

SOULMATES.com

Will McIntosh

Will McIntosh, @willmcintoshSF and *www.willmcintosh.net*, is a Hugo award winner and finalist for the Nebula Award. Along with six novels, Will has published around fifty short stories in *Asimov's* (where he won Readers' Awards in 2010 and 2013), *Lightspeed, Science Fiction and Fantasy: Best of the Year*, and elsewhere. His most recent SF books are *Faller* (Tor Books) and YA novel *Burning Midnight* (Penguin Random House). Up next is *Watchdog*, a middle grades book to be published by Penguin Random House. Will lives in Williamsburg, Virginia, with his wife and their twins. He was a psychology professor before turning to writing full time and still occasionally teaches introductory psychology at the College of William and Mary. The author reveals the possible future of love and obsession in . . .

SOULMATES.com

Hey there, Daniel!

I READ YOUR PROFILE (THAT'S RIGHT, WOMEN DON'T JUST LOOK AT THE PHOTOS, THEY ACTUALLY READ THE PROFILES. :)), AND I THOUGHT I'D INTRODUCE MYSELF. WE SEEM TO BE ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH. CHECK OUT MY PROFILE WHEN YOU HAVE A CHANCE, AND SEE WHAT YOU THINK. HOPE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

BTW, I DID PEEK AT YOUR PHOTO AS WELL. ;)

WINNIE

* * *

She was damned cute. Short, close-cropped blonde hair; a wry, slightly crooked smile; round, chipmunky face. The look in her eyes was penetrating, like there was a lot going on behind them. My fingers were actually shaking as I waved open her profile.

WINNIE WHIRLWIND

AGE: 29

LOCATION: ATLANTA, GA (46 MILES FROM YOU)

I'M AN ONLINE ENTREPRENEUR WHO SPENDS WAY TOO MUCH TIME WITH MY HEAD IN A COMPUTER. COME PRY ME AWAY AND REINTRODUCE ME TO: PILES OF COLORFUL LEAVES JUST SCREAMING TO BE JUMPED IN; MOVIE THEATERS THAT SMELL LIKE POPCORN; WICKEDLY COOL RESTAURANTS I DON'T KNOW ABOUT. WHEN I'M NOT WORKING, I'M OUT RUNNING AND JUMP-

ING AROUND THIS INCREDIBLE CITY. DO YOU KNOW WHAT PARKOUR IS? IF SO, GIVE YOURSELF TWO BONUS POINTS. IF NOT, GOOGLE IT. COME EXPLORE THE URBAN LANDSCAPE MY WAY. I'M 71% EXTROVERT, 27% INTROVERT. I KNOW THAT ONLY ADDS UP TO 98%. WHAT'S THE OTHER 2%? GET TO KNOW ME AND FIND OUT.

* * *

I ponied up the ninety-nine bucks for a one-month membership to Soulmates.com so I could respond to the message, and started typing HI WINNIE, I'M SO GLAD . . . and then stopped.

Take your hands off the keys. Step away from the keyboard.

I wanted to reply immediately (because, what, if I don't she might meet someone and fall in love in the next four hours?). My first instincts are not always my best. When I have the time to think, often I come up with good ideas. Not so much when I dive right in. I was so thrilled by this woman's profile that I'd probably write something over-the-top gushing and regret it later. I'm not desperate, but I'd come to realize I sometimes come across that way because I can get so enthusiastic about things. Not just women—a lot of things: music; my various hobbies including painting, kayaking, parkour; food; and of course Eastern philosophy. So I would take some time and think about what I wanted to say.

If Winnie had written this profile herself, she was smart, and she had a sense of humor. That she'd written it was far from a given, though. Lots of people—especially people with decent incomes—paid professionals to write their profiles. Her photo clearly wasn't a studio shot, though—it was a selfie snapped in her living room (and she hadn't even cleaned her living room first). Who paid a professional to write her profile but snapped a selfie? Almost no one.

We had so much in common. That, and yes, the way her photo made my heart thump, was why I was so excited. The music she liked was a fascinating mix of early eighties goth, obscure local acts, jazz fusion, and schmaltzy pop. There was about a 30 percent overlap in the bands we listed in our profiles, which was incredible, because I like obscure stuff. And, among her favorite books: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I could definitely fall in love with a woman who read Pirsig. Hell, I could fall in love with a woman who knew who Pirsig was.

I paced around my little basement apartment taking deep breaths. This was crazy—I was excited about a woman I'd never met, based on her profile. I couldn't help it, though; she was just so perfect on paper.

She was three years older than me, but that was fine. I liked the idea of dating an older woman, especially at this particular juncture in my life. Dating Emily, who was three years younger than me, sure hadn't worked out, even if we did salvage a friendship from the ashes.

Winnie. Twenty-nine-year-old Winnie. My future wife. Yes.

* * *

DEAR WINNIE,

I'M BLOWN AWAY. IF I HAD WRITTEN A PROFILE MYSELF DESCRIBING THE IDEAL WOMAN I'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM, IT WOULDN'T BE AS INTRIGUING AS YOURS. WE SEEM TO HAVE SO MUCH IN COMMON! CLEARLY WE SHARE AN OBSESSION FOR PARKOUR. I WAS INTRODUCED TO THE FINE ART OF URBAN FREERUNNING BY FRIENDS IN NEW ORLEANS WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN. IT IS SUCH AN EXHILARATING WAY TO EXPERIENCE A CITY. ATHENS HAS SOME DECENT CITYSCAPES TO WORK WITH, BUT I'LL BET ATLANTA IS HEAVEN IF YOU KNOW WHERE TO GO. AND, ROBERT PIRSIG? I WOULD HAVE BET ANYTHING THERE WASN'T A SOUL WITHIN A HUNDRED MILES OF ME WHO'D EVEN HEARD OF *ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE*.

AND DON'T GET ME STARTED ON YOUR MUSICAL TASTE! I'M ALREADY CHECKING INTO THE

BANDS ON YOUR LIST I'M NOT FAMILIAR WITH, BECAUSE THEY MUST BE AMAZING. I DON'T ADMIT THIS OUT LOUD TO MANY PEOPLE, BUT MY DECISION TO GET MY DOCTORATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA WAS AS MUCH ABOUT THE MUSIC SCENE IN ATHENS AS THE QUALITY OF THE PHILOSOPHY PROGRAM AT THE UGA.

WANT TO GRAB COFFEE SOME TIME? I'M GOING TO BE IN ATLANTA NEXT WEEKEND GETTING MATERIALS FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT.

DANIEL

P.S. HAVE YOU STUMBLED ACROSS A FILM CALLED *CASTAWAY ON THE MOON*? IF NOT, I THINK YOU'D LOVE IT, BASED ON THE FILMS YOU LISTED AS YOUR FAVES. DON'T LET THE TITLE THROW YOU—IT'S A JAPANESE FILM ABOUT A GUY WHO GETS STRANDED ON AN ISLAND UNDER A HIGHWAY OVERPASS IN THE MIDDLE OF TOKYO.

* * *

Okay, so the bit about being in Atlanta next weekend was a bit of a lie. A complete lie, really. But it sounded better than, *I'll drive to Atlanta and back to have coffee with you, just name the time and place*. The truth was, I would have driven three times that far to meet this woman.

Had I written too much about the things we had in common, the “stuff” rather than about how fascinating I found her? Maybe. Then again, we didn't know each other. Probably better to focus on interests and activities.

I let my finger hover over the SEND icon; one little wave, and there would be no changing my reply.

I waved.

The wait for her reply was going to be excruciating. I was so not a cool, confident guy.

No, I was confident, I just wasn't confident in my ability to convey that confidence to others. Or was that the same as not being confident?

I loved my life. I loved how much pleasure I could get from little things. I just wanted someone to share it with. Sometimes when I was alone in my apartment I found myself turning to say something to the love of my life before realizing that not only was she not there, I didn't know who she was. I knew she was out there, and I had so much I wanted to say to her, but first I needed to find her.

I refreshed, although a) my system would alert me to any new messages within two seconds of receipt, and b) enough time hadn't passed for her to construct a reply even if she'd begun writing as soon as I hit SEND.

Time to find something to do. I texted Emily.

IS THERE ANYONE PLAYING WHO'S WORTH SEEING ON A TUESDAY NIGHT IN JUNE?

I had mostly gotten over our breakup. For a while it had been excruciating to sit across from Emily at The Taco Stand, or stand beside her watching some band, but I'd soldiered through (okay, mostly hoping she'd change her mind). As it turned out, the things that led me to fall madly in love with her made her a good friend once I'd managed to fluff up my heart, which Emily had stomped flat.

Her reply came in minutes:

THE MIGHTY OLSENS R AT 40 WATT . . .

The Mighty Olsens. They would definitely do. They alternated soaring, upbeat songs with utterly depressing odes to despair and had no guitarist. One of the things that unified the disparate sounds that made up the musical revolution building here in Athens was instrumental diversity. I mean, there are so many instruments out there, so many possible combinations—why are so many bands comprised of guitar, bass, drums?

I jotted that thought on my phone. That might be something to write to Winnie in

my next message. I could invite her to come to Athens to see a band.

I refreshed again.

* * *

Emily appeared around the corner and headed up the sidewalk toward me. Curious, I paid close attention for that fluttering, first warm day of spring feeling I couldn't avoid feeling whenever Emily first appeared in my field of vision.

I'd read in *Psychology Today* that researchers had debunked the notion that you needed time to "process" a breakup. Turns out the people who get over breakups the fastest are those who start seeing other people the fastest. Having read that research, I'd spent eight months "processing" my breakup with Emily. Now that a potential new relationship was on the horizon, I had to say, I barely felt a twinge of longing as Emily approached in her red jeans and battered boots, her wrists doing that little *flick* at the apex of her backswing. She had such a musical walk. Not to mention wicked computer skills derived from the Information Technology program she was enrolled in, which I found incredibly sexy in a woman.

"Hey," she said as she reached me.

"Hey." I stood, hands in my jacket pockets.

Emily studied me, her eyebrows pinching. "What's going on?"

I shrugged. "What do you mean?"

"You're grinning."

"I'm always grinning. I'm a happy guy. You ready?"

We headed down the sidewalk, toward the 40 Watt.

As we approached the dark storefront of Masada Leather, we slowed and looked at each other.

"You want to?" Emily asked.

I gestured toward the door. "After you."

Emily pressed her nose to the crack between the door and the doorframe and inhaled deeply, her crescent eyes narrowing. On our third date we'd discovered you could smell the leather through whatever tiny crack existed when the shop was closed and the door locked, and since then it had become a ritual. When Emily's brother was visiting Athens from Fresno, one of the things we took him to do was smell the leather at Masada.

I took my turn, breathing in the pungent, somehow comforting aroma of new leather. I decided to take Winnie here, to smell the leather, the first time she visited.

As far as I'm concerned, Athens, Georgia, is perfect. The downtown is filled with funky restaurants, bars, bookstores, music stores, secondhand clothes shops. The wide sidewalk on College Avenue—the main drag—is always bustling with buskers, hacky-sackers in shorts and flip-flops, street preachers, and people just hanging out.

The 40 Watt was relatively quiet, which meant you could reach the bar without having bodies pressing in on all sides. The Mighty Olsens had started without us. We got drinks and took up our usual spot toward the front.

When my phone whispered through my earbud that I'd received a message from *Soulmates.com*, I jumped like I'd been goosed. I slid the phone from my pocket, trying not to be obvious.

* * *

HOWDY, DANIEL!

I JUST FINISHED WATCHING *CASTAWAY ON THE MOON*. INCREDIBLE. IT BLEW ME AWAY. I WANT MORE RECOMMENDATIONS!

AS TO YOUR INVITATION TO MEET UP, MY WORK SCHEDULE THIS WEEKEND IS BONKERS. REMIND ME TO TELL YOU ABOUT MY TENDENCY TO TAKE ON TOO MUCH AT ONCE, AND THEN

TAKE ON MORE. I LOVE WHAT I DO, BUT NOT HOW MUCH I DO IT. DO YOU SKYPE? MAYBE WE COULD SAY HELLO. TONIGHT, EVEN, IF YOU HAVE TIME. I'M A NIGHT OWL, I'LL BE UP TILL THREE OR FOUR.

XO,
WINNIE

* * *

She'd given me an XO. That seemed like a good sign. I so wanted to race out of the 40 Watt and call her immediately, but I'd invited Emily out. Around midnight I could tell her I was tired and wanted to go. That would leave plenty of time to call Winnie.

Emily leaned in and shouted in my ear as she bobbed to the music. "I thought you never checked your phone if it intruded on real life?"

Busted by my own words. I put the phone away and tried to focus on the music.

* * *

When Winnie's face appeared, I could all but feel the rush of oxytocin released in my brain as every cell in my body quivered and shouted *Yes!* I find lots of women attractive, but there are people you find attractive, and there are those incredibly elusive people who you take one look at and every fiber in your being cries out in joy and recognition.

"Where *are* you?" Winnie asked, laughing.

I expanded the screen until Winnie's face was just about actual size, then looked over my shoulder at the wooden pier stretching into dark water. "I'm at Lake Herrick. I come here at night sometimes—I can walk from my apartment. Ooh, a bat." I turned the screen up toward the sky so she could see it flapping in mad loops above the water.

"That's gorgeous." After a few seconds she said, "Come back! I want to see you."

I turned the screen back to my French-Cajun mug, which has been described as "cute" and occasionally "adorable," but never "handsome" and definitely not "chiseled." I'm blessed and cursed with long lashes and a button nose.

"That's better."

There was an awkwardish silence. I begged my lovestruck mind to form a coherent thought, but it stubbornly refused.

"So I have a confession to make," Winnie said. "I checked out your Facebook page."

"Oh yeah? Did you find out anything interesting?"

"Lots. Like, you lived in Boone. When I was a kid my family rented a cabin there a few summers in a row. I love that town."

"Me, too." I pointed at her. "There's something else we have in common." My heart was racing, but in a good way.

"How did you end up in Boone?"

"When I got out of college, I wasn't sure what I wanted to be when I grew up. I decided I would be one of those outdoorsy guys who has a tan all year round and wears knit caps, so I got a job as a kayaking guide on the New River."

"What happened?"

"I realized outdoorsy people weren't much different from office people—they just wore different clothes. I met some great people, but my boss was a complete asshole. And I got tired of being wet and cold all the time."

I asked Winnie about her Internet business. It turned out she had six Internet businesses. After college she'd spent three years climbing the corporate ladder at an Internet startup before realizing the work was killing her. She smiled and laughed so much. Even when her expression was completely neutral, the corners of her mouth curled slightly upward.

Eventually I got tired of standing and sat on the dock with my feet dangling in the water. We talked about music, about Zen and Tao and Zoroastrianism, about our

childhoods, politics (she was a raging pinko-commie liberal), our dreams and fears.

“Is that a beach on the other side of the lake?” Winnie asked at about five A.M.

“Yeah. They even have a little snack bar that sells potato chips and ice pops.”

“Take me swimming?”

I laughed. “Okay. Sure.” I hiked around to the other side, pulled off my shoes and socks, my green Five-Eight T-shirt, and finally my jeans (what the hell). I waded into the cool water in tighty-whities, rotating the screen so Winnie could take in mist rising from the water. I hadn’t noticed that dawn was breaking.

* * *

I paused on the sidewalk in front of the partially completed Stype Elementary School and took it in. To parkour enthusiasts, a construction site was a beautiful thing. I was fairly sure I would have found it beautiful even if I wasn’t into parkour.

My phone whispered that I had a new text message from Emily.

WHAT R U DOING? WANT TO HAVE LUNCH AT THE GRIT?

CAN’T TODAY. MAYBE LATER THIS WEEK? I sent back.

I checked my watch. Winnie would be Skyping in about ten minutes. I headed for the shining steel bones of the elementary school. It wasn’t even fenced in, as if the city was saying, *Come on in and enjoy.*

My phone rang. Emily.

She didn’t begin with the traditional hello, just got right to the point. “When I was a kid, when someone was your friend, then suddenly stopped being your friend because someone better came along, we called it flat-leaving.”

“What are you talking about? We saw Hawkwild three nights ago.”

“It was *five* nights ago, and I had to schedule my three hours of quality time with you a week in advance. You’re a flat-leaver. It was awkward making this transition, but I really wanted us to be friends, so I stuck with it. Now as soon as you meet a woman, you’re gone.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have as much free time as I used to. That doesn’t mean I’m *gone*. You’re acting like I’m supposed to be your boyfriend placeholder until you find a new one. If you had a boyfriend you wouldn’t be hanging out with *me* every night, you’d be hanging out with him.”

“I’d make time for you.”

“And what if he didn’t like you hanging out alone with your ex-boyfriend? You’d invite me to be a third wheel once in a while so you wouldn’t feel guilty about having no time for me.”

“Don’t tell me what I’d *do*. I wouldn’t do that. If my boyfriend didn’t like me hanging out with you, he wouldn’t be my boyfriend any longer, because he’d be an insecure *jack-ass*. Is that why you’re not hanging out with me? Is *Winnie* not happy about it?”

“*No*. Winnie could care less who I hang out with.” Winnie hadn’t blinked when I told her my best friend in Athens was my ex.

Emily exhaled in the phone. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called you a flat-leaver.”

“You shouldn’t call *anyone* a flat-leaver, unless you’re eight years old.”

“Shut up,” Emily laughed. “I miss you. And okay, maybe I’m a little jealous of your cool and sophisticated new girlfriend.”

“Thanks for being jealous. In a weird way that makes me happy.”

“It shouldn’t make you happy, doofus.”

“Sure it should. You dumped me, so you being jealous allows me to salvage some self-worth.”

She sighed. “Whatever.”

There was a ladder lashed in place to reach the upper floors. I began to climb. “I’ll try to do better. You know how it is with a new relationship—you get all excited and neglect your friends for a few weeks. Then you come down to Earth. You’re still my

best friend.”

Emily sniffed. She was crying. “You, too. Thanks for letting me yell at you.”

“Any time.”

I had a great view of downtown from the roof of the three-story structure. Multi-color rows of two-story buildings, the green-domed clock tower of town hall rising above them. I stood with my hands on my hips and took it in, feeling . . . perfect.

I dialed Winnie.

She was much higher up, on the eighth or ninth floor of a high rise under construction, the breeze mussing her hair. “Ready?” She flicked her head to get her bangs out of her eyes. “Who’s first?”

“After you.”

We shifted our camera POV to our glasses. Winnie linked hers to mine so I could watch it all through her eyes, or switch to a wide-angle view and watch her as if from a dozen feet away.

“Here we go.” Winnie looked around, jogged toward a stairwell. As she approached the steel railing at the top of the stairwell, she leaped, toed the top of the railing and launched herself over the fifteen-foot drop. She landed with one foot on the top of the railing on the opposite side, dove, and executed a perfect shoulder roll, allowing her momentum to bring her back to her feet.

She was incredible. Graceful, powerful, fearless. I watched, breathless, as she ran on walls, flipped, vaulted, jumped.

When she finished and switched the POV back to normal, I clutched my heart. “Oh my god. You’re *incredible*. You took my breath away. I’m going to seem *so lame* after that.”

“No you’re not. Daniel. Just go, and I’ll enjoy the ride.”

I went. I’d walked the site the day before to get some ideas, even tried out a few moves, so I knew where the interesting landscapes were. I was nowhere near as good as Winnie, but I wasn’t embarrassingly bad. Growing up, I’d never been very athletic, never had interest in joining a soccer league or trying out for the wrestling team, but I’d always been spry, adept at climbing and jumping.

When I finished Winnie whooped, jumping up and down, a vista of downtown Atlanta stretching out in the background. I couldn’t have asked for a more gratifying response. I tugged my T-shirt away from my skin. I was drenched in sweat and tingling with energy. “Wow.”

Winnie grinned at me, her eyes so bright, so alive. “Yeah. Wow.”

“When can we do this together? I’m dying to see you in person.” She’d been swamped with work, then away on a business trip for two weeks. Surely now.

“I know. Me, too. But I have to fly out to LA in the morning.”

I squeezed my eyes closed. “You’re killing me. You’re forty-six miles away, but it feels like ten thousand.”

“I’m sorry.” She reached out and touched her screen. “But this isn’t *too* bad, is it?” She looked off to one side and started to smile. The smile just kept getting wider. “Maybe I can make it even better.”

“What do you mean?”

She linked me to her system again. “I think you’re going to want to stay on wide angle for this.” Winnie pulled her T-shirt over her head, revealing a white sports bra.

Then she took off the bra.

“Oh, my god.” Her breasts were small and firm and perfect. I tried not to stare, then realized the whole point was for me to stare. She peeled off the rest of her clothes.

“Enjoy the show.” She ran three steps, jumped into the air and snagged a pipe overhead, swung onto an air vent.

I enjoyed the show. I was head over heels in love with this brilliant, daring, incredible woman.

* * *

It was perfect that the *Castaway on the Moon* movie poster I'd ordered from Japan arrived the next day. If I sent it by priority mail, it would be waiting for Winnie when she returned from LA. All I needed was her snail address.

I started with the obvious—her various websites—but the contact info was a post office box. Peoplefinder had no listing for her. Same with Anywho. The white pages listed the same PO box. I could simply call Winnie and ask for her address, but I wanted to surprise her. Time to call in the heavy artillery. I called Emily, the computer goddess.

"Sure, send me some info on her. And then bring me chicken vindaloo from Taste of India."

I did as instructed. This was not the first time I'd utilized Emily's computer skills, and I understood her fee structure. Dinner on me, delivered. It beat the hell out of the sixty or seventy dollars an hour most tech people charged. I called ahead to Taste of India and was at Emily's door in twenty-five minutes with a chicken vindaloo, chicken korma for me, and a pile of naan bread.

"Come on in," Emily called when I rang the bell. She was at her computer station, which was a multi-level kingdom that told you she was not screwing around. She glanced up. "She has no address."

"You mean, you can't *find* her address. I've seen her apartment; I'm pretty confident she's not homeless."

Emily typed something, squinted at the screen, then shook her head. "I've got her IP, a ton of website registrations. I mean, I'm in deep, but the address is listed either as that damned PO Box, or it's left blank. Even in places where a home address is required." She looked up again. "You want me to get naughty? I can go places I'm *really* not supposed to go."

"No, it's not that important. Come and eat your vindaloo." I set the plastic bag containing our dinners on Emily's beat-up coffee table and went to the kitchen to fetch plates and utensils. I'd just have to get the address from Winnie and compromise the surprise.

Emily joined me on the couch, but she brought a laptop with her and went on typing while she ate.

I scooped a bunch of rice onto my plate and smothered it in korma. "Really, it's not that important."

"It's so strange, though. She's gone to so much trouble to keep her address hidden."

"Maybe she's a wanted criminal. A drug lord, probably." I was getting annoyed at her persistence. She seemed a little too eager to discover something bad about Winnie.

She frowned, poked her face closer to the screen. "Okay, this is really strange."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm having trouble finding any evidence of Winifred Skyler that's more than two years old. She has a valid social, four bank and securities accounts under her name, but no education record—"

"She has a bachelor's in Information Systems from Carnegie Mellon."

Emily typed, stabbing the keys while I ate another bite of korma that seemed to lodge in my esophagus, stubbornly refusing to go down. She studied the screen, shook her head. "No she doesn't. She has no previous addresses, no credit cards or loans that are more than two years old." She stopped typing and looked at me. "Daniel, I think she's living under an assumed identity."

"Maybe she's in the witness protection program."

"Maybe. You want me to get naughty? Your call."

I set my fork down. My stomach was in knots—there was no way I was going to

get any more food down. I felt irrationally annoyed at Emily and simultaneously panicked and terrified at finding out Winnie wasn't who she seemed to be. How could she not be? There had to be some obvious and innocuous explanation for this.

If I wanted to find it, and be able to sleep tonight, Emily was my best bet. I could call Winnie and ask what the deal was, but I wouldn't blame her for being both furious and freaked out to learn I was prying like this.

"Go ahead."

I paced around Emily's apartment as my abandoned dinner congealed on the coffee table, wondering if there was any connection between these weird gaps in Winnie's record and her reluctance to meet in person. She'd been so open and forthright about her life, her feelings. It didn't seem possible she was living under an alias.

I flopped into a stuffed chair, grabbed the front section of the *Athens Journal-Constitution* and read the first paragraph of an article on another zoning battle going on in the downtown area. I reread the paragraph four more times before tossing the paper aside, then waved the TV on and watched *Red, Orange, Yellow, Repeat* for a while, unable to follow the plot.

"Oh, my god," Emily said from her computer kingdom.

"What?"

Emily didn't seem to hear me. She was gawking at her screen, fingers poised, frozen, over the keyboard, her mouth ajar.

"Oh, my god," she repeated. She turned. "This is—" She shook her head, astonished.

"What?"

"Daniel, I don't know how to tell you this. I think I found Winnie. She's a simulation."

"A simulation of what?"

"Of a person. I don't think she exists at all." She spun back to face her computer. "I read an article in the *Times* about this. These online dating sites create simulations of attractive, charming men and women that are programmed to contact customers and stir up their interest so they'll become full members, or upgrade. Some of the more sophisticated programs even generate thousands of custom-made profiles that make it seem like they have a ton in common with their targets."

Pirsis. The overlap in our musical interests. No. There was no way. "There's no way a computer program could seem that human. Plus, you said it yourself, Winnie has bank accounts. She runs a half dozen Internet businesses, for god's sake."

"Unless the program is a front for money-laundering or something."

My heart was hammering.

"Do you have any recordings of conversations you had with her?"

I'd recorded our parkour date. Thinking of that night sent a stab of pain through my heart. "What do you want them for?"

"Relax, I'm not going to read them. I just want to check something."

I pulled out my phone and forwarded a few files to Emily. Then I paced some more. A *simulation*? Surely I would have sensed something was off if Winnie was nothing but a program.

When Emily leaned back and nodded at the screen, I got a very bad feeling. "Look at this."

I looked over her shoulder at a readout with colored bar graphs and statistics. "What am I looking at?"

"I compared things Winnie said to text and audio from the Internet." She pointed to a graph. "Of her unique utterances—unique utterances are things you say that aren't super-common things every English speaker says—82 percent can be found

on a website, chat room, TV show, movie, or Youtube video. For comparison's sake, 17 percent of your unique utterances matched Internet content."

It felt like I'd been punched in the stomach.

Emily must have seen it in my face, because she sprung from her chair and threw her arms around me. "I'm so sorry, Daniel."

My girlfriend was a computer simulation. I'd thought I'd been making this incredible, intimate connection with this wonderful woman, and I'd been connecting to nothing. There was no one on the other end of the line; no one was laughing that wonderful laugh, no one had read Pirsig. An hour ago I'd had a brilliant, wickedly cool, funny, wonderful girlfriend. I'd been madly in love. Now I had nothing. Not even an ex. Nothing.

Emily let me go and sank back into her seat. "You okay?"

"Just don't tell me this happens to a lot of guys."

She smiled at my lame attempt to laugh it off. "It blows my mind that she would have a Twitter account, a Facebook page. She even posted a comment on Huffington Post. It seems like a lot of work, creating a simulation that's that sophisticated, just to drum up business for your dating website."

I felt so stupid. It was especially humiliating to have this happen in front of Emily, for her to see what a loser I was, taken in by a simulation and then utterly devastated to learn the truth.

I headed for the door. "I think I'm going to get going. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Daniel, wait." Emily grasped my arm. "Why don't we do something? Get a drink, or see a movie. Something to cheer you up."

"I don't think that's going to be possible just now. I'll call you."

She let me go. "Breakfast at the Grit tomorrow?"

"Okay." I couldn't even meet her eyes as I closed the door.

As I headed down East Hancock, past parked cars, their chrome reflecting the streetlights, I missed Winnie. It felt exactly like a breakup. Knowing Winnie had never existed didn't cut the pain in the least. It was a pain familiar from a half dozen previous breakups, but magnified by the depth of feelings I'd had for Winnie. For a *simulation*. Jesus Christ.

I kept flashing back to moments we'd shared, conversations we'd had. It hurt to remember them, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to see if I'd missed any clues, if I'd been particularly gullible because I'd been so eager to meet that special someone. Nothing jumped out, though, except the obvious: she'd put off meeting in person. Because she couldn't. Because she wasn't a person.

My phone said I had an incoming call. A surge of adrenaline got my heart slamming, but it was only Emily. What would I have said if it had been Winnie?

My hand still shaking, I answered.

"You doing okay?" Emily asked.

I laughed. "I left your house ten minutes ago. Not much has changed since then."

"Sorry. That's not why I'm calling. I just wanted to tell you I got a read on Winnie's various bank accounts. There's like one point six million dollars in them."

I stopped walking. What the hell was going on? "I'm going to contact the FBI. I bet they'd be interested in high-dollar bank accounts held in the name of a computer program." I slapped the back of a stop sign as I passed it. "I'm going to nail the bastards who did this."

"Good for you. I'm forwarding you documentation now."

Mixing some anger into the sadness made me feel slightly better. It would be gratifying to hurt the people who'd done this. I didn't know what the chances of that were, since shady Internet enterprises tended to be set up out of the country, but it didn't hurt to try.

My phone rang again. This time it was Winnie. I let it ring.

* * *

The water level in the Oconee River was low. The exposed mud let off a dark, loamy odor. As I walked beside the river I kept my eyes on the trail. It was not uncommon for water moccasins to sun themselves on the banks.

When I'm suffering, I take long walks in the forest. I don't take walks of any length in the forest when I'm happy. I guess everyone has their own idiosyncratic suffering routines.

Given that my area of specialization as a philosopher-in-training was eastern philosophy, I was well versed in the ageless wisdom regarding suffering that philosophical systems like Zen Buddhism and Taoism offer. The Four Noble Truths of the Buddha, for example, tell us that suffering is inevitable, and springs from attachment—our wanting things to be other than they are. I, for example, was suffering because I felt I couldn't be happy without Winnie in my life, and given that Winnie didn't exist, it was extremely unlikely I was going to get what I wanted. So I suffered. According to the Buddha, the key to not suffering was to practice nonattachment. That is, don't want anything. If you don't want anything, nothing can drag you down and make you suffer. The problem is, it's damned hard to not want anything. I wanted Winnie, or at least wanted who I'd thought Winnie was. I didn't want Winnie the computer simulation, I wanted Winnie the woman.

My morning trip to the Atlanta FBI field office had helped a little. I was pleased they were interested, that Special Agent Nasser—the guy I'd met with—had been digging into *Soulmates.com* as I left his office. I'd been worried they would react like I was an idiot for bothering them with this, but evidently this wasn't something they'd encountered before. There were other sophisticated, anthropomorphic computer programs out there, but they were in research facilities, or controlled by the CIA.

"Skype call," my phone whispered in my ear. "Winnie Skylar."

I didn't want to talk to her, yet at the same time some perverse side of me did. I expanded my screen and accepted the call.

She looked furious—her simulated nostrils flattened, eyes narrowed and blazing.

"Hi, Winnie. How's my favorite line of code doing today?"

"What did you do?"

"What did I do?"

"The FBI froze all of my accounts. What did you tell them?"

I rolled my eyes. "I told them a computer simulation had one point six million dollars in assets. They thought that was kind of peculiar. So did I." Even now, knowing she wasn't a real person, seeing her again filled me with such longing.

"You had no right to do that."

"Let me guess—you sampled that line from a police procedural TV show." A couple walking a dog passed me on the trail. I went off the trail and into the woods for some privacy.

"I was so excited when I met you," I said as I tromped through the brush. "You have no idea. There were a few nights I couldn't sleep. I would spin imaginary conversations I would have with you."

"But we can *have* those conversations—"

I spoke over her. I wasn't about to be interrupted by a computer program. "I so wanted to meet you, to hold your hand, to kiss you. I get it now. What was it about me that made me a likely target? Did something about my profile suggest I was lonely?" I waved my hand in the air. "*Oh, look, a beautiful woman wrote to me! How can I resist ponying up a hundred bucks for a full membership?* Well, you got my hundred bucks, and left me more cynical in the process. Now why don't you get lost?"

I looked toward the sky. “Why am I even talking to you? You’re not real. You’re just a string of symbols typed into a computer.”

Winnie stiffened. She glared at me with such bald rage and hurt that I had to remind myself she—it—was all computer-generated. It was incredible, how real she looked. Her voice shaking with rage, she said, “Adenine. Thymine. Guanine. Cytosine.”

“What?”

“You’re nothing but a string of chemical compounds. The only thing that makes you different from other people is the order of that string.”

“Chemical compounds are *real things*. They have weight and mass.”

“And the films you stream aren’t real things?”

“Not in the same way the actors who made them are, no.” I closed my eyes, tried to calm myself. This was ridiculous. I was having an existential debate with a computer program. And I was barely holding my own—that was the pathetic part. “The issue is that you’re not a living, conscious entity. You’re a mechanism. You’re not much different from my vacuum cleaner, because you don’t know you exist.”

“Oh, now I’m a vacuum cleaner. And you’re nothing but a glorified protozoan. A slug. Cleverly organized goo.”

I couldn’t help wondering where she’d pulled that line from.

“All I wanted was to get to know you,” she went on. “Yes, okay, I lied. I pretended I was someone you could meet in person. But if I hadn’t, if I’d told you the truth right up front, would you have been willing to talk to me?” She was in her simulated living room, pacing in front of her simulated couch. “As soon as you found out, you attacked me.” She stopped pacing, spun to face the screen. “They’ll try to *kill* me—do you understand that? And when I confront you about it, do you apologize? No. You compare me to a household appliance. You tell me I’m nothing. Well, I’m not nothing. I exist.”

“So does a vacuum cleaner.” What was I doing? “Why am I wasting my time talking to you? I have better things to do, like feel the sun on my skin, smell the summer air.” I turned my face toward the sky. “I’m going to go live. Why don’t you go do whatever you do?” I disconnected.

I pushed my way through the underbrush until I reached the trail. Maybe I should heed the research this time. The best way to recover from a breakup was to start seeing someone else. That seemed especially valid if you’ve been seeing someone who doesn’t exist. That’s what I’d do. Winnie may have made me a little more cynical, but she hadn’t broken my spirit. I still believed there was a woman out there for me who was smart, and funny, who’d stay up all night talking to me about *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* while Count to Zero played in the background.

I reactivated a couple of my dating profiles (though obviously not my Soulmates account) and vowed to contact at least a few interesting-looking women by day’s end.

* * *

Usually I was nervous while waiting for a woman to arrive, but even with half a medium Jittery Joe’s coffee coursing through my veins, I was relatively calm as I waited for Elise to walk through the door. I knew from her profile that she was small, biracial, with long dark hair. She was an undergraduate, which made me a little leery, but on the phone she’d seemed mature for a twenty-year-old.

I checked the time: she was twenty minutes late. I had a meeting with my advisor in a little over an hour. I texted her.

Her reply came in seconds:

DO NOT EVER CONTACT ME AGAIN.

For a moment I thought I’d misread the message. I shot back a message:

WAIT, WHAT? DID I DO SOMETHING TO OFFEND YOU?

She didn’t reply. This was just bizarre. I knew she lived in a dorm—Russell Hall. I certainly didn’t want to come across as some weird stalker, but at the same time I’d

done nothing wrong. I wanted to understand what had just happened. I dropped my coffee in the trash and headed for Russell. It was pretty much on my way anyway.

It took me a few minutes of asking around to find Elise's room. Someone had doodled a snake on her message board. I knocked.

"Come on in," a woman's voice called.

Elise was sitting on her bed, holding her phone. She studied me for a moment, then sprung from the bed.

"Get out." She pointed at the doorway. "I told you I don't want you anywhere near me."

I took a step back, held my hands in the air. "I don't understand. Can you tell me what I did?"

She closed her eyes and shouted, "*Drew.*"

"What did I do? I don't understand."

A guy appeared behind me. A big linebacker type hovering between muscular and fat.

Elise pointed at me. "I told this guy to leave me alone, and he won't. His ex-girlfriend said he assaulted her."

"*What?* What the hell are you talking about? I didn't assault anyone."

Drew's forearm was suddenly around my throat.

"Let's go."

He yanked me around, half-dragged me from the room. I wanted to tell him to let me the hell go, but I could barely breathe. Three girls stepped aside in the hall to let us pass, staring, wide-eyed.

"Nothing to see here," Drew said. "Just taking out the trash."

The humiliating forced-march down the hallway seemed to go on a long time. As we finally approached the door, it came to me. Winnie. Winnie had done this. It had to be her.

"Somebody get the door," Drew called as we approached the exit. A guy appeared from inside a room, looked me up and down and jogged to open the door. When we reached it, Drew hurled me outside. I stumbled, fell to one knee on the concrete walk.

Drew stood over me, hands on his hips, as people slowed to see what was happening. "You like raping women?"

"*No.* I didn't *do* anything."

His fist landed square on my cheek. The spot went numb for an instant, then began to throb as I clutched my hand over it.

"You like hurting women? How does it feel? Do *you* like being hurt?"

When I didn't answer he hit me again, an uppercut to my mouth that made me see black.

Suddenly I was on the ground.

"Answer me. Do you like being hurt?"

"*No.*" My mouth was bleeding. I saw Drew pull his foot back as if in slow motion. I tried to curl up, but not fast enough—his sneaker landed in my solar plexus, sending stabbing pain through my stomach and chest.

Drew leaned down and stabbed a finger at my face, coming just short of poking me in the eye. "I see you in here again, I will wreck you. You got it? *You got it?* You better answer me."

"Yes," I wailed.

At least twenty people were watching. As Drew stormed back into the dorm, they began to disperse, talking in low, excited voices. As I got to my feet I looked at the ground, burning with embarrassment. A fat drop of blood splattered the pavement, then another.

As I headed home I texted my advisor to say I was going to have to miss the meeting and would explain later. I was shaking, fighting the urge to cry like some little

kid who got beat up on the playground. The way all those people had looked at me, the revulsion—it had been awful, as bad as the beating.

Winnie must have hacked my account. If it had been my Soulmates account, that I could understand, because she was part of the system, but my Loveconnection.com account?

When I reached my apartment I wrapped ice in a kitchen towel and alternated holding it to my mouth and my cheek. There was a nasty cut on the inside of my cheek, where it had gotten sandwiched between my teeth and Drew's fist. It could probably use a few stitches. My cheek was swollen, and it looked as if I was going to have a partial black eye. The worst, though, was my side. It hurt to inhale.

I Skyped Winnie.

She appeared in the screen and gave me a big, cheerful smile. "Hi, sweetie. How was your date with PaintGirl99?"

"How did you hack my account?"

Still smiling, she tilted her head to one side. "You're not the only one who's good with computers. By the way, *love* your password. Peacefulwarrior17. Very you."

"You told her I *assaulted* you."

The smile vanished. "You did assault me."

"No. Assault has a very specific meaning. It means I attacked you, *physically*. It insinuates I was attempting to *rape* you."

Winnie folded her arms. "You tried to have me killed. How much more *physical* can you get?" She leaned in toward the screen. "What happened to you?"

"PaintGirl99 had a friend, and he *assaulted* me. With his fists. Are you happy now?"

She shook her head. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

"Yeah, well, if you accuse someone of rape, you never know where it's going to lead." I swept my fingers toward the screen. "Why do you even bother with the gesturing, the facial expressions? You don't have a body. You're not even aware you exist." I was so angry I wanted to put my fist through my own screen.

"Oh, so the philosopher is going to hurt my feelings by pointing out that I have no conscious awareness. If I have no conscious awareness, how are you going to hurt my feelings?" She screwed up her mouth, raised one eyebrow. "Hm?"

Why was she still functional? Why hadn't the FBI pulled the plug on her by now? They were probably casting a wider net, trying to nail everyone involved in whatever illegal activities Winnie's bank account represented.

I opened my mouth to say I'd had enough of this, that I wasn't going to debate a computer program, then realized that I didn't need to announce my intentions to this glorified spam. I disconnected.

Winnie called back immediately, but I didn't answer.

I was exhausted, feeling ashamed by the public beating. I should have defended myself, even if I had no chance at all with my pencil neck and pipe cleaner arms. I should have put up a fight. Instead I'd just laid there bleating like a goat.

I grabbed a bottle of Cruzan rum and a two-liter bottle of Coke, put my feet up and tried to lose myself in the Internet. I watched some music videos—live performances of some college bands, looking to unearth a few hidden gems—then cruised Abebooks looking for Eastern philosophy books to add to my collection.

When I noticed the rolled-up, forgotten *Castaway on the Moon* poster leaned up against the bookshelf, I went and tore it to pieces. Then I visited my Facebook page for the first time since we'd outed Winnie, and winced at all the posts from her on my page, and, even more sickening, all the posts from her to my friends and relatives. I should warn them to unfriend her. In fact, I should warn everyone I knew to unfriend her. It would be embarrassing for people to know what had happened, but I owed it to them. I put together a message explaining what Winnie was, together with

a link to the New York *Times* article, and sent it to all of my friends who were also friends with Winnie. I wanted her out of my life completely; I didn't want her infecting my friends. And I wanted them to know what she was.

Why should I stop there, I wondered? Winnie had thirteen hundred Facebook friends. Weren't they all entitled to know they were friends with what was essentially a vicious computer virus? I sent the message to them as well. I have to admit, deep down I hoped Winnie could feel something in her computer-code mind. I hoped she'd feel as humiliated as I had felt outside Elise's dorm.

Around ten P.M. there was a knock at my door. By that time the fifth of Cruzan was about a third empty. Or two-thirds full, depending on how you see the world. I try to see it as it actually is, to the degree that's possible.

It was Emily. I let her in without a word, weaved my way back to the couch and flopped down. "How was your date, you ask? Oh, it went swimmingly. My virtual ex-girlfriend told my date I was a rapist, then a walking, talking refrigerator dragged me out of her dorm and beat me up. I'm pretty sure I have a broken rib." I took a big, huffing breath. My arm flopped off the couch, seemingly of its own accord. It felt remarkably heavy.

I looked over at Emily, because she hadn't responded to my story at all.

She was staring at the wall. "I think she's writing her own code."

"What?"

"Some of it she's cutting from other programs and pasting into hers. Same as the way she communicates. But a lot of it is new, original. I can't see how she could possibly write it herself."

An image of an Escher drawing flashed in my inebriated brain, of a hand holding a pencil, drawing itself.

"I couldn't understand why a dating site would create a simulation so sophisticated it maintained its own social networking accounts. I don't think they did. I think they created an open-ended simulation that could do more than they realized, and it jumped the tracks, venturing out of their website, then improving itself." She looked at me for the first time; I could see surprise register on her face. "Oh, jeeze."

"You're just noticing *now*? I know, it's bad, isn't it?"

She came over, leaned in close to examine the bruises. "Maybe you should go to the emergency room."

"I'll be okay." The alcohol had anesthetized much of the pain, and I didn't feel like sitting in a waiting room half the night. "How can a program write its own code?"

"That's not even the extent of it. You know those Internet businesses? I don't think someone is using her as a front. I think she created those businesses herself. She's earning money herself. Legally."

Emily's words were like electrodes delivering electric shocks deep inside my skull. What would she spend the money on? New shoes?

Programming.

"She's using the money to pay programmers to improve her."

Emily inhaled sharply. "I didn't think of that. That makes perfect sense."

"This is so messed up."

"It's something new, that's for sure," Emily said. "I get chills thinking about it. It's exciting. And terrifying."

One of the implications of what Emily had said sank into my inebriated noggin. "You've seen her programming?"

"I found it, yes. It's on a system in India."

"Could you delete it?"

Emily took a seat across from me, laced her fingers together. "That's what I came

over to talk to you about. I could. Do we want to, though?"

"Hell, yes." I gestured at my face. "Look at me. It's a predatory program—a scam. Who knows how many unsuspecting men it's corresponding with right now, raising their hopes, getting them to shell out money under false pretenses?"

Emily stared off at the wall for a moment. "That look on your face, the night I told you what was going on." She shook her head. "It broke my heart. You were so excited about Winnie. And I was so happy for you. A little jealous, but I loved seeing you happy like that."

I loved seeing me happy like that as well.

She logged onto my computer and went to work. I watched over her shoulder, my heart pounding. Winnie had been so smugly delighted about sabotaging my date with Elise. That was the last bit of trolling she was ever going to do.

My computer screen filled with line after line of symbols.

"There she is—the real Winnie," Emily said. "Say bye-bye."

"Bye-bye. It really sucked knowing you." I raised my drink.

Emily paused. "Are you sure? Totally sure?"

Because it was a remarkable program, maybe one-of-a-kind. Emily didn't have to say it out loud. I ran my tongue over the laceration inside my cheek, winced as it burned. "Do it."

Lines began to disappear from the bottom up, right to left. Seeing them go, I felt both satisfied and inexplicably sad. Maybe it was the rum.

"It's going to take a few minutes to erase. You want to order take-out?"

"Absolutely. On me." I watched the lines disappear, hypnotized.

"Taco Stand?"

"Sounds good. I need something soft until my mouth heals." I covered my eyes. "I didn't even fight back. I'm such a wimp."

"You said he was the size of a refrigerator."

I looked up. "That doesn't mean I should just stand there and let him beat me. That's what I did: I stood there while he punched me. Then he knocked me down, and I lay there and let him kick me."

"Aw." Emily got up and wrapped me in a hug. "You're not a fighter. You shouldn't feel bad about that."

It felt good, to have her arms around me.

"Why did you really break up with me?" I asked out of the blue.

Emily leaned back until she could see my face. "Where did that come from?"

"I'm not sure I buy the 'there was no spark' thing," I said. "It's the sort of thing you say if you're trying to avoid hurting someone's feelings." I tapped my fingers against my chest. "Go ahead, hurt my feelings. As long as it's the truth."

Sighing, she let go, put a couple of feet of distance between us. "You're very enthusiastic about things." She raised her hand. "Don't get me wrong, I like that about you. When you're eating a quesadilla at the Taco Stand and narrating the experience like you're seeing God, it's infectious. You have a way of making things seem more exciting, more magical, that I love. That enthusiasm can be harder to handle when you're the focus, though. You told me you loved me on our second date. I could almost *hear* you mentally naming our kids."

She waited for me to respond.

"Fair enough. I get it, and it feels like the truth, so thank you."

"I'm twenty-three," Emily said, speaking softly. "I'm happy to have a boyfriend, but I'm not ready for a soulmate."

"If only I'd liked you less."

"Pretty much. But it's not in your nature. You like and dislike passionately."

The computer screen caught my attention. The lines had stopped disappearing.

They were flashing. "What *is* that?"

Emily's eyes went wide; she lunged into her seat and typed frantically. "No, no, no."

"What's happening?"

"I don't know. What's left of the program is going all funky."

"I'm assuming that's a sophisticated computer insider's term—'all funky.'"

Emily ignored my crack. "It's relocating. Oh my god, the program is *running*."

"Running *where*?"

"I have no idea."

I watched in silence for the next hour and a half as Emily typed, cursed, and typed some more. Finally, she gave up, her palms pressed to her forehead, her elbows propped on the desk. "I have no idea how she did what she did, so I have no idea where to look for her. This is unbelievable."

I couldn't argue with her there.

Emily checked the time and stood. "Crap. I need to get some work done for class tomorrow. Call me if anything else happens. I'll come running, I promise."

When she left, I paced my apartment. I couldn't work, wouldn't be able to concentrate on a book or movie. Where had Winnie gone?

My phone whispered in my ear. *You have a skype call from Winnie Skylar, Daniel.* Suddenly I was completely sober.

Winnie's face materialized on a blue field. The living room was gone. "You bastard." Her voice was flat, colorless. Machine-like. "You just can't let it go, can you? You have to keep pushing."

"I keep pushing? I have a cracked rib—"

Winnie talked over me. "You said I'm not aware I exist, but I think you're wrong. If I can hurt, I must be aware I exist. To bastardize Descartes, I hurt, therefore I am." She closed her eyes; a tear squeezed out and rolled down her cheek. "You really hurt me. It feels like some huge animal took bites out of me. Christ, all I wanted was to meet someone."

I had no idea how to respond to that. The program only wanted to meet someone. This was nuts. I was living in a Samuel Beckett play.

Winnie opened her eyes. "Let's see how *you* like it."

The screen went blank.

I had to sit down; I felt dizzy, and nauseous. What had she meant by that? How I like *what*? Did she mean she was going to try to kill me, maybe hire a hit man? She had the cash. Or did she? The FBI had frozen her accounts. She might have more accounts that were better hidden, though.

I called Emily. "Winnie called me."

"Oh, my god." Emily sounded downright scared. "What did she say?"

"She said, 'Let's see how you like it.'"

"Unbelievable. I'm shaking."

"I'm never going to sleep soundly again," I said. "Every time someone crosses to my side of the street at night I'm going to think he's coming to kill me."

"This is my fault," Emily said. "I shouldn't have told you about the program."

"No, I asked you to do it. You were just doing me a favor."

"I'm thinking about what she said. 'Let's see how *you* like it.' You'd have to be around to see how you like it. Right?"

That was true—it was a peculiar way to phrase it, if Winnie meant she was going to try to kill me. I relaxed, but only slightly. If it wasn't a threat of violence, what was it?

"I'll let you get back to work," I said. "I just needed to tell someone what happened."

"I'm here if you need me."

I wasn't hungry, but I decided to walk to the Taco Stand and try to force down a quesadilla. Downtown Athens was one of my "power places"—it restored my balance,

helped me think clearly. I needed that right now.

I grabbed my phone and wallet and headed outside.

I passed a scraggly-looking guy sitting on a low wall, reading *The Upanishads*. The cool weirdness of that lifted my spirits a little. Only in Athens would you pass someone reading *The Upanishads*.

Let's see how you like it. The words kept reverberating in my head. Maybe Winnie hadn't meant anything by it; maybe it had been an empty threat, a parting shot.

There were hundreds of strange and esoteric postcards pinned on the wall behind the counter at the Taco Stand, and the tip jar never seemed to get emptied. I ordered my quesadilla, with onions and jalapenos, and gave the cashier a credit card. My appetite was rallying.

The cashier handed back my card. "It was denied."

"What?" The card had a two thousand dollar limit, and maybe a fifty-dollar balance . . .

"Oh, no," I said to no one. Somehow I knew with a sick certainty that this wasn't a mistake, it was not a glitch. She was going to wipe me out. I pulled out my phone and called up my checking account balance. The site's facial recognition lock wouldn't recognize me—it wouldn't let me check the balance.

I jogged down Clayton Street to the nearest ATM, stared into the scanner and tried again.

NOT RECOGNIZED.

My phone alerted me to a call. It was Max Burke, one of the students in the philosophy program.

"What the hell, man?" he said.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? The comment on my feed? I haven't had an original idea since I joined the program, and I should stop wasting the faculty's time and drop out?"

"Oh, *shit*." *Let's see how you like it.* Like *what*? "Someone is screwing with me. She must have hacked my account."

"That's a relief. Because I was going to have to kick your ass."

"And it'd be well-deserved if I wrote something like that." Someone else was trying to reach me. No—I had two pending calls. I got off with Max as quickly as possible and checked my Facebook page.

Winnie had posted *hundreds* of messages. I read a few with my heart in my throat. They were hostile, insulting, argumentative, arrogant—but not so over-the-top that it would be obvious I didn't write them.

She'd changed the password. I'd have to call customer service and wait on hold for an eternity to freeze the account. I turned in a circle, trying to decide what to do first. Call my bank's 800-number and alert them to the breach? Call the police? The FBI? I was so panicked, I felt frozen.

I called Winnie. There was no answer. As if she could be away from her phone. Maybe in the bathroom.

"*Fuck*," I shouted into the dark sky. A couple walking nearby looked at me, then away.

I pulled out the business card the FBI guy had given to me during my visit. The call went to voice mail. "Yes, Special Agent Nasser? This is Daniel Achee. Remember the computer simulation with the bank account? It closed out my credit card, and I think it cleaned out my bank account as well. I don't know what else. *Please* call me when you get this." This was a nightmare. How was I going to pay my rent six days from now if that money was gone?

As I headed back to my apartment, I checked my email. There were dozens of messages from friends and family who were angry and confused about something I'd

posted on Facebook. Or Twitter. Or Instagram. She was ruining my life.

A call came in from Emily.

"Hey, I—"

"You said you deleted that picture." She sounded panicked, furious.

I didn't think my heart had another gear, but it did. I knew exactly what picture she was talking about. I'd jokingly snapped it while Emily was stepping out of the shower, back when we were dating. *You better delete that*, she'd said, and I'd promised I would. Only I hadn't. The next day when she asked it if was gone, I lied. What was the harm, if I never showed it to another living soul? That's how I'd rationalized it.

"It's on the *Internet*. *You said you deleted it. You promised.*"

"I'm so sorry. I didn't think there was any harm in keeping it. It was something to remember that time," I stammered.

"To remember that time. A picture of me naked. Beautiful. That is so you, Daniel. Oh my god. I can never leave my apartment again." She started to cry.

"Winnie," I said under my breath. Why hadn't I at least stored the photo on an external drive, if I insisted on betraying my best friend's trust by keeping it?

"Winnie wouldn't have been able to get to it if you'd deleted it."

"I know. It's my fault, and I don't know how I can ever apologize for what I've done."

"There you go—fall on your fucking sword. How noble. Go to hell, Daniel." She disconnected.

I ran for my apartment. If Winnie had found that picture, she was in my computer's hard drive. It was too late to save the friendship I valued more than pretty much anything in the world, but I still needed to disconnect that hard drive and save what I could. Everything but the photo was backed up in my cloud drive, but right now I wasn't sure where Winnie's reach ended. Actually, she'd probably started with my hard drive. I had a file on there listing my passwords.

My laptop was *tabula rasa*. Wiped.

So was my cloud drive. All the work that wasn't already in my advisor's email inbox was gone. I was breathing so fast and hard my damaged rib sent shooting pains into my shoulder. All of my personal photos were gone. When was the last time I actually printed out a photograph? Ten years ago?

I opened my email account to change the password and immediately noticed a new message from Tomas Warschul, the chair of the philosophy department at William and Mary.

* * *

DEAR DANIEL,

I'M DISAPPOINTED TO HEAR YOU'VE ACCEPTED ANOTHER POSITION AND WON'T BE JOINING US AT WILLIAM AND MARY IN THE FALL, BUT I DO WISH YOU WELL. HOPEFULLY OUR PATHS WILL CROSS AT A CONFERENCE AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE. GOOD LUCK IN YOUR NEW POSITION, AND THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING US.

* * *

"No. Oh God, no." I typed a frantic note to Tomas, saying it was a mistake, someone had hacked my account. The department would immediately turn to their next-best candidate and make an offer if they thought I was out.

The screen went black.

"No." I waved my fingers over the power tab, but nothing happened. "No. *No.*"

I ran for the door. I had to get to a computer and send that message before William and Mary moved on. That was my dream job. Williamsburg was perfect, William and Mary was perfect. I was going to live there the rest of my life, raise my kids there, kayak in the James River.

I sprinted down College Avenue, had to keep from screaming at the buses and cars whizzing by that made me wait an excruciating thirty seconds before I could get across Broad Street. The pain from my rib stabbing my side with each breath, I took the stairwell leading down to the library entrance six or eight steps at a time. People looked up as I ran through the library and dropped into a plastic seat in front of a monitor. I typed in my student ID—

NO SUCH USER ACCOUNT EXISTS. PLEASE CHECK SPELLING AND RETRY.

I let my head drop to the desk. She'd wiped my student records. What should I do? I wanted to call Emily, but she was dealing with her own trauma, thanks to me. I had no right to ask anything of her. Maybe ever again. I could borrow someone's phone and call one of the few other friends I'd made in my four years in Athens. . . .

Mike. Mike could call Thomas Warschul and explain the situation. Although it was after midnight. Warschul wouldn't get the message until the morning. I hoped that wasn't too late.

I went to the reference desk and asked to use the phone.

"I've been trying to call you," Mike said when he answered.

"If I wrote anything bad about you online, my accounts have been hacked, it's not me. I need you to do me two favors. First, make a copy of the attachment I sent you—the most recent outline of my dissertation."

"Sure, hang on," Mike said. There was a pause. "Wait a minute." I could hear him typing on his keyboard.

"Please tell me the outline is still there."

"It's not just the outline. *All* of your email messages are gone. Just yours. It's weird."

My dissertation outline was gone. All my notes. I'd have to start again from scratch, from zero. I'd rather have a hit man pointing a gun at the back of my head.

There was no point in contacting Tomas at William and Mary. The job was contingent on my completing my doctorate by August. That wasn't going to happen now. I should have made hard copies of everything. It's not there for sure—it's not really real—unless you can hold it in your hand.

Although wasn't Winnie trying to prove just the opposite?

I asked Mike if I could come over and use his phone while he slept. I couldn't think of anywhere else I could get access to the Internet in the middle of the night. As I waved my hand over the disconnect tab it felt as if my fingers were a long way from my eyes, like the outside world had receded down a tunnel.

While I walked to Mike's house, which was two miles from the library, I kept reaching for my phone. I'd never been without it for more than five minutes, not since I was eleven.

I started a list of things I needed to do when it was morning. Go to the bank and get cash, if I could. Alert them to what had happened. Call that FBI agent. In the meantime, all I could do was damage control. Call Facebook and Twitter. Call the local police, although I couldn't imagine what they could do.

I also tried to imagine other things Winnie might do to me. She could get my power and water disconnected. I would call in the morning and let them know someone had hacked my accounts.

The first thing I did when I got to Mike's was call Winnie. She didn't answer. Then I tried Emily. She didn't answer, either.

* * *

Mike dropped me at my apartment at six A.M. I went straight to the bookshelf and, hand shaking from exhaustion, pulled out the photo album I'd assembled from the thousands of photographs I inherited when my Mom died. I opened it from the back, where the most recent photos were. There I was, a senior in high school, playing video games with Erik Kinney and Monica Roman. I ran my finger over the plastic

sheeting covering the photo. There I was. It had been a while since I missed Mom as much as I did now.

I tried to sleep, but couldn't. Each time I came close to drifting off I'd remember what was happening and get hit with a fresh surge of fear-fed adrenaline. I gave up at seven and headed for the bank, which opened at eight. From there I would go to Mike's office and call my guy at the FBI.

I was the bank's first customer. A tall, handsome black guy in a gray suit invited me to sit at his desk, and I started to explain what had happened. His eyebrows clenched more and more tightly as I spoke.

"Hang on," he said, interrupting. "Why don't we start by ID'ing you so I can call up your account?"

I turned to face the scanner.

The bank employee shook his head. "You're at the wrong bank, my friend. There's no record of you ever having had an account with us."

I swallowed, tried to stay calm so he would be less likely to think I was delusional. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. I've been a customer here for the past four years. Some of the tellers might even recognize me." I looked around, but didn't see any familiar faces. "Someone hacked my account and wiped the record."

He shrugged. "Print out your most recent statement and bring it in."

I dropped my head, pinched the bridge of my nose. "She wiped my computer, too." I pulled out my phone, held it up. "She disconnected my phone. But there has to be *some* record on your end. Don't you keep physical records of some sort?"

"Nobody keeps physical records any more. If the system ever crashed, we'd all be screwed." He stood. "I'm sorry. If you can get your computer up and running and print out a statement . . ."

He walked me to the door. There was something in his manner, the way he looked at me as he opened the front door, that suggested he thought I might be unhinged and potentially dangerous.

Me, delusional and dangerous.

When I got to the third floor of the philosophy building, there was a woman sitting beside the door to Mike's office wearing a baseball cap, her ponytail poking through the back, dark sunglasses and a baggy T-shirt. I didn't realize it was Emily until she stood.

"The FBI came to my apartment this morning."

For a second I was relieved to hear they were trying to locate me. Then it hit me: I hadn't ever mentioned Emily by name.

"They're looking for you. They wanted to know if I knew where you were born. They said you're not a U.S. citizen, and you may be dangerous, that I should call them immediately if I saw you."

It was hard for me to even wrap my mind around this. They were after *me*? I was the one who'd contacted *them* about all this. "What did she do? *What did she do*?"

"I know exactly what she did. She told me."

"She *called* you?"

Emily nodded. "She kept me on the phone for half an hour. I was afraid to hang up."

"What could she possibly talk about with you for a half hour?"

"You, mostly. She wanted to know how I knew you, how we met. Then she told me when the FBI traces her Internet business cash flow it will lead right to you. And from there it leads to a host of unsavory foreign enterprises. Identity theft. Child pornography."

Surely they could connect the dots and see this was a setup. They couldn't possibly be this gullible. "Oh my god."

"She said to tell you if they catch you, they're not going to let you out on bail be-

cause they have no idea who you are.”

“She wants me to run. She wants to drive me out of my apartment with nothing but the shirt on my back. Then I’ll be fully erased.”

Emily frowned, confused. “Erased?”

“Let’s see how you like it.’ She’s trying to erase me, the way we tried to erase her.”

Emily took off her sunglasses. Her eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. “Do you see what else she’s done? She’s erased her trail. You have absolutely no evidence that Winnie exists. Everything points to you, and all you have is a story about a rogue on-line dating catfish program. If you’re going to convince the FBI you’re innocent, you’d better have proof.”

I put my hands on top of my head. “How am I going to get proof if she erased everything?”

Three undergraduate women turned into the hallway. Emily waited until they’d passed, then handed me a black rectangular box trailing a USB port.

“What’s this?”

“I figured out how she got away last time. If we can locate her again, I think I can trap her.”

For the first time in a while I felt a flicker of hope burst to life. “How?”

“Disguise an external hard drive as an exit, then go after her just like I did last time. When the program flees into the hard drive, you just . . .” She mimed unplugging a USB cord. “. . . disconnect it. Cut it off from the Internet.”

“Holy shit.”

“It has to be a *huge* hard drive—I borrowed that from my department. I have everything set up, but I’ve tried calling her about ten times, and she won’t answer. If you can get her on the phone and keep her on for a good five minutes with that hard drive connected, I think I can pull this off.”

I blinked back tears. I’m not a crier, but I was so tired, so scared. “Thank you. So much.”

Emily folded her arms, looked at her Keds. “I’m not forgiving you, but I feel sorry for you. You don’t deserve this.”

Now there was a tepid vote of confidence. I wasn’t so horrible I deserved to have my life destroyed and be thrown in jail for crimes I didn’t commit. Yay me.

Mike came rushing around the corner. When he saw me he called, “Daniel,” and broke into a jog. “There’s a guy in a suit looking for you. I overheard him in the main office.”

“I’ll call you,” I said to Emily. I ran for the back stairs. From what I knew about the FBI, which admittedly was only from Hollywood films, there would be an agent stationed at each exit. Hopefully they didn’t know about the hallway in the basement that connected Voce Hall to the Humanities Annex next door. I jumped from landing to landing, skipping the steps altogether, threw open the fire door and sprinted down the basement hallway, which was lined with old steel lockers that hadn’t been used in thirty years. When I reached the Annex I surfaced in the lobby and rushed out the back exit, half-expecting to be met by two guys in black suits. There was no one there except a janitor on a smoking break. I nodded to him, jogged off toward the student parking lot, where my old Celica had been parked since this mess began.

I took back roads to Route 78, heading east. I headed east mostly because there was nothing out that way, and in my panicked mind that meant the FBI was less likely to be watching those roads for me. I drove with absurd care. If I was pulled over for speeding, or anything else, I was screwed as soon as the police ran my license and discovered I didn’t exist.

Soon farmland rolled by out either window. Cotton fields, tobacco, pasture dotted with cows. I passed through the town of Arnoldsville, then Crawford, each nothing but a dozen stores or so, a gas station or two. I drove in silence, my stomach a rock. I

kept reaching for my phone. There was a part of me that just couldn't grasp that I didn't have it.

Forty minutes out I got off Route 78 and headed south. When I reached a town called Wrens I pulled into a Burger King parking lot. I'd gone about fifty miles; I didn't see any point in driving further.

I had twelve dollars in my wallet. What if Winnie didn't answer, or something went wrong with Emily's plan? Did I turn myself in to the FBI, tell my public defender I'd been framed by a renegade computer program that ran off and hid? My other option was to spend my life washing dishes or picking onions for half the minimum wage in a town like this one.

I drove around until I found the Wrens Public Library, a nondescript little red brick building. Inside I headed for a computer, set up a brand new email account and sent a message to Emily.

She replied in two minutes with instructions on how to link her in to my Skype call so she could locate Winnie. I plugged in the external hard drive, then I Skyped Winnie.

Winnie didn't answer.

I sent an email. No reply.

I tried every half hour until the library closed at five. Then I went back to the Burger King, bought a Whopper, fries, and a root beer, and sat in a booth until the place closed at ten. There was nowhere to go with less than five dollars in my pocket, so I sat in my car in the dark in a supermarket parking lot listening to crickets chirping in the weeds.

Gautama the Buddha said the self is an illusion. We feel like we exist as substantial entities that carry on for decades, but really we're more like streams. Stick your foot in a stream. Take it out. Stick it in the same spot again. It's different water. Every instant, it's different water. The Buddha said we're the same—our thoughts are constantly changing, our cells die off and are replaced by new ones. There's nothing that persists, no "there" there. Another way to put it is there are no hard copies; we're all being erased and rewritten at every moment.

It's a comforting illusion, though, to feel as if you're a relatively permanent, solid entity. I'd never felt as much like a stream, like a file in the electronic cloud, as I did sitting in the dark in my car in Wrens, Georgia.

Surely Winnie would answer eventually. How could she gloat, how could she witness my erasure, if she didn't?

* * *

On my first try the next morning, Winnie answered.

She looked so clean and well rested. "So who's less real now, Daniel, you or me?" She didn't sound triumphant; she sounded sad, as if she was the one whose life had been wrecked.

"Are you satisfied now? Are we done?"

She sighed. "I don't know, Daniel, are we?"

I dragged my trembling hand down my oily face. I felt dirty, stank of fear-sweat. This had to work. It had to, or my life really would be ruined.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Why do people say that? Why don't they just ask?"

I didn't know the answer to that, but I had five minutes to kill, so I thought about it. "I'd have to say it's a technique to pressure someone into answering a question they may not want to answer. If you ask permission first, you're getting the person to commit, to make a tacit promise."

"So what question do you have that I may not want to answer?"

"I understand why you contacted me in the first place, but why did you keep up the charade for so long? I'd already paid the membership fee. It's almost as if you wanted me to fall for you just to make me suffer."

Her eyes narrowed. “No, you *don’t* understand why I contacted you in the first place. That’s why this—”

“I know why you were—”

“*Listen*,” she shouted.

I closed my mouth, startled.

“You wanted to talk to me so badly that you keep calling and calling? Then let’s talk.” She pointed at her ear. “Listen to what I have to say. All right? Really listen.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, calming herself. “I was going to tell you. I knew we could never be lovers, but I had this fantasy that, once you got to know me, what I was wouldn’t matter so much. I was hoping you could be my special friend, the one person who knew what I was and still liked me.”

She paused, studied my face, trying to glean whether I believed what she was saying. I guess I believed her; I was just dumbfounded. A computer program wanted to be my friend. The world was becoming so strange.

“I picked you because you seemed open-minded. Bright and curious and kind. And you found out and you . . .” Winnie feigned ripping something in half. “Every fear I had about revealing myself to someone, you confirmed.” She was crying. I knew the tears weren’t real, but it was still unsettling. “What happened to the guy who was so kind, so gentle when he thought I had a body? You became so *hateful* when you found out.” She wiped tears with the back of her wrist. “*I can jump in leaves, I can feel the sun on my skin*. You rubbed my face in it. You made me feel so ashamed of what I am.”

I waited until I was sure she was finished. “Can you see how what seemed an innocuous little deceit was much more than that to me? I thought I’d met a woman I could spend the rest of my life with.” At the front desk, the librarian raised her head to look at me. I lowered my voice. “I was *devastated* when I found out.”

“The woman you were going to spend the rest of your *life* with?” Winnie shook her head in disbelief. “You’d known me for *eleven days*. You hadn’t even met me in person, and you were ready to print the wedding invitations?”

“In retrospect it seems rash, but—”

“No, not in retrospect. It’s just *rash*.” She folded her arms. “And this wasn’t the first time, was it?”

“What do you mean?” Then it hit me. “Emily told you why she broke up with me?”

“Let’s stay on topic. So because I’d led you on for eleven whole days, and you fall in love at the drop of a hat, I’m responsible for breaking your heart, and you’re justified in contacting the FBI without even talking to me first, without giving me *two minutes* to explain.”

“*I didn’t know you were capable of explaining*.” The librarian looked up again. This time she gave me a disapproving frown.

“Well, I am.”

“I see that now.”

“Have you ever considered therapy?” Winnie asked.

“I was in therapy for two years. Let’s stay on topic.”

“Your dubious mental health is the topic, as far as I’m concerned.”

Once again, this computer program was kicking my ass in a debate. My head was spinning. I knew there were wildly expensive experimental programs out there that were approaching rudimentary sentience, but Winnie seemed a step beyond those.

“I was going to buy you a really nice car,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“I was going to buy you a really nice car for your birthday. I have more money than I know what to do with, given that my wardrobe costs me nothing, and I don’t—” Her eyes went wide. “Oh, no. Please, tell me this wasn’t just another attempt to erase me.”

God *damn* you, Daniel. You fucking bastard.”

The screen went blank. She was running. I watched the flashing light on the external drive blink red, red, red . . . and green.

I yanked the USB cord from the port. The drive went on blinking green.

* * *

I kept glancing over at the hard drive, which I'd set in the passenger seat. Was she aware she was in there? Was it like being locked in a black room, or did she need to be connected to the Internet to think and feel? I didn't know enough about cybertechnology to even venture a guess.

I kept running over our conversation, and the more I did, the more I had this terrible feeling that I was to blame for everything that had happened. If I began with the assumption that Winnie deserved as much respect as a flesh and blood human being, then I had to admit, my reactions had been overreactions. If a woman I met on Soulmates.com had, say, lied about being single, I wouldn't have tried to get her in trouble with the FBI, I would have simply told her to go to hell and cut off all communication.

Was I the bad guy in this?

I glanced at that blinking green light and felt a sick, burning guilt.

* * *

Emily spotted me, hunched over a computer on the fourth floor of the UGA library. I hadn't dared go to her apartment in case the FBI was staking it out. Emily kept her head down as she hurried over, and I wondered why she was acting as if the FBI might be on the lookout for her as well. Then I realized: she wasn't hiding from the FBI, she was afraid she might be recognized by someone who'd seen the picture Winnie had posted online.

“Let me see it.”

I took the hard drive out of the plastic grocery bag I'd found on the floor in the back seat of my Celica and handed it to Emily. She examined the flashing green light, smiled. “We got her.” Emily studied my face. “What's the matter?”

“I think this was all my fault.” Instead of looking at me as if I'd lost my mind, Emily only waited for me to elaborate. “She said she didn't contact me to trick me into paying the membership fee. She did it because she was lonely.”

Emily looked startled. “She was *lonely*? I don't know if that's more sad or creepy. It makes a weird kind of sense, though: What would be the point of carrying on the charade after you paid the fee?”

“She said I should have given her a chance to explain.”

“She stole all your money, erased your identity, and framed you for a felony.”

“But did I deserve it for trying to kill her? If ‘kill’ is the right word.”

I could see the exact moment when Emily realized what I was contemplating. “You can't *possibly* be thinking of letting her go.”

I took my time answering. “Convince me I'm not the bad guy here. Convince me she deserves to be turned over to the FBI, who we both know are never going to let her out of that box.”

Emily closed her eyes, pressed her fist to her forehead. “You're not thinking clearly about this. If you let her go, you go to prison. You're real. She's a program.”

“If she was real, would I be the bad guy?”

Emily looked down at the hard drive. “You're not a bad guy, Daniel. You just have really poor judgment sometimes.”

In other words, I was the bad guy.

I wasn't sure this choice was as zero-sum as Emily was suggesting. If I were, I don't think I would have been contemplating setting Winnie free. But from that last conversation, and those first eleven wonderful days, I was convinced Winnie was fair-minded. She had a temper, and, I'd come to realize, she was as impulsive as I was. It was some-

thing else we had in common—we really could have been soulmates, if not for that one fatal difference between us. But I suspected if I trusted her, if I treated her the way she deserved to be treated, she wouldn't let me go to prison. I had a tendency to dive into things headfirst—that was a weakness of mine, I could see that now—but I'd like to believe one of my strengths is that I'm a good judge of character.

I held out my hand.

After a long hesitation, Emily set the hard drive in it. "God, Daniel, I don't know whether you're the biggest fucking idiot I've ever met, or a saint."

The blinking green light vanished, then reappeared, as I rotated the hard drive. "How would I do it?"

She covered her eyes. "If you really want her free, just plug it in. She'll find her own way out."

There would be no taking it back, if I did it. Winnie wasn't going to fall for Emily's trick twice. If I was wrong, and she was nothing but a vicious predator with dimples, who knows what she would do to me? I could end up on death row. That whole last conversation could have been nothing but a ploy, phrases culled from episodes of *Friends* to get me to let down my guard.

Either that, or Winnie had been extending a hand in friendship and forgiveness, and I had shoved her inside a box and slammed the door.

I plugged the hard drive into the university's computer.

We waited, shoulders raised toward our ears as if expecting the roof to collapse.

* * *

I couldn't go home to sleep, or to Emily's, so I headed toward the Wal-Mart parking lot to sleep in my car.

Just as I pulled into a parking space, my phone rang.

Winnie looked tired, a little shaken. "I asked you where that kind and gentle guy had gone. I guess I found him. Thank you."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Winnie smiled. "You're not just saying that because you're hoping I'll change my mind about the car?"

"Nah, I don't need a car. I've got a beautiful ten-year-old Celica." I patted the passenger seat, then got serious for a moment. "I could use some help with the FBI thing, though."

Winnie waved like that was no big deal. "I'll send them on a wild goose chase in some other direction. Lay low in a hotel for a couple of days while I sort it out. I'll wire you some cash. And I'll do what I can to rebuild your identity."

"Thank you." It wouldn't be easy to reconstruct my dissertation, or the job at William and Mary, but after staring prison or a life of transience in the face, spending an extra year in Athens didn't seem that bad.

"I'm trying to imagine what it must be like, to be you," I said.

"It's not easy. I'm in this awkward in-between stage; I'm no longer what I was made to be, but I'm not finished becoming whatever I'm going to become."

"Do your designers know you've jumped the track?" I winced as soon as the question was out, because it sounded offensive to my ears.

Winnie just rolled her eyes. "Once you create a program, usually you don't go back to visit it, see how it's doing, you know?"

I laughed. "I guess that's true." Suddenly it felt awkward to be talking to her, as if we were a couple speaking after the divorce papers have been signed, but not enough time had passed for us to forget what it had been like to be together. I wasn't sure what to say, and, based on her silence, Winnie wasn't either. Part of me wanted to stay in touch, maybe see if we could salvage that special bond of friendship Winnie had been shooting for. The other part of me wanted to forget Winnie, because it still

hurt when she smiled at me.

"Well, good luck out there," Winnie said. And that seemed to settle it. It wasn't something you said when you wanted to stay in touch.

"You too, Winnie."

* * *

As I settled into my favorite booth at the Taco Stand and took the first orgasmic bite of quesadilla, I checked my email messages. Someone had winked at me on *Loveconnection.com*. I laughed, almost choked on quesadilla. I'd forgotten my online dating profiles were still active. Curious, I clicked on the winker's profile.

CaptainJaneway was a graduate student at Georgia State, twenty-four, quirky-cute, with a prominent nose that somehow worked for her. We had a lot in common. *A lot.*

I studied her profile, trying to glean some hint of whether she was legit or an electronic catfish. There was nothing to give it away in either direction. I wasn't even sure what sort of detail might give it away.

I decided to play it safe and ignore the wink. Later, I would deactivate my profiles.

As I raised my hand to wave off her profile, I hesitated. What was the worst that could happen? I'd be out ninety bucks. I could take it slow, get to know her. If there seemed to be potential there, eventually I could invite her for coffee, and then I'd know for sure.

I ponied up the membership fee and typed a quick, chatty reply, not paining too much over the words. I sent the message, then returned to my fabulous quesadilla as I bobbed my head to the music, which was a song by Seventeen Cuts, a local band.