

# *Souls*

Chloe could hear Sylvia—her roommate and best friend—laughing, as she trudged into her apartment, exhausted from work.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, smiling in anticipation of Sylvia’s response.

“Hey, Chloe,” Sylvia exclaimed, hopping up and helping her with the shopping bags she was carrying. “Let’s quickly put these away and I’ll show you. You’re going to love this.”

“What about dinner?” Chloe asked. It’d been a long shift and she was starving.

“It’ll only take me a sec to show you. I’ll cook while you swipe.” Sylvia put the food away as Chloe removed her bag and coat.

“Swipe?” Chloe asked, raising her eyebrows, but followed Sylvia into the lounge room regardless.

Sylvia opened her laptop as the pair sat on the lounge. “It’s a new program that you can use on your laptop or phone,” Sylvia explained. “But it’s clearer on your laptop.”

“What is it?” Chloe asked, intrigued.

She placed the laptop on the coffee table, putting it side on, so that the screen was perpendicular to them both.

“It’s a dating program—but it’s new and so much fun.” She evidently pressed enter because the laptop made a buzzing sound and then, in the middle of the coffee table, a hologram appeared of a man Chloe had never seen before.

“Oh my God,” Chloe said, leaning forward.

“I know, it’s crazy!” Sylvia said, her words fast from excitement. She pulled the table towards them. “It projects a true-to-form image of a guy and gives you his stats here.” She pointed to a small hologram of writing near the man’s feet.

“I can’t read it though,” Chloe said, squinting at the tiny font.

Sylvia reached forward and tapped her finger on the writing, which was just air really. It immediately zoomed onto the writing, switching, so that the man was now the size of an egg, whereas before he was half a metre tall.

“Age, height, weight, eye and hair colour, area where they live, a little spiel about themselves if they want,” Sylvia explained, pointing to each of the pieces of information in turn.

“So this guy is twenty-five, six foot with blond hair and brown eyes and he’s, what, only five kilometres away from us?” Chloe asked, amazed at this program Sylvia had found.

“Yeah,” Sylvia said, laughing again. She double tapped on the guy and the zoom switched once more. “Watch this.”

Sylvia placed her hand over the man, her fingers pointing down, almost as though she was gripping his head. She turned her hand and the hologram pivoted with her. Sylvia turned it around three-sixty degrees so Chloe could see every angle.

“I can’t believe how clear it is,” Chloe said, shocked at this technology. They used holograms in the hospital where she worked—robots, lasers and incredible software—but to have something like this available in your own home was awesome.

“It’s really good on your phone too, but the images aren’t able to be projected as large, and sometimes it lags a little,” Sylvia said. “Hang on, there’s more.” She used one finger to tap another small image Chloe hadn’t noticed before. It looked like a button, and as Sylvia tapped it, the hologram changed to another picture of the same guy. It was a hologram of a photo though, dissimilar to the first one. Sylvia tapped the button again and the hologram changed to another picture. “So the first picture is always a full body, three-sixty scan that your laptop does when you sign up. It’s good, ‘cause people can see what you really look like. I’ve set up a profile and it’s so weird doing the scan. I thought my bum was smaller.”

“Your bum is tiny,” Chloe laughed.

“Thank you, so is yours,” Sylvia returned the compliment. “But anyway, that’s your main profile picture. Then you can upload any other photos that you like and they get transformed into a hologram file. Then you enter your stats—except for your height, the scan does that for you so you can’t lie, thank god—fill out the ‘about me’ section and put in a radius for how far you’d like the program to search for people.”

“I think I’ve heard of this. Is it called *Tinder*?” Chloe asked.

“Yep,” Sylvia replied. “It was around years and years ago but ended up dying out. They’ve recently reintroduced it and I’ve been on it all afternoon. It’s so much fun.”

“How does it work, with choosing someone?” Chloe asked.

“You swipe the hologram of the person to the right and then that means you’ve liked them. If they like you back then you get a message on your phone saying that you’ve been matched and you’re able to talk to each other. If the ‘like’ isn’t reciprocated, you can’t talk to each other. And no one knows if you’ve actually rejected them. If you want to ‘nope’ somebody, you just swipe left and move on to the next guy.”

Chloe had forgotten she was hungry. “Can we set me up on here?”

“Of course,” Sylvia said, grabbing Chloe’s laptop. “You just type *Tinder* into the search engine, click on it”—she was explaining and doing everything at once—“then we set you up with an account. You can do that while I get dinner sorted though, okay?”

“Do you want me to help?” Chloe asked as Sylvia handed her the laptop.

“No, don’t be silly, you get this started up and we can play on it while we eat.”

“Okay then,” Chloe said as Sylvia left for the kitchen. She entered all her information—twenty-five, hazel eyes, mahogany hair, postcode—and then rushed into her room and put on a little make-up, brushed her hair and changed into something nice. The program used the camera on the laptop to do the full body scan, instructing her when to turn around and stay still. After that she filled in the ‘about me’ section:

Hi, I’m Chloe, I’m an intern paediatric surgeon at General Southwest Hospital and my dream is to be able to afford to own a horse one day, as rare as they are. I’m a bit of a nerd, but love being outdoors and find it hard to sit and do nothing for a whole day.

“Oh, Sylvia, my profile sounds so crap,” Chloe yelled in the direction of the kitchen.

“Don’t worry, mine is super lame, I don’t think people read them too much anyway,” Sylvia called. “Dinner’s ready.”

Chloe pressed enter, feeling nervous but excited as the program began loading her profile. She put her laptop on the table, the same way Sylvia had, and headed into the kitchen.

“Smells so good, thanks for cooking,” Chloe said, heaping the stir fry into her bowl.

“No worries, thanks for grabbing the stuff we needed.”

Chloe followed Sylvia back to the lounge room and, with her mouth full of food, cracked up at the hologram awaiting her on the table. Sylvia did the same and the girls tried very hard to swallow without choking.

“Oh my god,” Chloe said. “I feel so bad for laughing at him, but I suppose I was expecting someone else.”

“Oh no,” Sylvia said. “You have to sift through a lot of unfortunates before you get anybody you want to like.”

“Have you had any matches?” Chloe asked.

“I’ve swiped right for two guys and matched with one of them so far.”

“Have you spoken? Can I see him?” Chloe asked in earnest.

“Yeah, of course,” Sylvia said, pressing a few buttons on her laptop.

A hologram of a man came up. He was tall, muscular and handsome. Chloe knew Sylvia’s type, and this guy fit the bill.

“Good find, he’s gorgeous,” Chloe said, appraising the hologram by pivoting the man around with her hand. She tapped the photo button and looked through the four other photos. He wasn’t exactly Chloe’s type. She could appreciate he was attractive, but she liked men with kinder faces. “What have you guys been talking about?”

“Not a whole lot, he seems nice enough but it’s so hard to tell online and from one conversation,” Sylvia said, handing her phone to Chloe.

Chloe looked through the conversation and laughed at a few of Sylvia’s comments. She was so innocent. Adorable though.

“Yeah, I totally suck at it,” Sylvia said, laughing at herself.

“I’ll scan what you write from now on if you like,” Chloe offered.

“Please,” Sylvia said, smiling at her. “Keep swiping.”

Chloe swiped through about fifty guys before one popped up that caught her eye.

“He’s amazing,” she said.

Sylvia looked at him and they both went through his stats and photos.

“Yeah, give him a like, see if it’s a match,” Sylvia prompted. Chloe swiped right but nothing happened. “You haven’t been on for long enough. It just means that he hasn’t come across your profile yet,” Sylvia said.

“Or maybe he noped me.” Chloe felt disheartened. He’d been her exact type.

“As if that would ever happen,” Sylvia said. “You are the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen. Don’t worry, just keep swiping and maybe in a few hours or days you’ll match.”

“Thanks, Sylvia,” Chloe said. It had been a very long time since she’d been on a date, or with anyone. It was because of work and her studies. She was confident and didn’t have any trouble interacting with guys, it was just finding the right ones. They seemed to elude her.

“Can I use it on my phone without the hologram function?” Chloe asked. “If I want to do it on my breaks and don’t want to showcase to the world that I’m on Tinder?”

“I’m sure there’s a function. Let me have a look,” Sylvia said. Chloe watched as she scrolled through the options on the laptop, her eyes scanning from left to right, faster than Chloe would have thought possible to absorb any information. Chloe was good with technology, she had to be for her profession, but Sylvia was an analyst for the government. She was basically a wizard when it came to gadgets. “No, there doesn’t seem to be. Weird. Hang on and I’ll write it into your software.”

“You can do that?” Chloe asked, surprised.

“Yah, sure can,” Sylvia said, trying to suppress a grin. She grabbed Chloe’s laptop and began typing away. “I’m sure they’ll introduce it into an update later on, but you need to go on a date asap.”

“Yeah. I definitely do,” Chloe sighed.

She was too busy to be lonely; working, catching up with friends, studying. But she had a hole inside that nothing seemed to fill. She’d ignored it for the better part of two years, but it was a defiant thing and was making its presence harder to deny.

“Sweet, all done,” Sylvia said, placing Chloe’s laptop back on the table. She grabbed Chloe’s phone, turned it off and on and then navigated back to the program and showed Chloe the new addition. “You just have to press this button and it’ll turn the hologram function off, then you can view everyone on the screen and use the same principles for liking or nopeing.”

“Thanks so much, now I won’t look as desperate as I feel,” Chloe laughed.

“You aren’t desperate at all, my dear,” Sylvia said. “You are so independent, it blows me away how strong you are.” She hugged Chloe. Her hair smelt like strawberries. “I’m heading to bed, got to be at work at five tomorrow morning eww.”

“Yuck,” Chloe agreed, beginning to swipe through guys again. “I’ll wash up.”

“Already done,” Sylvia said. “Night.”

“You shouldn’t have washed up too!” Chloe called out.

Chloe was tired though, and appreciated it. She swiped through another few guys, liked two of them, and was thrilled when she matched with them both. She waited for fifteen minutes before messaging them, disappointed that they didn’t initiate the conversation. Neither replied and that was when she realised it was ten o’clock on a Wednesday night. No wonder.

She shut down her laptop and went to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth, tied up her hair, undressed and then hit a button on the wall that started the shower. It was pre-programmed to her optimum temperature, length and body wash. The hot water relaxed her muscles. It had been a long surgery today. Eight hours. She was sore from standing and working for so long. After three minutes the water changed to include coconut body wash. She grabbed her loofah and scrubbed herself clean. After another five minutes the water automatically returned to normal, rinsing away the suds. She washed her face and then the

water stopped. She changed into pyjamas and got into bed. Chloe rolled around for a while, feeling too tired to read, but thinking too much to fall asleep.

She was on the verge of lulling off when her phone vibrated. She was about to dim the screen when she noticed that it wasn't a message, it was a match from *Tinder*. She sat up, awake again, and unlocked her phone. It was the guy she'd liked first! She felt a small flutter in her stomach. She looked through his profile, at his photos. He had dark brown hair, blue eyes, was fairly tall and had a very nice physique. She read his 'about me' section again.

Hey, my name's Aaron, I'm a personal trainer so my job keeps me fit and busy. Love animals and the beach. Just looking to meet some nice people on here.

Chloe began typing a message. It was eleven, but he was obviously still up. Just before she pressed send, her phone vibrated. She fumbled her phone, surprised, and saw that he'd sent her a message.

Hi Chloe, I know it's late but I just had to say that you have the most beautiful smile. You seem like an interesting person, would really like to get to know you. Sleep well.

She didn't know what to do. Should she reply? What should she say? Should she wait until tomorrow? He didn't ask any questions, so that made replying difficult. She decided to write back. She didn't want to play games.

Hey Aaron, thank you, that's very nice of you to say ☺ I am an interesting person, you seem like you would be as well. I don't want to keep you up though, so maybe chat tomorrow.

Chloe pressed send. She was anxious. She felt as though it was a good message, but she was long out of practise. She looked at his photos again, scrutinising him. She felt some weird connection. Some irrational feeling that Aaron was... special or something. It confused her. She was a scientist, logic was her weapon. Emotions were hormones, fabricated feelings produced by the brain. Her phone vibrated again. All thoughts of logic dissipated as she read Aaron's next message.

I couldn't sleep before, and now that I'm talking to you I don't think I'll be able to either, so you aren't keeping me up. I'd like to hope I'm an interesting person too, but I'll leave that up to you to decide 😊 Are you working tomorrow?

Chloe smiled as she read what he'd sent. She began typing out her reply.

Yes, I'm working tomorrow. I'm on the late shift so I get to sleep in a little which will be nice after today. What about you?

What happened at work today, Dr Chloe? Yes, unfortunately I have a group at 6a.m. Not looking forward to that. I've got a break until midday so I'll have a nap after I train the group and do a session myself. What time do you finish tomorrow?

Just a very long surgery—8hrs. I'm interning so I was helping the head surgeon, but it's so mentally and physically draining. I start at 1p.m. and finish at midnight tomorrow.

Woah! That's a long shift. I guess there's no point in me asking you out for a drink then, is there? Are you free to meet up on Friday at all?

Chloe could feel the grin spreading across her face as she read. He wanted to ask her out on a date! Wasn't it a little soon though? They'd only exchanged a few messages. She supposed it didn't bother her, she wanted to meet him, and didn't want to create a false impression from their online correspondence either.

Um, yeah, Friday sounds good. I'm working from 10a.m. till 8p.m. so I could meet up for a drink afterwards?

She pressed send and felt butterflies stir in her stomach again.

Friday night it is then. Do you have anywhere in mind? Would you like dinner too, seeing as it's right after you finish work?

Did she want to meet up with him for dinner? Drinks made escaping much easier for a first date, especially if there was no connection and it was going badly. But she knew she would be hungry and wouldn't have enough time for a dinner break at work. She decided to

give him the benefit of the doubt and go out for dinner as well. If it was awkward, at least it was just one night.

Dinner would be nice. I don't have anywhere in mind, you can choose if you like? Could we please make it somewhere in the city, close-ish to the hospital? Otherwise we won't eat until after 9p.m. haha.

No worries, I'll have a look at places and send them to you tomorrow to see what you'd prefer. I'll let you get some sleep now. Goodnight Chloe.

Goodnight Aaron.

She liked that he said her name in the message. She fell asleep after her excitement began dwindling away, drifting into a colourful dream.

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It was Friday evening and Chloe had just finished getting ready for her date. The hospital staff had never seen her in anything other than scrubs or her uniform and lab coat. She felt self conscious walking out of the bathroom in jeans, a red leotard and black heels. People stared, but they smiled and winked as she departed. She threw her bag and work clothes into her car, breathing faster than was warranted from the walk. She opened maps in her phone and then plugged the destination into her car. She was exhausted, so put the car on autopilot, which allowed her to nap or zone out entirely as the vehicle navigated its way to her destination. But as her car drove itself through the traffic to the pub Aaron had chosen, Chloe fidgeted and squirmed, much too nervous to relax for a powernap.

She was happy they weren't meeting at a restaurant, the atmosphere of a pub would feel much less daunting for a first date. After ten more fidgety minutes her car pulled into a parking spot. She put on some perfume, brushed her hair, grabbed her purse and walked into the pub.

Sylvia had been elated at hearing Chloe was going on a date. She'd helped pick her outfit and had read over the exchange of messages, approving of online Aaron. She had

demanded a message throughout the night to know that Chloe was safe and having a good time. Chloe figured she'd send one when she went to the bathroom at some point.

She tried to distract herself from the swirls of apprehension in her stomach by watching the ceiling. It was a hologram, and showed snow falling from an overcast sky. It was beautiful. Chloe felt a small shiver run up her spine and her bare arms became dotted with goosebumps. She brushed her hands up and down her skin, unsure whether she was actually cold, or if it was merely the hologram playing tricks on her mind. It was winter, but it never got that cold anymore. Snow was basically unheard of except at the very north and south of the world. Chloe sent Aaron a message to let him know she'd arrived.

"Chloe?" someone questioned from behind a moment later. His voice was deep and husky and filled with warmth that made Chloe relax before she turned around to face him.

"Hi, Aaron," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm Chloe." His hand shake was firm, at odds with the delicate kiss he gave her cheek. He smelled like mulled wine, a rich, spicy aroma that reminded her of Christmas.

"It's so nice to meet you," he said. Chloe forgot to reply. He was much better looking in person than in his photos. His affable smile was hypnotising. "You look beautiful," he continued, looking her over with reverence in his eyes.

"You look very nice as well. Shall we?" she asked, gesturing to the restaurant section. "I'm starving."

He chuckled before answering. "Definitely." He took her hand—which Chloe's brain said was weird, but her body said was welcome—and lead her to a table. He pulled out the chair for her, and then turned and sat opposite. "Would you like anything to drink?" he asked.

"A wine would be nice, thank you," Chloe replied.

"Which one?"

"Just the house white please."

"Hmm, I'll have a cider," Aaron said as he ordered from the tablet menu.

Chloe moved her purse away from the centre of the table before it opened. Their drinks rose up on a platform. They took their glasses and the platform lowered, allowing the opening to close over once again.

“So, a horse, hey?” Aaron asked after he’d taken a sip of his drink.

“Oh it would be amazing,” Chloe gushed. “I doubt I’ll ever be able to afford one, but I’ve always found them so beautiful and fascinating.”

“How much do they cost these days?”

“They’re gradually getting cheaper, the more they’re able to breed, but an average quarter horse will set you back about five million dollars,” Chloe explained. She could feel her eyes light up as she continued speaking. She’d always had an affinity for horses, even though she’d never been able to spend much time with them. “If you want a thoroughbred, they’re closer to twenty million, just for an average one. A Clydesdale is about ten, and a working stockhorse is around the same.”

“How wonderful would it have been to have lived in a world when they weren’t on the verge of extinction?” Aaron replied, resting his elbows on the table and leaning towards Chloe.

“I still can’t imagine how devastating that virus must have been, to wipe out almost all of the horse population across the world.”

“Wasn’t it global warming that brought that on?” Aaron asked.

“Yes, or apparently so anyway. I’ve done a lot of reading on the subject and they weren’t as technologically advanced back then, obviously, so the data isn’t as accurate or reliable as it could have been.”

“Oh, that science talk is very sexy,” Aaron teased.

Chloe laughed. “Sorry, if I get sciencey on you again, let me know.”

“No, it is actually very sexy. I like that you’re intelligent.”

They locked eyes for a moment, but their gaze was interrupted by the table serving them again. The middle opened and the platform provided them with a plate of bruschetta before closing.

“I hope you don’t mind, I ordered this for us to share before our mains,” Aaron said, gesturing with his long fingers for Chloe to help herself.

“No, I absolutely love bruschetta, it’s one of my favourite things.”

“Excellent,” Aaron said, looking relieved. “Any idea what you’d like for your main?”

“Maybe the chicken parmigiana,” Chloe said, tracing her finger down the tablet screen. Aaron laughed. “What is it?” she asked.

“I was going to get the same thing.”

“It’s always a good choice,” Chloe said, ordering the two meals from the tablet. “Tell me about your personal training.”

“I’m a runner, but was better when I was younger. I represented Australia at a few international competitions—”

“Oh, wow,” Chloe commended.

“Thanks.” He smiled into his lap. “But I was always pretty skinny. I wanted to put on some muscle so I started training differently and was amazed at how the body changes to different styles of exercise. I decided to do my PT course and help other people reach their goals.” Their meals arrived then, steaming hot from the opening in the middle of the table. They smelt mouth-watering. Chloe and Aaron both dug into their chicken. “But enough about my job, *your* job is insane, I can’t believe how smart you must be.”

“Just lots and lots of study.”

“Don’t play it down, you’re a paediatric surgeon, Chloe.”

“Okay, I’m pretty smart,” she laughed. “But I worked hard to be where I am.”

“It’s very impressive,” Aaron said. After a beat, he continued. “What’s one thing that you wish you could do?”

“Out of what?”

“Out of anything,” Aaron said. “If you were going to die tomorrow, what would you want to do right now—aside from ride a horse, ‘cause I already know that about you.” He smiled.

“I would want to see snow. Real snow. I’d want to go snowboarding like you see in the movies and on the history channel.” Chloe looked at Aaron’s expression—he was smiling but his eyes were wide, amused. “What?”

“That’s what I’d want to do too.” The coincidence was funny, but she was sure every second person in the world would want to see snow these days. Another wine and cider popped up as they each finished their meals. “Would you like to play pool?” Aaron asked, taking his cider and sliding his chair out a fraction.

“Yes,” Chloe said, standing and taking her wine and purse. She walked ahead of him, grinning to herself.

“I have to warn you,” Aaron said as they reached the table. “I’m not half bad.” He winked and it sent flutters through Chloe’s chest.

“We’ll see, Aaron. We’ll see.”

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“So, how was it?” Sylvia asked as Chloe walked through the front door.

She pulled off her heels and flopped onto the lounge. She couldn’t wipe the smile off her face. “Yeah, it was good.”

“Details, please.”

“Argh he was *so* nice and handsome and we just clicked, you know?”

“Did you kiss?”

“Yes,” Chloe said, her voice turning child-like.

“Oh! Was he good?” Sylvia asked.

“Very.”

“Tell me about it.”

“We had dinner and talked and then we played pool—”

“You beat him, right?”

“Of course,” Chloe said, feigning shock that Sylvia would need to ask such an obvious question. “Then he walked me back to my car and he just leant in and went for it.”

“What was it like?” Sylvia asked.

“He held me really tight and... I’m not sure how to explain it, but you know when you kiss someone for the first time and it takes a couple of goes to know how the other person kisses and for you to work well together?”

“Yep.”

“Well, it was like that didn’t exist, like as soon as our lips touched, moving together was just second nature.”

“That’s a really good sign. Are you going to see him again?”

“He asked me to come over tomorrow night. Is that too soon though?”

“To his house?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. That seems pretty full on. You can’t trust someone after such a short amount of time, so be careful if you do go, and don’t do anything you don’t want to. There’ll be more pressure on you, being at his house.”

“I know, that’s what I’m worried about. I know that I’ll be able to say no, if he does want to do anything, but I don’t know if I *want* to say no.”

“It’s completely up to you. Just do what your heart tells you.”

“Thanks, mushball,” Chloe teased, eliciting a grumble from Sylvia. “I’m going to bed. Absolutely buggered. I’ll see you tomorrow. Night.”

“Night, my dear.”

Thank you for tonight, it was lovely meeting you, and yes, I’d like to come round for dinner at yours tomorrow night, just let me know the time and address Xx.

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“Hey, come on in, how are you?” Aaron asked, welcoming Chloe inside.

“Yeah well thanks, how was your day?” She looked around the apartment . It was spacious, modern, simplistic. She really liked it.

“It was busy, Saturdays always are for me, so it will be nice to spend a night in with you,” he said, smiling crookedly at her.

Chloe felt her cheeks redden. “Here you go.” She handed him a bottle of wine to go with dinner.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. “You didn’t have to do that, you drove out here, dinner’s on me.”

“You paid for everything last night and you’re cooking tonight so it was the least I could do.”

“Well thank you. Actually, dinner’s ready now so did you want to head over to the table?”

“Sure thing.”

She walked over and poured them a glass of wine each as Aaron brought plates filled with delicious smelling food out from the kitchen. He placed them in the middle of the table, which he’d set before her arrival.

They ate and talked and drank and talked and Chloe couldn’t remember feeling so comfortable with anyone before, except for Sylvia. When Aaron suggested they watch a movie she knew it was the turning point of the evening. She could refuse, and leave, saying she was tired and that they’d meet up again soon. Or she could agree and see where the night took them. Her deliberation must have taken longer than she thought, as Aaron interrupted her thoughts.

“It’s okay, you know. You can go home if you like.”

“I don’t want to go home,” Chloe said. Aaron exhaled in obvious relief. “But I don’t want to *do* anything with you tonight either. I mean, I do, but I’d like to maintain some

integrity and wait for a little while. The last time I was with someone I rushed into things and I don't want to make that mistake again," Chloe explained.

"No, of course. I don't want you to feel pressured because you're in my home. I would love to, uh, *do* things with you... But you never get the *waiting* back. I'm absolutely fine with just watching a movie."

"Why are you on *Tinder*?" Chloe asked as they stood and made their way to the lounge.

"Hold that thought," Aaron said, lifting a finger to indicate he'd be back shortly. "Sorry about that," he replied, returning with chocolate covered strawberries and more wine.

"You have no need to apologise if you're walking into a room with chocolate and booze," Chloe said, her tone playful.

Aaron laughed as he set down the plate and wine and then sat beside her. Their legs were touching. It made Chloe very aware of herself, and of their proximity.

"I decided to go on *Tinder* because my ex and I broke up a while ago and I'm over it, I've done the rebound thing, but I guess I've just been a little empty since then. It's hard to meet people, and everyone's getting on it, so I thought why not?" He took a sip of wine and then picked up a strawberry. Chloe couldn't help but notice again how elongated his hands were—strong and calloused, from lifting weights, but long and delicate, like a pianist. He raised the strawberry to his mouth and took a bite. His lips curved around the chocolate, reminding Chloe of their kiss. She felt something stir deep within her stomach. "You?" he asked.

"Oh, me, um, right." Chloe brushed her hair to one side in a nervous gesture. "My roommate, Sylvia—also my best friend—was on it and showed me her profile and I thought the same, why not have a go and see what it's like? My work keeps me so busy and I'm constantly studying to keep up with everything, that meeting people in the real world is difficult."

Aaron stared at her for a moment. She felt like she was looking into a mirror. Clearly their faces were dissimilar, but her exact expression was reflected back at her.

She leant forward, inching towards him. He reciprocated the movement until they were as close as they could be without touching. Chloe closed her eyes and as they were about to kiss, the ground started shaking.

“Oh no,” Aaron said, jumping up and pulling Chloe with him. “Into the bathroom, I’ve got a mattress ready!”

Even though the bathroom was just down the hall, the earthquake had already hit. Chloe fell to the floor, but Aaron picked her up and ran as best he could despite the tremors underfoot. He threw open the door and placed Chloe in the bathtub. He then raced across the hall and opened a storage cupboard—Chloe had leaned out of the tub to see—he extracted a foam mattress and returned to the bathroom, keeping one hand pressed to the wall, steadying himself. He closed the door, jumped into the tub and placed the mattress over the top, covering them from falling debris.

Minutes passed and they were rocked around. The earthquake was strong. Chloe was sure it would be a higher Richter rating than any she had experienced. The bathtub wasn’t built for two people to lay side by side. They were entangled in each other, limbs entwined, bodies pressed together. Aaron’s muscles provided a buffer on most of Chloe’s left side, but her right side felt bruised from ricocheting between Aaron and the cold ceramic curve of the tub.

“Are you okay?” Aaron asked, his voice strained from what Chloe thought was fear and pain.

“Sort of,” Chloe responded, her teeth clashing together as her head hit the tub.

“It should be over soon,” he reassured her.

He changed his position slightly, as much as he was able, and lay on top of her. The tremors were subsiding, but Aaron’s weight helped Chloe from being thrown around so much.

“Thank you,” she said, clasping her arms around his torso.

They were used to earthquakes. They probably occurred every six months or so, and were usually just small tremors, lasting for thirty seconds or less. This one had been large. And it had gone for at least three minutes.

“I think it’s over,” Aaron said. His head was pressed to the side of hers and his breath tickled her neck as he spoke.

“Aftershocks?” Chloe asked, feeling too scared and sore to say anything more.

“We’ll wait in here for another ten minutes or so, just to be safe,” Aaron decided. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Chloe just nodded. She had a huge headache and could feel a lump growing on the base of her skull. Actually, she could feel a lump growing somewhere else, too.

“Aaron,” she said, laughing. “Are you happy to see me or something?”

“Shush, you.” She knew he could have raised his head to look her in the eye as he spoke, but he kept his face hidden, pressed to the side of hers. “We just survived a crazy earthquake and I’m lying on top of the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen, can you really blame me?”

Chloe blushed and was about to reply when the building started shaking again. Aftershocks.

“It’s okay,” Aaron whispered as Chloe tensed up.

She sucked in a quick breath and braced herself, ready to be thrown around again, like coins in a piggybank.

“Can you tell me something?” she asked.

“What do you want to know?”

“Anything,” Chloe replied through gritted teeth. The tremors were violent. “Anything to take my mind off this. I’m scared.”

“Me too,” Aaron admitted. “Okay, I’ll just tell you—some of my favourite things—because these tremors—are making it—hard to speak.”

Chloe squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated on his voice, his Christmas scent and his sculpted body on top of her.

“Watermelon. Ice-cream,” he began. “Dogs. Superhero movies. Exercise. Well, that was an obvious one.” He laughed, and the vibrations from his chest seeped into Chloe,

calming her, allowing her to relinquish her grip on his torso slightly. “The way you smile. Your perfume. The smell of your hair, like coconut.”

By this point the aftershocks had stopped. Chloe’s heart rate remained accelerated, but her fear of the earthquake had disappeared. Given their position, she knew that Aaron could feel it. She raised her arms from their curled position around his body and placed her hands on the side of his head. She ran her fingers through his thick hair and then took his face and directed him to look at her. She kissed him. A strange but wonderful electric connection formed between them. It was a familiar sensation, but that was ridiculous as she had never *actually* felt that feeling before. She thought it must have been a feeling from a dream, nothing tangible, only something remembered.

Aaron pushed his hips into her and she stopped thinking of anything but him.

\* \* \*

“Oh my god, are you okay?” Sylvia asked, hugging Chloe with crippling strength as she walked through their front door.

Chloe squeezed back, so happy to see her friend safe. The same could not be said for their apartment though. “Yes, I’m okay, what about you?”

“I was here when it hit and I just did the usual hide out in the bathroom,” Sylvia began. “I didn’t have enough time to save any breakables, though.” She looked around the room, a saddened expression on her face.

Chloe surveyed the damaged. Obviously Sylvia had cleaned up, but there were lots of things missing. Presumably broken and thrown away. There were cracks in the walls that hadn’t been there before; new, cheap light globes replaced their previous pendants, and as Chloe entered the kitchen, she saw they hardly had any plates or bowls left.

“Don’t be silly, as if you would ever have time to save breakables when an earthquake hits,” Chloe said. “The same thing happened at Aaron’s. At least we’re all safe.”

“Are you heading into work today?” Sylvia asked.

“Yeah, I got called in. There have been a lot of injuries.”

“I thought you would be. Let me know if you’ll be home for dinner, reception should be back up soon,” Sylvia said, glancing out the lounge room window. “I was so worried about you last night, not knowing if you were okay and unable to contact you.” She wiped at a tear on her cheek.

Chloe took Sylvia in her arms again and rubbed her hand up and down her back. “It was a bad one,” she said. “But it’s okay, we’re all okay now.”

\* \* \*

A month had passed and Aaron was coming to Chloe’s place tonight. Sylvia was out, so they’d have the apartment to themselves. The devastation left by the earthquake had been quickly cleared. Robots had been sent out to clean the streets and search for people trapped in wreckage. Chloe had been busy at the hospital, with so many additional patients, and the pair hadn’t been able to spend much time together. She was excited about tonight, and had spent the afternoon getting dinner prepared.

A knock on the door indicated Aaron’s arrival. Chloe felt her stomach swirl and she tried not to rush to answer the door. Aaron stood, soaking wet, holding a brown paper bag in both hands.

“If you could have picked any dessert for me to bring over, what would it be?” he asked with an uneven smile.

“Uh, cookie dough ice-cream?” Chloe replied.

Aaron’s eyebrows shot up and his smile turned into a grin as he opened the bag and extracted a litre tub of cookie dough ice-cream. “Weird,” he said.

“Definitely weird,” Chloe replied, inviting him in. “Did you want to have a shower or dry off?”

“I’ll just grab a towel if that’s okay, it’s pissing down out there.”

“Sure thing,” Chloe said, placing the ice-cream in the freezer. “Grab a fresh one from the linen closet.”

Chloe returned to the stove, stirring the curry she’d made. The soft *click* of the rice cooker went off. Aaron’s hands took hold of her hips. His chest pressed to her back. His lips pressed to her neck.

“Mmmm smells good,” he murmured, trailing kisses along her throat.

“I’m glad you think so,” Chloe breathed. “I hope it’s not too hot for you.”

“I meant you,” Aaron amended. Chloe’s breathing became shallow, but faster. “I can handle the curry. I like spicy. You, on the other hand, I’m not sure about.” He spun her around. The wooden spoon Chloe had been holding clattered on the side of the pot. “I’ve missed you.”

Before Chloe could say anything, he was kissing her. He picked her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist. He took her to the bedroom.

“What about the curry?” Chloe asked, as he threw her onto the bed. She was thankful she’d turned the stove off.

Aaron undid the button and fly on her jeans and pulled them down, slowly, trailing his long fingers over the skin of her thighs. She extracted her legs and he tossed the jeans aside. Her heart was racing. He then repeated the process with her underwear. Her skin felt too warm. He laid down in between her legs.

“I’d prefer to have you for my *entre*.”

Chloe did not object.

\* \* \*

“It’s okay, Aaron, just hold on!” Chloe screamed as she pressed her hand to his wound.

His reply was a faint gurgle. It terrified her. Her hands were covered in blood. She wiped them off on her white shirt. They’d been together for six months now and he was her soul mate in every way. She couldn’t lose him.

“I’ve already called the ambulance, they’ll be here soon, stay with me,” she pleaded.

She'd pulled him from what was left of the car. She'd been driving. Another earthquake had hit. She'd crashed. She was bruised and knew some ribs were fractured, but Aaron was worse. Much worse.

Both of his legs were broken. One a bloody, messy compound fracture. She'd bandaged his bleeding with her jacket as best as she could, but she could see the deep crimson stain growing.

"I can hear the sirens," she whispered to him. "I'm so sorry." She started to cry. "I love you."

The ambulance came and took them both away.

\* \* \*

"Home sweet home," Aaron said as Chloe helped him through his front door.

"I bet it feels amazing getting out of the hospital," Chloe said.

"Yeah, three months of not being able to walk was pretty shit," he joked.

Aaron had recovered well after the accident. Chloe still had nightmares about it and the guilt felt like a sodden towel wrapped around her body—a heavy, cold intimation.

"Did you want me to get you something to eat or drink?" she asked as Aaron dumped his crutches and relaxed back into his recliner lounge.

"Actually there is something you could do for me," he said.

"What would you like?" Chloe asked.

"For you to answer a question."

Chloe gave him a puzzled look. "Okay."

"Would you like to move in with me?" he asked.

"Oh," Chloe breathed, shocked.

“Just be honest with me,” Aaron said. “I know how much you love living with Sylvia, and that your place is a bit closer to your work, but I want to wake up next to you every morning.”

Chloe smiled at him. “I want that too. Let me talk it over with Sylvia, we’ll have to figure out her living arrangements because I can’t just leave her high and dry. But yes, I would love to move in with you.”

“Thank you,” he said. “For being with me through everything. I know you feel guilty but I’ve told you over and over again that it wasn’t your fault, you couldn’t have done anything. And if you hadn’t have been by my side through those three months I would be a very different person.”

“I’m so happy I met you, Aaron,” Chloe said. “You are so familiar, ever since I first met you. It’s like we intuitively knew things about each other but we didn’t know how or why.”

“It’s because we were meant to be,” Aaron said, tucking some of Chloe’s hair behind her ear and then cupping her cheek with his palm. “We were supposed to find each other.”

— 300 years earlier —

Suzie shuffled into the private hospital room. She closed the door behind her, noticing again how wrinkled and frail her hands were. She was old, but it was the stress that seemed to have made her age show. Her husband was asleep, well, he was in a coma. Suzie sat by his bed and listened to the *beep, beep, beep*, of his heart rate. It was one of her favourite sounds, no matter how monotonous, because it meant that he was still alive. They had been married for sixty-eight years.

For the past two weeks, her husband had been in a coma. He had suffered a heart attack and by the time the ambulance arrived, he had been without oxygen for too long. The best thing was that he wasn’t in any pain. The worst thing was that no one knew if he would wake up. And if he did wake, would he still be the same, or would he have incurred brain

damage from the lack of oxygen? Suzie reached under the covers and found his hand. It was cold.

“Hello, my love,” Suzie said to her husband. She squeezed his hand, but her grip elicited no response from him. “Do you remember when we first met?” she began. “We found each other on a dating site. And to think, all these years later, you are still the love of my life.”

Suzie flinched. She had felt his hand move, she was sure of it.

“Andrew?” she asked, fearful to feel any kind of hope.

He coughed.

“Oh my god,” Suzie breathed. She stood, as fast as her weak legs would allow, and pressed the ‘call nurse’ button over and over again until a nurse rushed into the room. “He coughed!” she exclaimed, pointing to her husband.

The nurse made her way over to him, and as she neared the bed, he coughed again and his hands twitched.

“I’ll be right back,” the nurse said and then sped out the door.

She returned moments later with the Nursing Unit Manager and the doctor on duty. Suzie was ushered outside and told to wait. She stood for as long as she was able, but exhaustion and fear took hold, making her feel light-headed, so she sat and waited. After an hour of nurses and doctors coming and going, giving her brief snippets of her husband’s health and telling her it wouldn’t be much longer, the nurse who first came to her call gestured for Suzie to come back inside Andrew’s private room.

Silent tears trickled down her cheeks as she stood in the doorway and looked at her husband. She stumbled forward and sat on the bed, holding him, resting her head on his chest. Suzie released the hysteria and torment she felt in great waves of sobs. Andrew held her tightly, crying with her.

The hospital staff left them alone and after a long time, Suzie finally calmed enough to sit up.

“You’re alive,” she whispered.

“I am,” Andrew replied. His voice sounded strange, his throat swollen from the endotracheal tube that had been keeping him alive for the past two weeks. “But not for long.”

“What?” Suzie asked. Her insides felt like they disappeared.

“The doctors don’t know why or how I’ve woken up. They did some tests and don’t think I’ll make it to tomorrow.” His words sounded heavy, as though his tongue was struggling to remember how to create different sounds.

“But I just got you back,” Suzie whispered. “It’s not fair.”

“Suzie,” Andrew began. “I get to see your face and hear your voice one last time before I leave this place. It’s not fair to you, but it is the greatest gift I could ever receive.”

His words brought a bittersweet smile to her face. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” he replied. “What was it you were telling me, before I decided to wake up?” he said, his tone light and jovial.

“Huh?” Suzie said, confusion evident in her expression.

“Oh yes, the way we first met.”

“You could *hear* me?” Suzie asked, completely amazed.

“I heard everything you said to me while I was in that coma. It felt like a dream, though, a beautiful dream.” Suzie leant forward and kissed him. His lips and the movement were so familiar, she could never forget the connection that formed when they touched. “Let’s reminisce some more. Do you remember me asking you out to dinner, the same night we started speaking?” Andrew asked.

“Yes, I thought you were crazy.” Suzie laughed.

“But you still came.”

“It was the best decision I ever made. And I kicked your arse at pool.”

“You sure did,” he conceded, grinning at her. “And then I invited you to my place for diner the next night and I cooked for you.”

“I still maintain that it was the best meal you’ve ever cooked in our seventy-one years together,” Suzie teased him.

“What about when I was in hospital, after breaking my legs in the skiing accident?”

Suzie’s expression saddened. “That wasn’t me.”

“Oh, no, I’m so sorry. My memory is muddled,” Andrew apologised. “I know why I said that though.”

“Why?”

“Because I would have given anything to have had you there beside me in the hospital. To have had *you* as my girlfriend during that time. It was horrible, and the person who I was with was not my soul mate. You are though.”

“I would have hated seeing you that way.”

“I know,” Andrew said. “But I still would have wanted it to be you that cared for me.”

“What about the ice-cream?” Suzie said, changing the subject to something more cheerful.

“Oh the *Ben & Jerry’s* cookie dough ice-cream!” Andrew exclaimed, laughing. “Now that was a coincidence.”

“I’ll say. Remember when we first moved in together, and for some reason heaps of spiders kept getting inside?” Suzie asked.

“Yes, lucky my wife is braver than I am.” He smiled as Suzie looked at him. His voice was softer, his eyes more distant. “Come, lay with me.” Andrew helped Suzie onto his bed. She crawled under the covers and he wrapped his arms around her. She laid her head on his chest, her ear resting directly above his heart. “I loved you from the moment I met you,” Andrew whispered. “And even though I won’t be here, in this body for much longer, my soul will always be yours, my love for you will transcend time and space. My love for you will always be here.” He pressed his hand to Suzie’s heart.

Tears once again coursed down Suzie’s cheeks, seeping into Andrew’s hospital gown. He cradled her, kissing her forehead every now and then. He began to hum a tune that he

always said reminded him of her. Suzie's memory was fuzzy on many things, but she remembered every lyric to their song, *A Sky Full of Stars* by Coldplay.

Andrew's voice became a faint whisper on the wind by the end of the tune, as did his heartbeat.

— 299 years earlier —

Suzie lay in the hospital bed, struggling for breath. Breathing hurt. Everything hurt. She heard a knock on the door but was too weak to call out for the person to enter. It didn't matter, the door opened anyway, and Sam—her best friend in the world—was wheeled inside by her son, Daniel, also Suzie's son-in-law. Daniel positioned her wheelchair close to Suzie's bed. He kissed both their cheeks—Suzie felt the cold wetness of a tear left on her cheek—and then left.

“How are you, my dear?” Sam asked.

“Not. Good,” Suzie managed to say. “I can feel it coming.”

“What?” Sam asked. “Death?”

Suzie nodded in reply.

“I'll be right behind you,” Sam joked, making Suzie smile. “We did well, you and I,” she continued. “You, ninety-six, me ninety-five.” She sighed and then reached forward, taking Suzie's hand in hers. “You don't have to talk, because I know it's hard, so just listen, okay?” Suzie nodded in response. “You're my last friend left. Everyone else has died. I suppose I'm the cockroach of the group, outliving everyone. But my god I will miss you with every cell of my being. I don't know what happens after you die. I don't know if it's heaven, or reincarnation, or if you just decompose. But whatever it is, I'll find you. Even if what's waiting for us is just decomposition, the worms that eat my body will find the worms that eat your body and they will be best friends.”

Suzie laughed at that. Trust Sam to make impending death seem funny.

“I know that every day since Andrew died you’ve been empty inside. But you’re about to go on your next adventure.” Suzie saw the tears welling in Sam’s eyes as she spoke. “And you know what you’ve got to go and do now, don’t you?” she asked.

Suzie shook her head. She was getting tired, so tired.

“Now you go and find him.” Sam squeezed Suzie’s hand again. “No matter if it’s heaven and you’re swept straight into his arms, or if it’s reincarnation and it takes you three hundred years to find each other again, you two are soul mates. Wherever you go in death, my friend, you will find each other.”

“We will. We all will,” Suzie whispered.

“I love you, and I’ll see you soon, okay?” Sam said, her voice breaking.

“I love you too,” Suzie said in little more than a whisper. She took one last breath. “I will find Andrew, and I will find you. I promise.”

And she was taken away.