

**To Know You**

**ONE.**

**DALLAS**  
**Saturday 9:15 a.m.**

*Don't ask*, Julia Whittaker wanted to scream.

But the words were sawdust in her mouth. Matt would ask because it was his nature to take in information, cradle it, and rebirth it so the world made sense.

*How—*

Moments away from being irrevocable.

*long—*

If Julia couldn't bear the asking, how could she ever bear the answer?

"The transplant committee moved Dillon up. He's near the top of the list," Dr. Ann Rosado said. She was a pediatric gastroenterologist at Cedar Springs Medical Center, specializing in liver diseases. The Whittakers had known her all of Dillon's life.

"Just near? Not at?" Matt was rubbing his stubbled head as if he could massage this fact into something closer to his liking. They hadn't been home in two days. His gray slacks were wrinkled at the knees and his oxford shirt was stained with salad dressing. He had shoveled food into his mouth to set the example for her. *You have to eat*, he said.

*Yeah, Mom*, Dillon had said. *You have to eat*. He had made an attempt on her behalf, picking apart a muffin and smearing scrambled eggs on his plate.

Black coffee and Red Bull was all Julia had patience with. The acid in her stomach was a welcome relief from that sinking sensation of time slipping away.

Of Dillon slipping away.

She dug her fingernails into her palms and stared at the pictures of children on Annie's wall. Some were pink-cheeked with health, others had sallow skin and shadowed eyes—the autumnal shades of liver disease.

Thirteen years ago, Julia had studied the pictures, looking for a sign of hope. “Are these the survivors?”

“I don't differentiate,” Annie had said. “They are all my patients.”

“But which ones are still a—” Julia hadn't been able to finish the question. The cruelty that children could be born blighted and die without a future was unbearable.

“They all live in my heart,” Annie had said. “They all live in God's heart because He doesn't differentiate either.”

Where was God's heart today, after thirteen years of dealing with this? Certainly not in that void between *how* and *long*.

She curled her fingertips into the arm of the sofa and counted the lights on Annie's Christmas tree. There were no “Wait Until Christmas” tags on the presents because some children—like Dillon—could not wait until the 25<sup>th</sup>.

Julia had bought her son's gift a month ago, the expensive Arriflex 235, which would allow him to shoot video underwater. She and Matt nixed the notion of a motorcycle rig that would allow him to shoot high-speed chases.

*When I'm sixteen I'll get my own motorcycle*, Dillon had said, even as his blood pressure climbed and the toxins backed up in his liver like a clogged sewage pipe. Sixteen was more than three long years away and, even if she dared to let Matt ask *how long*, three years weren't possible.

Not without a transplant.

“Dillon’s beaten the odds since he was born,” Dr. Annie said. “We’ll find him that liver.”

“Of course,” Matt said, his blue eyes distant. Computing the odds, Julia knew, because she had asked him once when they prayed together—*where do you go when you disappear?*

*Where the numbers add up*, he had said.

She had prayed everywhere. Prayers in a dark closet. Prayers on a mountain top. Prayers in Matt's car. Prayers in his arms. Prayers in Jerusalem. Prayers in the bathroom.

*Don't lose hope*, Matt always said.

*Imagine all that Dillon has before him*, Matt had said shortly after Dillon was diagnosed with biliary atresia. Infancy became toddlerhood. *Look, the Kasai procedure is holding and now he's made it to kindergarten. Cheer, Julia, because he's in Little League and wow, can you believe our son won the sixth-grade spelling bee? Listen to his voice squeak into manhood and whatever you do, sweetheart, pretend you're impressed by that fuzz on his lip.*

*Imagine what we have before us*, Matt would say. *College and a lovely daughter-in-law and bouncing grandchildren and a long life of blessings. Look how our son is beating the odds.*

Until three weeks ago—when he wasn't.

Dr. Annie talked on, her soft voice no veil for the ugly words coming out of her mouth. *Hepatic encephalopathy. Coagulopathy. Ascites. Cerebral edema.*

Matt's fingers tightened on Julia's. He exhaled, his mouth forming a soft *o*.

“No,” she said. “Don't.”

“How—”

“Please. Don’t—”

“—long?”

Julia jumped up, pulse thundering, hands pressed to her ears to block out Annie’s response.

“Not long.”

She staggered to the door, willing God to stop the sun in the sky like he had for Joshua. But from the moment her son had been cast in her womb with a doomed liver, she knew she had no say in the matter.

From somewhere in the gloom, Matt called her name and Dr. Annie said, “I know this is hard.”

Maybe the sun did stand still outside Dr. Annie’s office. Maybe on the other side of this door Dillon was strong and thriving, playing sports and chasing girls and tripping over his feet and being brilliant in one moment and utterly ridiculous in the next. She needed to go to her son and promise he had all the time in the world.

Julia yanked at the door but it didn’t open. So she punched it.

And punched it again and still the door wouldn’t open.

“Julia, stop,” Matt called out of the distant haze. “Stop it.”

She couldn’t stop, just kept punching the door.

Because she couldn’t punch God.

**Saturday 4:32 p.m.**

Julia opened her eyes to the harsh glow of hospital lighting.

A nurse appeared out of nowhere, said *the surgery was a success*, and wanted to know *how do you feel, Mrs. Whittaker?*

Like cat vomit, Julia would have said, if the cat didn't have her tongue.

Dr. Annie had pulled every favor in her considerable book to get Julia scheduled for surgery within hours after breaking her hand.

"Where's my husband?" Julia said. The words came out *where's my hubcap*.

"I'm here." Matt kissed her forehead. "How're you doing?"

"Hurts."

"That's what happens when you shatter three fingers." Matt brushed her hair back. "What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking anything. I just couldn't get the door open."

"That's because it pulls inward. You were pushing it out."

"I had to get out—"

"I know, I know. Just relax," Matt said. "The nurse said she'd bring you some painkillers."

"No. We don't have time. We have to find Dillon a liver." Julia pawed at her left hand, trying to rip out the IV. No go—her right hand was engulfed in a mummy-wrapped splint the size of a loaf of bread. Her fingers were captive, reconstructed with tiny pins and plates, and swathed in gauze. Only the tip of her thumb extruded from the bandage.

Julia tried to curl her hurt hand into a fist. Pain spiked through her wrist and she cried out. The nurse scurried in. *Keep calm*, she said. *Your pulse is racing*. She took Julia's blood pressure, fiddled with the monitor, and glared at her with an admonition to *just relax*.

Matt laced his fingers gently around the IV site on the back of her wrist. His face was stubbly, his eyelids heavy. At least she had had a few hours of anesthetized slumber. How long had it been since he slept?

"It's okay. It's okay." He said it over and over so it became one word—*sokay sokay sokay*.

"I am so sorry, Mattie. I really messed up."

"Nothing that a few plates and screws didn't fix."

"It's late. Wait—Beth was supposed to get tested today," Julia said. Beth Latham was their office manager and dear friend.

Matt made that *hm* sound high in his palate, an indicator that things were bad but he wouldn't let it get to him.

"What," Julia said.

"There's good news and bad news that's really good news."

Julia groaned. "Just tell me."

"Beth was a match."

"Really?"

"She can't do it. She wants to badly. She can't. Not for eight months at least."

Her heart sank. "She's pregnant? I thought she and Bruce had stopped trying."

"They had. She was having the physical, mentioned nausea, and they ran the test."

“That’s wonderful news, Matt.” Julia’s voice came back hollow. They were all hanging on by fingernails. They needed to find a liver—immediately.

A terrible twist of fate had made both her and Matt ineligible as living donors. Her A-positive blood type with Matt’s B positive could have combined to AB positive in their son, the blood type that can receive all comers. But they both carried recessive genes—like hidden sins—into their pairing and gave birth to a type-O, Rh-negative baby.

Were he healthy, Dillon’s blood type would make him a universal donor. How ironic that he would have been sought after by the Red Cross to give blood every two months once he turned eighteen.

He could share with anyone but only receive O-negative blood and could only survive a transplant from a type-O donor. The fact that he was in the majority blood type made the process trickier because he had to compete with everyone on the waiting list.

Though giving up a lobe of one’s liver had some peril and an extended recovery time, friends and family had volunteered to be tested. Six—counting Beth, their office manager and dear friend—had the right blood type.

All six were ineligible.

Her assistant Patricia was ruled out due to her chronic asthma. Matt’s brother Todd had too many tattoos from his wild days, including two from his mission time in India. Their accountant Charlie had a history of melanoma. Pastor Rich had chronic malaria from time spent in Africa. Dillon’s debate coach Isaac had undiagnosed hepatitis A. Her design assistant Trevor had active Lyme disease. By the time he finished the rigorous course of treatment, it might be too late for Dillon.

Without a live donor identified, the last option was grim and unpredictable.

Someone would have to die from a crushing head wound and that someone would need to have an organ card in his wallet or have a merciful next-of-kin who could see through their grief long enough to say *yes, let's redeem our loved one's death.*

"I'm sorry," Julia said.

Matt laughed. "You pack a mean punch. I'm going to be a lot nicer to you from now on." He squeezed next to her on the hospital bed and draped her injured hand over his shoulder so she could snuggle into his chest. Even though it was December, he smelled like summer.

"You know what we have to do," he said.

"I can't."

"Dillon's got two sisters."

"They don't know any of this. They don't know each other, they don't know me."

"They are the only hope Dillon has."

Julia dug the fingers of her good hand into his shirt. "I don't even know where they are."

"I do," Matt said. "I know where they are."

### **Saturday 6:18 p.m.**

When Dillon was eight years old, he asked for a grown-up Bible. *Hallelujah*, Matt and Julia whispered in delight. We've got the next Billy Graham.

Wrong.

Her son was the Spielberg of scripture. Since graduating from *Wally McDoogle* to the wall of Jericho, he had devoured and then dramatized the bible from the Creation to

the Apocalypse. Matt joked that the lesson was that when you give your kid a bible, you hide the video camera.

"He's reading Samuel," Julia said when he was nine. "Adultery, madness, murder—"

"The stuff movies are made of," Matt said.

For all those years, the Kasai reconstruction of his bile duct held strong, draining bile from his liver into his intestine. Allowing him to grow and even to thrive. Those were good years but deep in Julia's gut, she knew the Kasai was the wall of Jericho that would someday come tumbling down.

Tonight Dillon looked like an under-ripe tomato with his round cheeks and yellowed skin. Propped up in pillows and tucked under a blanket, he was surrounded by electronics. Heart monitor, IV, blood-pressure cuff, bed controls, land-line phone, and call button—all belonging to the hospital. His laptop, tablet, and smart phone were never out of reach of his blazing thumbs.

He glanced up from his game and said, "Mom! Wait 'til you see." He waved the remote and turned on the television. Julia's image was frozen in high-definition. Her hand was a bloody mess, her fingers twisted in a strange and terrible way.

"How did you do that?" she said, half in wonder and half in horror.

Dillon turned his iPad so she could see it. On-screen, Tanita—the patient in the next room—waved at her. The teens on this floor all linked up—chatting, playing games, and flirting in cyberspace.

"Tanita was heading down to Ultrasound this morning," Dillon said. "She had her tablet with her because you know how boring the wait can be. And then she caught you in the hall, looking like Dr. Annie had put your hand into a meat grinder. So what happened? Did you punch someone, or what?"

“I . . . no, I didn’t punch anyone. I just got it caught in the door and . . .” And what? Lying had to be okay if it was to spare your son’s feelings. “I was holding the edge of the door, talking to Dad and Dr. Annie, and my foot caught on something and my whole weight just slammed against the door while my hand was still in it.”

Dillon narrowed his eyes at her. His eyebrows were becoming bushy and a wisp of a moustache formed over his upper lip. She’d ask Matt to buy him an electric razor with a trimmer. *Oh dear God, please let him need it, please God, please God—*

“Mom! I asked you a question.”

“I’m sorry, hon. What did you say?”

“I said Tanita heard pounding. Like someone was bashing something. She thought there was a fight or something in Dr. Annie’s office. That’s what made her flick on the video.”

“I don’t know what she heard, Dil. Maybe someone’s working on something upstairs.”

“If you say so.”

“You probably should close out that picture. It’s pretty gross.”

“It is very gross. Exceptionally gross, masterpiece-level gross. I think I’ll use it in my next film.” Dillon leaned back into the pillows. This simple exchange had exhausted him. He smiled as he stared at her image on the screen, his lush imagination already planning a whole story around the battered fingers on her hand.

All the time not recognizing that his death sentence was on her face for the whole world to see.

**Saturday 10:16 p.m.**

Julia often thought she should have wrangled cattle for a living. Or maybe she should have become an eighth-grade teacher. As strong as steers were and as nasty as hormone-soaked thirteen-year-olds could be, they could not compete with brides who could afford a million-dollar wedding.

Fickle. Panicked. Arrogant. Terrified. Inspired. Loving and kind and crazy and mean, all in the same breath.

God was good to give the gifts he had—but Julia sometimes wondered if she absolutely had to be blessed with this particular talent. Her company Myrrh specialized in high-end, sophisticated events, usually weddings. She was the face of the business, the artist with the singular eye and inspired vision.

Matt was the spine, the man who watched the money and tamed the madness. He did his own wrangling, mostly with caterers, designers, florists, and musicians. Myrrh might be expensive but they did not allow clients to be soaked for every penny.

They succeeded because they could not be hired. Their selectivity about whom they would serve had given them the edge of exclusivity. Prospective brides and grooms underwent a grueling interview process with Matt. If they were at all unstable or uncertain, they never made it to Julia. Once she met with them, if she could conjure an amazing vision for the nuptial week, Myrrh would book the event. Otherwise, she sent them elsewhere.

Her favorite wedding was the first one she had ever done. She hadn't even met Matt, just put together a free event for her dear friend Jeanne Potts. It was a sunrise wedding on the coast of Maine. The bride wore an ivory silk princess dress and a single Bethlehem rose in her sun-streaked hair. After the ceremony, the guests ate fresh blueberry muffins and cheered as the bride and her love kayaked away.

Myrrh was a curse when it forced Julia to be away from family and home; a blessing when she watched love walk down the aisle or sail across the bay and knew she had crafted a vision of what heaven will be for those who save the date.

*I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;*

*I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.*

Her business attire consisted of expensive silk blouses and tailored slacks. She needed to give a bride confidence in her taste and she did that with incredible accessories. Hand-painted scarves from Kenya, bulky silver jewelry, quirky handbags. But she made sure the bride would always be the star of the show.

Now she ripped blouses out of her closet like a crazed bride at a fire sale.

Her beautiful tops with the fitted sleeves and fine cuffs would not fit over the club on her right hand. She could go sleeveless, if her jackets fit over the cast. The nurse had instructed her about swelling and taking antibiotics and to *be sure to report if her fingertips turned blue.*

No one had warned her that it would be impossible to get her good clothes on.

Nothing would fit except tank tops she wore for gardening and the gym. “I can’t wear this stuff,” she said to Matt. “I need to make them like me.”

“They’ll like you.” Matt put her toiletries into the suitcase.

“Are you kidding? I drop out of nowhere and say, ‘Hi, I’m your biological mother and I need a lobe of your liver.’ They’re just girls, Matt.”

“They’re grown women now, honey.”

Twenty-four and twenty-two years old—but in her mind, Julia saw her daughters as infants. Born seventeen months apart of different fathers, they didn’t know they had a biological half-brother. They didn’t know they had each other, and they didn’t know her.

Adoption had been the right thing to do. The loving thing to do. The *only* thing she could have done, and survived.

Destiny Connors—the eldest—was just a plane ride away in Los Angeles. Matt said that the adoptive parents kept her name. An impulsive choice because Julia had been only twenty and thought maybe the name would bring her child the strength Julia didn't have.

“I'll have one shot to make a good first impression and oh—my hair! I can't work the curling iron and brush with one hand.”

“So stop at a salon on your way to . . . um . . .” He coughed to hide the catch in his throat.

It could not have been easy to hear about Julia McCord, the girl who had gotten pregnant by two different men and bore two babies out of wedlock. She and Matt had buried that past so many years ago, had lived in the present every day of their marriage, because that's what Jesus said to do and that's what Dillon needed.

Matt tapped at his phone.

“What're you doing?” Julia asked.

“Patricia texted Camille and asked her to open her store. She'll run by there for us and pack up what you need. Wait.” He paused as the text came in. “She says to bring your shawls. The black one and the camel one. Wait . . . wait . . . okay, get that big scarf you sometimes wear on your shoulders.” Matt grinned. “Can you believe I'm dispensing fashion advice?”

Matt owned eight pairs of charcoal slacks for work, and a pair of Dockers khakis he wore on Fridays. His one concession to style was pairing muted ties with snowy white shirts. Simplicity could be stunning, something Julia tried to impress on her brides.

Matt slipped his phone into his pocket. “We’ll stop at Camille’s and get you dressed on the way to the airport.”

“When?”

He glanced at his watch. “We still have three hours or so. The jet just came in from Toronto.” They shared a private jet with two other business owners from their church.

“I can’t wait.”

“We have to. They have to check mechanicals, refuel. It’s going to be a while.”

Matt drew her into his arms. He breathed steadily, his eyes closed. After twenty years of marriage, she knew what he prayed.

*God, please don’t let Julia drive herself crazy in Los Angeles.*

*Please give her wisdom, strength, graciousness.*

*Please heal her hand.*

*Please save our son.*

*Please afflict me in his place.*

*Thy kingdom come . . . Thy will be done.*

Julia pressed her lips to his—gently—to taste his goodness, his steadfastness. Matt kissed her back and suddenly, she was famished for him.

“Julia, your arm . . .” he murmured.

Though she was insufficient in so many ways, somehow Julia knew she was—and had always been—what Matthew Whittaker needed.

“We’ll work around it,” she said.

\*

On the way to the airport, Julia and Matt met friends for prayer. Pastor Rich, her assistant Patricia, and her brother-in-law Todd encircled them. Hedging them in. *Where can I go from Your presence*, Julia prayed silently. *If I go up to the heavens—You have got to be there or I'll lose my mind.*

*You created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb.*

And that was where Julia always stumbled because God knit Dillon together in her womb and *look what's happening now, please Father, please.*

*Count your blessings*, Matt would say.

Blessings. Indeed, she had blessings.

Friends.

So many friends who loved her. Church family. Her college roommate and dear friend, Jeanne. Her colleagues Trevor and Patricia. Parents of children they had met, first in the pediatric wing, now in the transplant wing. Joys and devastations were never far from open arms. Some of her brides and grooms had become like family.

Julia had two enemies. First and always was herself. Try as she might, pray as she would, follow as she must—there was that old Julia McCord trying to bust out. Like an ingrown toenail, something no longer alive but able to hobble her just the same.

And the second enemy: biliary atresia.

When a baby was born, you counted fingers and toes. You didn't poke their belly to see if their liver was filling up with garbage. *Your baby boy is ten pounds and lively, and that jaundice is natural*, they said.

Until the baby couldn't gain weight even though he was a hearty eater. Until his stools were like clay because what God designed the body to be rid of was being trapped

in the abdomen that Matt loved to tickle. In that belly was a perfectly good liver, going bad because the bile ducts just wouldn't work.

Julia wanted to punch God until she remembered she had no choice but to love Dillon. She'd once had a choice, when Jesus came calling. She could have said no. Long before she knew Matt, long before they became one and Dillon became theirs, Julia McCord suffered from her own spiritual biliary atresia.

She was lost in bitterness and bile and she could not get clean until Jesus said He would do it for her. And she had felt that untangling, that draining of toxins, that constant and loving presence of life, and she knew then as she knew now that she was held. That was why she could be furious with God—for a moment—and fall into His arms for an eternity.

Julia had friends, she had enemies. And she had love. Matt, steady and unpretentious, was the ballast to her sails, the canvas to her art. Not perfect, which made her love him more. Dillon, whose heart beat with hers for nine months, now a funny-voiced, shaggy-haired young teen. And who could ever deny the love shown by Dr. Ann Rosado, with her chaotic hair and summer-sky eyes?

*Count your blessings.* Friends. Family. Love.

And now—now what?

Two daughters whom Julia had loved enough to walk away from. They would be appalled, offended, disgusted by what she was about to ask of them.

Love compelled Julia to take this journey. Could grace compel them to join her?