tight. Her hands once again smelled his and they tingled from his warmth. She leaned forward and their mouths met over the console. Every sensation was at least as strong as the night before.

Finally she sat back. She knew her eyes were wide and that she was visibly trembling, but she didn’t try to hide it. She wanted him to know what she was experiencing.

Gradually, his mouth formed a smile. “Are you afraid?”

“Yes. No.”

“Me too,” he said. He then pointed at her pocket. “I think your phone is dead. It buzzed a bunch of times, and then a few hours ago it stopped.”

Juliet pulled it out. He was right; it was dead. “My parents, probably.”

“What about Donnie?”

She met his gaze. “Probably him, too. He doesn’t know yet.”

He laughed softly through his nose. “How is this going to play out?”

She just shook her head and looked at her knees. She had no idea.

He gripped her hand. “Juliet, if you’re feeling anything at all like I am now, then you know there’s no way in hell I’m giving you up. Ever.”

Juliet already knew that, but it helped to hear him say it. She responded by kissing him again. When she pulled away, she had to force herself to breathe evenly.

“We didn’t plan this very well,” she said. “We didn’t bring any water or food. Can we go into town?”

“Yeah, but first I have to pee. I’ve had to for hours, but I didn’t want to wake you up.”



As they descended through the foothills toward Mountain Home, Juliet took time to observe their surroundings. Hills stretched out for as far as she could see in every direction. Other than appearing drier and browner, it wasn’t all that different from the hills surrounding her hometown of Fort Collins. Perhaps she would come here to stay. Or maybe Elijah would come to Colorado. Maybe they would go somewhere entirely different. As long as they were together, it didn’t matter.

She was about to say something to him about this when a police car passed them going the other way. Elijah stiffened, and he watched the patrol car in his rearview mirror.

“He’s turning around,” he said. “My mom called the police. I knew she would.”

He then punched the gas and sped up until they had rounded a curve, putting a hill between the Forester and the patrol car. He turned off on a small gravel road and the tires briefly beat out a rhythm as they crossed a cattle guard. He sped up and over a ridge extending from the hill. The gravel road forked into two directions, and he turned wildly to the left, almost sliding off the road.

Juliet became alarmed. “Elijah, you might as well stop. We aren’t really doing anything wrong, are we? Maybe we should just deal with it now.” But she understood exactly what he was thinking. It was too soon. They both wanted more time together before the hassles started, before they had to explain what couldn’t really be explained.

He was going to run them off the road if he didn’t slow down. She put her hand on his shoulder. “Elijah.”

He glanced at her, his eyes wide.

“Elijah, it’s okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

He appeared to take a deep breath, and then he let up on the gas.

“We knew this was coming,” she said. “It’s okay.”

Driving slower now, he turned at another fork and headed up a rocky ridge. The road was narrow now, nothing more than a rancher's trail, and it cut up the side of the ridge. The ridge became too steep to go any further, and he stopped and turned off the engine. He twisted around to look back.

"I guess we lost him," he said.

Juliet began to relax a little. Maybe they would have a little more time after all.

Suddenly the Forester slid to the left a foot or so. Juliet looked at Elijah. Beyond his stricken face was the rocky slope of the ridge. It looked like a long way down.

Elijah grabbed the key to start the car, and then it started sliding again.

"Juliet, get out!" he cried. "Now!"

Juliet looked at him in horror as the car started sliding faster. She had no time to get out. The Forester toppled onto its side and she was thrown hard against him, her seatbelt cutting into her hips and shoulder. For a moment they were upside down, but the car kept rolling, and Juliet's world was nothing but violence and noise.



It hurt to walk. One of her legs didn't work the way it was supposed to, and for some reason both her legs seemed to be scratched and bloody. But Juliet kept walking. She had

to keep walking. She could see the town now, and it wasn't far. She could even see the Wendy's sign above the highway.

That's where she had to go.

But one of her legs didn't seem to work right. Juliet sobbed. She wasn't sure why she was crying. She stopped and stared at her shoes, dark red with blood. She sobbed again.

A feeling started to wash over her. It was powerful and dark, and it scared her. She had felt it a few minutes ago and she knew it was bad. But this time she couldn't stop it. It was knowing, remembering. It washed over her and gripped her like fire that couldn't be smothered, burning her flesh as it engulfed her body.

Juliet remembered it all.

"Oh no!" She fell to her knees and it hurt. She covered her face with her hands. "No! No, please. Mom! Daddy, I need you!"

She had left him there. He had hit his head on something, and his face didn't look the same, and she couldn't find a pulse, and he was dead, and she heard the police car's tires approaching on the road, and there wasn't a pulse, and she took his cell phone and put it in her pocket, and she climbed out of the car, and she left him there. And he was dead.



Juliet drove all day and into the night, stopping only for gas. Her throat screamed for a drink of water, and her stomach was hollow, but she didn't care. She wasn't about to go inside a gas station to buy something in her condition. She just wanted to go home. She wanted her mom and dad to hold her and say soothing things. Maybe that would help to make it seem like there was some reason to go on living.

When she finally pulled into her driveway, the clock on the dash said 11:20pm. Grandma Larrison's car was there, and the lights inside were on. At least there were no police.

As Juliet turned off the Fiesta's engine, they came running out the door—Mom, Dad, and Grandma Larrison. Juliet got out of the car, stumbling on her leg that had stiffened up during the drive. When she stood fully erect, this stopped them short. They all stared at her face and blood-covered legs.

Her dad spoke first. "Good God, honey, what happened?" He rushed forward and Juliet let him take her in his arms.

And then all three of them were there, holding her, allowing her to finally fold up and stop fighting for the last of her strength.



They took Juliet to the hospital. A policeman showed up, but Juliet told him she had just wanted to get away for a

while, and that she had hurt herself hiking. He seemed satisfied by this and left the hospital.

Her mom and dad wanted the doctors to examine her for signs of sexual abuse, but Juliet was eighteen and they needed her permission. She told them it wasn't necessary.

Her leg wasn't broken, but there were torn ligaments in the knee. And both her legs had numerous cuts from walking through the sagebrush in shorts.

For now, Juliet would live.

When things quieted down and she was settled into a hospital room with only her mom, dad, and grandmother, the tough questions finally came.

"Jules," her mom said. "We need to know where you went."

Juliet looked at them. They all seemed so concerned. She found it difficult to speak so she just shook her head.

Her dad said, "You took your mother's car and were gone for thirty-six hours. We deserve to know why. You've never done anything like this before."

Juliet felt a sob about to erupt. If she spoke she would lose it. Even though she knew they didn't deserve it, she shook her head again and rolled onto her side, facing away from them. This hurt her knee and then the delayed sobs spilled out.

They quit asking questions and sat silently next to the bed.



Juliet was dismissed from the hospital the next day. Grandma Larrison had gone home during the night, and Juliet was alone with her mom and dad as they drove from the hospital.

Soon after pulling out of the parking lot, her dad said, “When you’re ready to talk to us, Jules, we’ll be ready to listen.”

No words were spoken after that.

When they got to the house, her mom and dad helped her hobble to her room and get into her own bed.

“We love you, Juliet,” her mom said, and then they left her alone.

Juliet stared at the trees outside her window for a long time.

She tried to picture Elijah’s face as it had looked when she’d first met him in the Wendy’s parking lot, but she kept seeing the battered remains of it after his Forester had rolled to the bottom of the ridge. She put her hand to her face, hoping her palm could still smell his lingering presence. But that was stupid; hands could not smell anything.

She fell asleep and then woke up when she heard her mom and dad talking outside her bedroom door. They were trying to keep their voices low, but they weren’t low enough.

“We need to give her some time, Zoe. We don’t know what she’s been through.”

“That’s exactly my point! She was dehydrated. She takes off for thirty-six hours and doesn’t even take a drink of water the whole time? Does that make sense to you?”

“She’ll talk to us. She just needs time.”

Juliet turned away from the door and put her pillow over her ear.



Two days later, Juliet was ready to talk.

Elijah’s presence had started to fade from her dreams and waking thoughts. But Juliet knew that nothing in her life would ever be the same. There could be only one best fit—one out of 250 million. Anyone else would just be *good enough*, and maybe not even that.

There was one thing that she now focused on, one thought that made it seem feasible to have a life without Elijah: her mom and dad were happy together, and they had found each other without the benefit of Enchantech’s database.

The police had not come to the house yet. Unless the officer who’d passed them on the road had seen Juliet in the Forester, no one in Idaho knew that she had been with him when he died. Juliet had searched and found only one online article about the tragedy. It was on the site of the

Mountain Home News. It was just a brief report of a local high school student who was reported missing by his mother and then apparently crashed his car trying to avoid a police officer. The report included a photo of him. Juliet had stared at the photo for a long time and then had turned off her phone, determined to quit searching for information.

Juliet had kept Elijah's phone. She wasn't sure why she had taken it. Maybe she had thought that his call history would reveal their brief relationship. But if his mom really wanted to, she could access his calls through the service provider. For now, the phone was hidden in the back of Juliet's drawer, turned all the way off to prevent calls and tracking.

"Mom! Daddy!"

She had waited until her dad came home from work, and so both of them appeared at her doorway within seconds.

"Everything okay, Jules?" her dad said.

Juliet tried to smile. They came in and sat on both sides of her bed.

Unexpectedly, she teared up. "I just want to say I'm sorry."

They both waited, knowing more would come.

"I shouldn't have left like that. I promise I won't do it again."

Her mom took her hand. "Where did you go, Jules? You put fifteen hundred miles on my car."

Juliet shook her head. She felt the tears flowing down her cheeks. “I don’t think I can explain it. But I’ll try to find a way—maybe soon. I just want you to know that I think I’m going to be okay. I’ll be okay.” She wiped her cheeks with her free hand. “You guys, I’m glad you have each other. I don’t know what I’d do if you didn’t.”

Their smiles were warm and sincere. They sat there and looked at her without speaking for a long time.

Finally her mom said, “Donnie’s been calling. He wants to come see you. What should we tell him?”

The tears began to swell again. “I guess so. There isn’t any reason why he shouldn’t.”



Juliet’s knee gradually shrank in size, and several days later she got out of bed, determined to stay out. She had rotted there long enough. She walked around her bedroom a few times and then up and down the hall. She stopped in the living room and gazed out the front window. It had rained last night and the trees seemed so green. Donnie was coming over in a little while and he was going to take her somewhere to eat. She had practiced things she could say to people—maybe her friends if she ran into any of them. With any luck, she might pass as a normal person. She wanted to be a normal person again.

Her dad was reading a book in the kitchen. He looked up when she walked in and raised his brows. “You, beautiful, are a sight for sore eyes.”

She looked down at her bare legs, scratched and bruised. “That’s a stretch, don’t you think?” She opened the fridge, ready to graze. “Where’s Mom?”

“She left last night. Her firm wanted her to attend a one-day conference in Phoenix. Bunch of people presenting about genetics of pheromones and the like. It’s beyond me.” He saw the puzzled look on her face. “It was a last minute thing. You were asleep when they called.”

Juliet turned back to the fridge and picked out a yogurt. “So she’ll be back tonight?”

“She will. Hard to say what time, though. After the sessions, she’s making a little side trip.”

Juliet got a spoon, opened the yogurt, and sat down at the table. “Where to?”

He sighed and shook his head. “It’s just a curiosity thing, I think. You know her Enchantech project?”

Juliet was suddenly alert, but she tried not to show it. “It’s like a site for finding people to date, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah, although it’s much more robust than you might think. Supposedly it finds the perfect match for just about anyone.” He shook his head again. “Your mom got this silly idea to try something.”

Juliet had yogurt in her mouth, but suddenly her mouth felt dry anyway. “Dad, what are you talking about?”

“Well, she had the system she’s been working on find the person who is supposedly the best match for her.” He smiled sheepishly. “It wasn’t me. Turns out the guy lives fifty miles from Phoenix.”

Juliet heard her spoon hit the table, but it seemed distant. A sound like white noise began building in her ears. She sputtered, “Daddy, no!”

He eyed her, lines of concern forming on his face. “What? She just thought it would be fun to see what kind of guy her software would pick over all the millions of others.” He looked at the clock. “She should be getting there about now. You okay, Jules?”

Juliet’s world was crumbling. She tried swallowing the yogurt but nearly choked. “No, Daddy! No!” She rose from her chair as fast as her knee would allow it. The yogurt cup flew to the floor, and she limped through the splattered mess.

She couldn’t get to her room fast enough. She grabbed her phone and plopped painfully onto the bed while pulling up her mom’s number. It rang once, twice. Juliet was crying now, and she wasn’t sure she could talk coherently. She heard a click.

“Juliet? What’s up, honey?”

Juliet sniffled and then tried again to swallow. “Mom, where are you? What are you doing?”

“Hon, I can barely hear you. Not much of a signal here.”

“Mom, listen! Dad said you were going to see someone. Is that true? Are you there yet?”

Her mom actually chuckled. “Your dad told you about this, huh? Yeah, I’m here. I’m just waiting for this guy Denny to get off work. I didn’t have time to call him, so I thought I would just pop over here and say hello to him as he walks to his car.” She chuckled again. “Hope it doesn’t freak him out.”

Juliet exhaled. There was still time.

“Mom, listen to me. This isn’t going to make sense, but I need you to—“

“Just a second, Jules. That might be him now.”

“Mom? Mom!”

There was only silence.

“Mom!” Juliet sobbed. “Don’t even look at him! Do you hear me? Please drive away!”

There was a double beep. The connection had been cut. Juliet stared at her phone in disbelief.

“Jules, what’s wrong?” It was her dad. He was now standing in her doorway looking very concerned.

Juliet sprang to her feet. “Dad, you have to call her!” She was aware that she was shrieking but didn’t care. “You have to tell her to come home! You don’t understand—you have to!”

Juliet tried calling her mom again, but her fingers were shaking too much to operate her phone. “Daddy, help me!”

And then he was at her side, and his arms were around her. “It’s okay, honey. Your mom’s fine.”

Juliet embraced him back. Her legs wanted to fold, and she felt him supporting her weight. “You don’t understand,” she sobbed. “You guys are all I have. And now it’s too late.”

He held her tighter. “Too late for what, Jules?”

“Mom’s project—the database—it works. Now she’s seen him, and it’s too late.”

Her phone suddenly chirped. Juliet inhaled sharply and pulled away from her dad. She fumbled with her phone and finally hit the right icon.

She practically screamed into the phone, “Mom!”

“Sorry about that, honey. My signal is weak and you lost me for a moment.”

“What about the guy, Mom? What about Denny?”

“False alarm. It was someone else. I’m still waiting.”

Juliet turned to her dad. He still looked at her with concern. She tried to get her voice under control. “Listen to me, Mother. I need you to do something for me. I’ll explain later, but I need you to drive away from there. Just come home, okay?”

“Juliet, do you know how far I’ve driven—”

Juliet screamed, “Mother, please!”

Her mom was silent for a moment. “Okay, Jules. I don’t understand, but I’m driving away now. Are you all right, honey? Is your dad there with you?”

Juliet let out a sound that was a sobbing laugh. “Yes, he’s here. Just come home as soon as you can, okay?”

“I’m on my way, Jules.”

Juliet tossed her phone on the bed and looked at her dad through a layer of tears. He stepped forward and held her again.

“We love you, Jules,” he said. “Tomorrow your mother and I will call someone you can talk to—someone who can give you the help you need. Is that okay with you?”

She buried her head in his shoulder.

“Okay, Daddy. Anything you want is okay.”