

I sneak another glance at Wu May-ling, my potential bride and the guest of honor at this matchmaking lunch. It may be years before I get another opportunity to be so near a young woman, and my eyes dart from the plump curves of her pink lips to the delicate point of her chin to her narrow cheeks and lush eyebrows. I drink in the warmth behind her eyes, the feminine loveliness in her every gesture, the electric charge she produces in me. Both angular and soft, delicate and strong, her face could beguile me for a lifetime. I imagine myself her master and subject for an entire night at a time.

Someone clears his throat, and I jerk up to find my two dads glaring at me. My face hot, I sit up taller and glance around the table to see if May-ling's two husbands noticed my indiscretion. There is a scowl on Husband One's face, but he's been scowling ever since he sat down. Intent on transporting a soup dumpling to his plate intact, Husband Two appears to have mostly food on his mind. I suddenly understand what it's like to be Dad, my mother's second husband and my biological father. But then, he has only one husband who outranks him, while I will have two to mind if I marry into this Advanced family.

Dad bestows a fatherly smile upon May-ling. "Our Wei-guo has impeccable health habits. He weight trains three times a week and swims and runs as well. He can bench a hundred kilos. You should see his biceps."

Sitting on my other side, Big Dad stiffens. "You're embarrassing our guests," he says to Dad with forced levity. With both hands, he offers up the ribbon-and-lace-adorned tin of individually wrapped moon cakes Dad spent hours choosing.

We have honored MaMa's dying wish, staying together under one roof as a family. I think she would be comforted to know that my two dads have become steadfast companions and that through Dad, I continue to hear her opinions. Her two men have taken to wearing the same shirts, both pouncing upon whatever happens to be clean. Even their paunchy and stooped silhouettes have started to look alike.

May-ling beams at the gift, her good nature evident in her twinkling smile. "I have a very sweet tooth. Thank you." Her smoky eyes and translucent silk dress could not be a more enticing blend of intrigue and grace. Despite having birthed a child, her manners and air remain maidenly, a primed canvas awaiting defining strokes of paint.

Which, I admit, I desperately want to apply.

Husband Two, a software designer and what the establishment calls a prosperously sized man, takes the tin from her and scrunching his nose, examines and leaves it under his chair without thanking us. If I did not know from his casual shirt and uncombed gray hair that he is not on board with Family Advancement, I do now.

Ironic that someone with such disregard for social niceties should possess so cherubic a face.

Dad doesn't seem to notice. "Wei-guo has won three triathlons, the five- and ten-thousand-meter races more times than I can remember. He'll be thrilled to give all three of you a free assessment. Put you on a diet—" I elbow him. His enthusiasm knows no bounds.

Sitting half a head taller than everyone at the table, Husband One, a corporate accountant, wrinkles his brow, looking even more displeased. He is in dire need of a weight-gain plan. A cold could take him. He seems to be the Alpha, the way he sits there with his arms crossed in judgment, waiting to be buttered up. Too important, even, to eat. That said, I've yet to see a better-fitted suit on a man. A linen hanky in his jacket pocket, a watch fob hanging from his vest, and his silvery hair slicked back, he seems a relic from a bygone era.

Hero, our matchmaker, gestures at May-ling, his three chunky rings glittering. "Lee Wei-guo was voted one of Beijing's top master personal trainers the last five years in a row by The Worldly Bachelor." If this same webzine had not ranked our matchmaker top in client placement, we would not have hired him. The volume and frizz of his shoulder-length hair bring to mind disorder and bad judgment. Even in a profession dominated by registered same-sex lovers—the Willfully Sterile—he sticks out, a baboon peacocking among men. We pray his name is a good description of his abilities.

Our matchmaker is trying to help, but mention of The Worldly Bachelor only serves to remind May-ling and company that there are forty million more single men like me out there to choose from, that it has taken me until my forties to save up enough to enter matchmaking talks at this lowest rung.

Furthermore, my living relies on such unmarried men. The government has awarded us—members of "The Bounty"—official status, investing in public campaigns to make the words "unmarriageable," "excess," and "leftover" in reference to men unpatriotic and backward. And for "The Bounty," fitness programs like those that I offer are State-funded and mandated. The distraction and physical exhaustion of a thoughtful exercise plan are as nonnegotiable for us as sleep, food, and weekly, State-arranged sex.

Husband Two seems uninterested in the conversation—above it even—focusing solely on shoveling down all the sliced beef shank on the table. He must be one of those jerks who considers his pot belly a status symbol.

"I don't like to brag," Dad says, "but Wei-guo really is the best in his field."

I didn't expect Wu May-ling to catch my eye. Before anyone notices, her flirty bangs fall back over her face, and she returns to sipping the shark's fin soup. We paid dearly into the Nature Preservation Fund in order to bring this dish to the table to signal our serious interest. Now that the right to propose matchmaking talks and marriage has become the prerogative of the woman's side, my dad's dare not spare any expense. But even as they caution me not to settle for anyone less than right—"a bad marriage is worse than no marriage at all"—I know what they won't say: our budget will not allow us many more of these lunches.

"Comrade Lee." Husband One finally deigns to open his mouth. "Please, call him Wei-guo," Dad says.

Husband One starts over with my given name. He asks how long I've been a master trainer, in what direction I hope to take my career.

"Our son earned his certification more than twenty years ago. Before he'd even graduated high school. He broke the program's record too, completing it in just under four months."

Big Dad frowns at Dad. "Let our son answer."

Wu May-ling makes eye contact again and smiles in commiseration. I like her. It can't be much fun to be married to these two grandpas. I feel sorry for her. Only the more financially strapped or money-grubbing husbands go the max to three.

I stare into her eyes even as I answer Husband One. "I cut my teeth on our city's elite at the Body Essential." Everyone who is anyone knows the Body Essential, the studio where the unmarried scions of our noted Party officials, financiers, and industrialists fulfill their exercise requirement. The owner's father (and chief investor) is a ranking member of the Politburo, but still, Husband One turns up his nose. "Those same clients followed me to my own studio eight years ago. My hourly rate rivals that of actuaries." At this, he raises a leery eyebrow.

I continue, "For my clients' convenience, I work early mornings and evenings, but my schedule is at my own discretion." May-ling nods, and I see the two of us with the middle of the day to ourselves. Strolling the streets hand in hand. Eating in bed. Rollicking.

Husband One asks again about my career ambitions.

"I like owning my own business. Being my own boss. I've worked very hard to get here." I smile at May-ling and can't help adding, "I'm looking for a special woman. A true love. A kindred spirit." I stop short of saying "play pal," extra emphasis on the word "play."

Big Dad shifts in his chair. "Wei-guo continually updates his program, his equipment, his gym. He's always innovating so as to gain competitive advantage."

Husband One crosses his arms. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but why not go to Vietnam, Burma, or on some marriage cruise, and bring back a woman? Why share?"

Big Dad answers again, "Wei-guo understands Advanced families. That's how he grew up. That's what he knows best. Like his father and me, he values literacy, shared culture and beliefs. And

the preservation of our people." In private, Big Dad liked to contend that it took, at the very least, two husbands in friendly competition to keep up with MaMa and her robust chatter.

"Yes," Dad says, "we are staunch supporters of China First." My dads are eager to establish us as law-abiding patriots.

Husband One looks to me for confirmation, no doubt skeptical of the party line. These days, only fools speak freely among strangers. I nod yes, but do not elaborate. What do I care about the dilution of our blood and the increasing complexity of our society when my most basic need for a wife and child is not met? I do not say that I've grown weary of my weekly ten-minute hygiene session with my State-assigned "Helpmate," but trudging overseas requires even more money, bureaucracy, and governmental interference. Furthermore, casting one's lot with a foreigner, a "sign-language wife," brings its own set of problems.

Husband One asks how I like to spend my free time.

Dad says, "Wei-guo serves on the Strategic Games Council. He is also the founding general of his battalion."

Husband One's scowl intensifies. Dad forgets that much of the public fear that instead of providing a much needed outlet for unmarried men, our war games condone aggressive behavior and create opportunities for mayhem. The bludgeoning to death of six soldiers two days ago during a game is fresh in everyone's minds.

The clam at the end of Husband Two's chopsticks stops halfway to his mouth. Light clicks on in his eyes. "I've amassed 5,468,325 krps in Metagalactic Domination. I am Emperor Divine of Omega Centauri, Superior Warlord on Small Magellanic Cloud, Eunuch General of Messier 83 . . ."

I steal a glance at May-ling. Head down, she is now the one who doesn't stop eating. Husband One rubs his chin, his mouth an upturned grimace, as pained perhaps by his counterpart's rambling as by my choice of pastime.

Finally, Husband One cuts him off. "Our spouse is quite a fan of virtual warfare. But you like actual fighting."

Surprisingly, Husband Two returns to picking out clam meat and says nothing more.

Big Dad says, "Wei-guo spends most of his time on the governing board's Safety Council."

"I'd note too that there is no physical contact of any kind allowed in Strategic Games," I say. Our critics always overlook this fact. "It is high-level strategy, teamwork, and wilderness training using the most sophisticated technology. It is an intense workout in the great outdoors."

"That's terrific," Wu May-ling says to me. I think it's terrific too, the way she keeps trying to forge a connection.

I ask how she likes to spend her free time.

She glances at Husband One and hesitates. "We loved to salsa and merengue before our son came along."

I am immediately transported to her youth. To her pulsing hips. I've long dreamt of marrying a woman sophisticated in the ways of the world.

Big Dad says, "I understand you have just one child."

May-ling flinches. I quickly send her a look to say that I am on her side, that I do not find their situation odd. After my family saved the requisite two million yuan needed for me to enter matchmaking talks as a third husband, it has taken another eight months to get this nibble of interest, and Big Dad will not blow it for me with a careless remark. Every man is allowed one child, and negotiating the size of the dowry refund and a dissolution option if a baby is not born in three years is the matchmaker's first order of business. After six years of marriage, May-ling should already have two kids.

Husband One says, "Our son just turned two, and we intend for him to have our undivided attention for his first three years."

Big Dad leans toward May-ling. “May I ask—I hope you don’t mind my asking—have you ever used an infertility specialist?”

“We have a child.” Husband One covers May-ling’s chopstick hand with his. “And May-ling is only twenty-two.”

“The child is yours?”

My desperate position seems to be of little concern to Big Dad. Furthermore, he does not tolerate family disunity or my disrespect. He would kill me if he knew I would rather take a chance with a wife like May-ling and no child at all than drift along lonely and alone for the rest of my days.

“Our son belongs to all of us.” Husband One sits up even taller. “And, no, we do not believe in sex selection.”

“Nor do we,” Dad pipes up. That is, of course, everybody’s party line these days.

“We are a true family in name and deed,” says Husband One. “Our son takes the Wu surname, as will all our future children.”

My two dads’ eyebrows shoot up together. In order to promote female births, the adoption of maternal surnames will become official in another year, and the birth rate has skyrocketed in anticipation. Supporters of China First fear that over time, the law will send more men offshore for wives and births, undoing all the gains made by ten years of Advanced family tax breaks.

Husband One continues, “We believe in sharing both our country’s wealth and pain. Should it become necessary for our government to raise the unit spousal limit, know that we are prepared to go the max again and make that sacrifice.”

May-ling starts at this proclamation, and my eyes follow the drops of tea tracing the curves of her bosom. I breathe easier knowing that going the max again after I join their family troubles her too. Big Dad fidgets, at a loss for words. Husband Two eyes the hairy crab, no doubt wishing for a lazy Susan rather than the intimacy of this smaller table.

“Every unit has its quirks, so let’s not waste more time discussing our bad habits.” Husband One promises that Hero will satisfy all our questions later. I am glad that it is not his inclination to keep pushing his views. “Today, I am most interested in getting to know Wei-guo. To see if a rapport exists.”

May-ling’s gaze snaps up. She stops dabbing at her cleavage.

We find each other and grin.

Husband One stops short of the restaurant’s door and pulls the hood of May-ling’s gray coat over her head. He cinches the hood’s drawstrings, and May-ling’s shoulder-length hair sprouts

like cat whiskers around her chin.

She smiles and stops him. “Let me.” She loosens and throws back the hood, and I am heartened to see how graciously she handles her controlling husband and stands up for herself. We six men surround and

wall her off, giving her some private space. She flips her hair off her shoulders. It catches the light in an undulating shimmer, gorgeous as a bolt of watered silk, and it's all I can do not to stare.

When I next look up, I am not surprised to find Husband One glaring as if I've violated her. He steps between us and pulls the hood over May-ling again before she finishes tucking away her hair. She takes hold of the strings this time and leaves them loose. "We are so honored to meet you today." She bows to Big Dad and then Dad, thanking them for an elaborate and delicious meal and for the pretty box of moon cakes. Husband One has little

choice but to stop fussing at her and do the same.

She turns to me next and squeezes my hand warmly. She closes my fingers before letting go, and a jolt of electricity shoots through me when I feel the sharp edges of a note. Despite the crowd around us, we've managed to reach each other. We've managed to establish a connection without speaking a single word. I barely have time to tuck the paper in my pocket before Husband One shoehorns himself between us and appropriates my hand.

After we say our good-byes, Husband One takes May-ling by the elbow and urges his counterpart to do the same. Flanked by her two tall sentries—one rail thin and the other hulking—she seems both their prize and prisoner. Outside, an expanse of blue windbreakers—a twentysomething martial arts club tour group from Guangzhou—blocks the flow of pedestrians. There seem to be more eligible bachelors every time I turn around. I locate lines of families with a wife or daughter sandwiched in between and fail to find another woman as covered up, as circumscribed. Overcome with an urge to run over and break May-ling free, I calm myself with a peek at her note. She has given me her contact information. "They act as if we picked a restaurant in a seedy neighborhood,"

Big Dad says, no doubt reeling from the size of the check. "It's downright insulting."

"They are a very proper and very loving family." Hero links arms with Big Dad, and we head in the direction of my Strategic Games Safety Council meeting. (The government overseer of the council called an emergency session just this morning to discuss the six recent deaths.) Hero asks me what I think of May-ling.

"I like her," I say, my heart still soaring from the touch of her hand. "She's charming."

"I can walk fine." Leaning hard on his cane, Big Dad clops away rudely, surely trying to lose Hero's hold of his elbow. I'm certain my forthcoming reply also irritates him.

"You aren't going to deprive me of the chance to show my respect," Hero says in a flirtatious lilt, "to be of service?"

Big Dad has nothing against the Willfully Sterile, but his dignity will not abide an affected man hanging off his arm in public, even if the man is wearing a cream business suit. I have no doubt Hero, secure in his identity and his booming career, loves little more than to mess with a guy like Big Dad.

I support Dad's elbow and help him keep up, his clicking knee reminding me that his every step hurts. As much as I long to get married, I worry how my two aging fathers will get by without my daily presence.

After some jerky steps, people near Big Dad and Hero turn and stare, and Big Dad allows us to catch up. We continue four abreast down the wide, tree-lined street.

Hero sighs. "Isn't our city gorgeous?"

Backlit by the sun, ginkgo trees as far as the eyes can see reach from opposite sides of the sidewalk, their canopies bathing us in a golden glow. Neither of my dad's comments, so I heartily agree with Hero.

Predictably, Dad adds, "It sure is crowded."

The whole of Beijing seems to be here jostling against us, trying to enjoy this beautiful sight, and I'm relieved when he doesn't say more. Stately, eight- and ten-lane boulevards crisscross our city, and we rarely walk down one without one of my dad's pointing out that countless properties were seized and lives disrupted and, in the most egregious cases, cut short to make possible their construction. Relegated to tiny, stacked boxes, ordinary citizens pour into parks and scenic streets, thirsting for open air and elbowroom, so that our leaders could have their show of grandeur.

Big Dad says, "We are worried Wu May-ling may be barren." Hero points out that she has a child. "I guarantee she's fertile." I say, "If anyone can't have kids, it's Husband One."

Dad pats my hand on his elbow and stresses patience. "This is our very first match."

Big Dad adds, "There are more pretty girls than one."

Hero chortles, unable to keep a straight face at the ridiculousness of Big Dad's assertion. Intensely competitive, Big Dad cannot even acknowledge the scarcity of brides.

Hero cranes his head around Dad and catches my eye. "You should know you're Wu May-ling's first match as well. She just came on the market. She picked you out of about five thousand in my office."

My heart does a little jig. Big Dad snorts. A young man pushes between Dad and Hero, no doubt irritated by our creaky pace, and Hero links arms with Dad to shore up our line.

"I didn't want to color your judgment with talk of money. This is, after all, a marriage. A lifetime commitment." He reveals that they're asking a hundred thousand less than the basic dowry price. "I found you an amazing deal. The best one around."

"A good deal is the farthest thing from our minds." Big Dad is touchy on the subject of money. A man who loves tax savings more than his manhood is the public's favorite stereotype of the Advanced male. "What's the catch?"

"They want an honest man. Somebody they all like." Hero explains that the threesome is going the max because they have their sights on a three-bedroom apartment. "I'm not supposed to tell you that Wei-guo's name will be on the property title."

"It should be on the title," Big Dad says. "What's the catch?" "Have I mentioned that the two husbands are brothers?"

"Is this a joke?" Dad says, breathing hard. "Wei-guo will be forever outvoted. What century do they think they're living in anyway? Brothers sharing a wife!"

Those brothers seemed an equal and opposite reaction to each other. I didn't sense much rapport and wonder if Dad's concern would really matter.

Dad stops walking and stares at the matchmaker. "That second husband is kind of an interesting fellow."

Big Dad adds, "He's a Lost Boy, isn't he?"

"Please," Hero says with a lowered voice. He glances around. "We mustn't make these accusations lightly. He's a top-earning programmer."

Hero is right to preach caution. Males with severe autistic, oppositional, or attention difficulties could be neutered and institutionalized, and a rumor is all it takes to start a messy investigation. My dads continue to stare him down, one from each side, and he releases their elbows. Some busybody tells us that non-moving pedestrians must stand to the side.

Hero clears his throat. "You already know about the maternal surname. Also, they want me to stress that they are a true family, that the children belong to all the fathers."

"Of course," Dad says. "We believe the very same."

"Let him finish," Big Dad tells Dad. We tighten our circle around Hero.

"They don't assign nights. May-ling decides who gets bedroom time."

A smile takes over my face. I can already see her choosing me over the two grandpas.

"That's outrageous," Big Dad says. MaMa kept a strict bedroom schedule, as do most Advanced families. She used to spend every other week with each of my dads, but they eventually talked her into alternating nights. My dads argued that too much closeness was lost over seven days.

Hero places one hand over the other and lowers his head. "They believe in fairness, in equality of all members. As the most junior spouse, Wei-guo will undoubtedly benefit from such thoughtfulness."

"How do we know for sure then if a child is ours?" Dad asks. Hero says, "They are all yours."

Big Dad grimaces. Dad's eyebrows are almost at his hairline.

"I understand your concern." Hero promises to pursue the matter with May-ling's husbands.

"This is not a marriage," Big Dad says when the matchmaker finishes.

On the contrary, I want to say, it's better. I welcome this chance to win with my wits, my looks, my sperm. I suspect I don't want the tedium of scheduled sex for the rest of my life.

Hero says, "I know those folks, and I wouldn't propose them to you if I didn't think Wei-guo has a very good chance at becoming May-ling's favorite."

"That's too much pressure," Dad replies. "Marriage should be a sanctuary, not a popularity contest."

Hero bows daintily. "You are right, of course. I wanted you to have a shot at May-ling. She'll be snapped up by next week—" He waves, his hand a butterfly in flight. Not only will he continue to aggressively market me, he says he will re-feature me as the bachelor of the day.

Big Dad shakes his head in disgust. Finally, he asks if there's anything else we should know.



Hero says, “Just the usual.” My STD panels, genetic disease profile, tax, bank, and asset statements should all be up-to-date. “And they also want an intelligence test. If you are truly interested.”

A terrible scowl takes over Big Dad’s face. My mediocre intellect has long been a sore spot for him. “We will let you know.” He says good-bye to Hero, dismissing him unceremoniously.

“Absolutely not,” Big Dad says, with Hero barely out of ear-shot. He jabs a finger in my direction. “You will not be falling for that minx or that”—I wipe his wayward spit from my nose—“that peddler of used goods.”

I say nothing. Big Dad hates it when I argue, hates it even more when I refuse to engage. He has been telling me how to act and what to think for four decades. I’ve always tried to please him. I’ve been a filial son.

But he will not bully me from this rare opportunity at finding a wife.

I deposit my fathers at a teahouse, where they will wait while I attend my meeting. Saturdays are precious errand days for us. My fathers prefer to handpick their fruit, longevity snacks, and personal items, but public transportation is no longer safe for them. Our crowded buses and subways are the number one source of concussions and broken hips for elderly men who garner little consideration in a society overrun with men. There’s a horrible joke out there: the easiest way to snuff out your father-in-law—put him on a bus.

I jog the rest of the way to the Ministry of National Defense, where the offices of Strategic Games occupy a portion of the bottommost basement floor. The game we play has more in common with laser tag than actual war. We shoot out of our uniform sleeves, handle no weapons, and receive no combat training. Yet the government classifies us as potential Enemies of the State. It insists that we be overseen by actual military men, midranking ones no less. It subsidizes a portion of our program, but it also caps us at fifty thousand participants, even though many more would like to play.

As I approach the fountain, our favored gathering spot, I count nine Safety Council members huddled around it. We like the high shooting water jets and their ability to muffle potential voice recordings. I am the last to arrive.

I say hello to everyone and clap the backs of the guys next to me. “What have we heard?” It is not the policy of the People’s Armed Police to divulge names or the circumstances of the crime before the conclusion of its investigation, but there is always the possibility of rumor.

Little Sung, our youngest and most vocal member, leans in and quietly tells me that a friend of a friend knows one of the dead. “He said the man worked for the Commerce Department, that he had stepped on some high-ranking toes there.” With his fist, he stamps a spot just below his heart. “And his body had a purplish black circle here.”

“He was branded?” I ask.

Someone adds, “I heard more than once that this was about a woman, that the six fought and killed each other over her.”

We are quickly inundated with gossip accusing the six men of blackmailing their boss about an affair, of being tax cheats culled in a government conspiracy, of trying to stage a protest over the immigration cap for foreign brides. . . .

Doc, our silver-haired council chair, shushes us. He points at Little Sung. "I want you to bring up the purple circle and the work- place run-in at our meeting. Can we name your source?" A physi- cian whose dedication to Strategic Games kept him involved even after he married and lost the right to play, Doc is much loved and respected among us.

Little Sung says, "My buddy doesn't want to be mixed up in this. And the victim's family is understandably wary."

"All right," Doc says. "Do your best." He glances at his watch and says it's ten past our meeting time. "We've waited long enough."

We line up to enter the building, its cavernous lobby deserted on a Saturday. One by one, we place our right palms on the Safety- Check and name our meeting room. Doc surrenders his watch to the SafetyScan to be "debugged." Most of us know better than to bring our info rings, message pens, and pocket geniuses here, but Doc, our leader, is required to model transparency.

I pass under the SafetyGate and pause for a second as my body is swept for prohibited items. The bell dings when Little Sung enters, and he freezes for a count of ten while his implanted chips are temporarily deactivated. I've never understood why anyone would offer up his privacy for the convenience of not carrying identification and monies, for home and office doors that automatically swing open, or for a hospital to know his every change in mood, but Little Sung swears by it.

We wait for him.

The relentless expanse of red in the carpet, ceiling, and walls bears down on us as we cross the foyer in the direction of the stair- well. Little Sung breaks away toward the bank of elevators and presses his hand on another SafetyCheck. Neither our status nor our business here merits elevator rides, but he is resentful of our treatment and hard-headed. His best buddy on the council laughs and follows. The sensor soon beeps, and "access denied" is broad- casted in a polite female voice in surround sound. Doc and I share a look, shaking our heads. As we descend the dim, cinder-block stairwell, someone parrots the voice, and "access denied" in falsetto echoes along with our footsteps. Guffaws break out behind me, and I can just imagine the lewd, accompanying gestures. Finally, Doc reminds us that six men are dead and tells everyone to shut up. They do.

Our entrance into our small meeting room clicks on the harsh institutional lights as well as the red recording signal on the three cameras. Like schoolboys, the ten of us sidle into the three rows of plastic chairs with L-shaped desktops.

I check the time. We are sixteen minutes late. Major Jung, our pompous, government-appointed overseer, hates it when we are late. We hate that our Safety Council possesses only the right to recommend policy, that decision-making authority lies with Major Jung and his superiors—outsiders who care only to keep Strategic Games under their thumbs.

Lately, Major Jung has taken to spying on us with the cameras. He no longer arrives first, and we very much look forward to his lectures on tardiness when he is himself tardy. Today, seven minutes after us—we are all silently counting the minutes—he enters, his presence dark and hulking in military uniform, his sharp beak of a nose and beady eyes as menacing as a hawk on a hunt. Not bothering to remove his flattopped cap, he lets us know just what he thinks of us.

We do not bother to rise and salute him; we are civilians. Many of the guys intentionally slump and sprawl out, their limbs limp jellyfish tentacles. We only dare attempt these pathetic forms of disrespect.

The major clears his throat. "What I am about to share with you will not be made public."

His failure to reprimand surprises me.

He continues, his gaze fixed on the back wall, "What I'm about to share is morally corrupting and soul-damaging, but it is my duty to inform you. It is your duty, your responsibility as members of this council, to know. To carry this burden. It is our combined duty to make certain that the participants of Strategic Games and the public are never again harmed in this way."

The major says that the People's Armed Police apprehended the killer this morning, a mentally imbalanced seventeen-year-old male who had tried his misguided best to defend the honor of his fourteen-year-old sister. The six killed had been harassing her with graphic photographs and disturbing messages detailing the many ways they were going to violate her.

Suspicion washes over me. His story matches none of the street talk.

"Her family, which also happens to be the killer's family, is also a victim, one that is scared, ashamed, and sorry. We will not incite or pollute the public's sensibility or further the pain of our many, many victims by broadcasting the specifics of this sad and filthy case." He crosses his arms as if there is nothing more we need know.

I will never understand why the government finds it necessary to shield us from such occurrences. It's ridiculous to think that hearing about a rape or murder makes us want to do the same.

"How were the men killed?" Doc says.

Major Jung clasps his hands behind his back, puffs out his gold tasseled and beribboned chest, and frowns. Doc did not raise his hand or stand as required by Jung and his "parliamentary" procedures.

"Oh. Sorry," Doc says with feigned sincerity. He sticks two fingers in the air and waits to be called upon before rising to his feet to ask again how the six men were killed.

"With a baseball bat. An aluminum alloy, to be exact. Again, that is privileged information." The major slaps some papers onto Doc's desk. "Pass this around. This will explain everything."

Still standing, Doc ignores the police report that we all know will be even less enlightening than the major. "What do the eye-witnesses say?"

"There are none." The major states that the killer lured his victims into a silo and clubbed them to death there.

"Six men were not able to overcome one seventeen-year-old kid," Doc deadpans.

“Do you have a question?” Our major abhors any hints at sarcasm.

Doc apologizes again. None of us can appear to intentionally offend. “Why were six men not able to overcome one?”

“Because they were lured to the silo one at a time.” “Why—”

“You’ve asked your three questions,” the major says. “Let some- one else have a turn.”

Little Sung’s hand shoots up. Doc sits down, but still does not pass the papers. The major glances around the room, surely want- ing someone else to speak. Finally, he calls on Little Sung.

Little Sung rises. “A purple burn mark was found on the torso of every one of the dead men. Can you tell us about that?”

The major pulls back his chin and frowns. “Who is the source of this nonsense?”

Little Sung continues, “The dead men discovered last week that one of their superiors at the Commerce Department was hav- ing an affair.” He employs our usual tactics—exaggerations that point the finger away from our sources and buried nuggets of truth to indicate that we are scrutinizing the investigation.

“Who is spreading these lies?” the major roars. “A friend of a friend heard—”

“We do not deal in gossip.”

“The father of one of the dead,” Little Sung says. “Which one?”

Little Sung shakes his head. “I do not know.”

“You do not know or will not say?” The major’s voice booms. Little Sung shakes his head again.

He approaches Little Sung to tower over him. “Claims without named sources cannot be investigated. It is your official duty as a member of this council to divulge the source of this information.”

Little Sung stares straight ahead. “I do not know.”

Major Jung snarls in disgust. “It is also your duty as a member of this council not to advance gossip.” He studies his documents, f lipping through page after page of some report, making a show of diligence and fairness. “The medical examiner has noted no burn marks on any of the victims. Your claim cannot be true.”

“You are right, of course.” Doc raises his hand.

Major Jung looks at him, but does not note that he has spoken out of turn again.

Doc stands. “But this is what’s circulating on the street. Unfortunately, this is what the public believes. As you are aware, I am a physician, and I would be happy to reexamine the bodies and put rumors to rest. At no charge, of course.”

The major says, “The families will never allow the bodies of their loved ones to be violated a third time.

“Sit down,” he says to Little Sung and Doc. “Our business is the safety of all the participants of Strategic Games. And this incident confirms that we do not have sufficient measures in place to help the mentally ill.

“The rate of detrimental mental illness among males eighteen to fifty is four point nine percent. The head of each team—the ‘general’—the major’s tone turns sarcastic uttering the word— “knows their players best.” He looks at Doc. “You will communicate to the ‘generals’ that they will submit to this council in one month’s time the names of four point nine percent of their team— five men each—most in need of psychological help. These candidates will be evaluated and offered counseling if needed.”

Doc jumps to his feet. “Please, that’s—”

“That will be all for today.” His papers already gathered, the major turns his back on us and swaggers out.

I slump back in my desk, my stomach a twinging knot. Putting anyone on a mental-health watch list would be the first step in sending him away.

I punch in May-ling’s contact information. Dots of color scintillate on the screen and coalesce into her striking face.

“I was hoping you’d call.” Her smile is warm, her gaze direct and genuine. I feel again our connection. I am reminded how long I’ve felt alone and adrift.

I dim the lights a bit before activating my camera, thrilled that she has opted for a face-to-face. “I loved meeting you yesterday,” I whisper.

“I loved meeting you as well,” she whispers back. “I’d love to show you my studio tomorrow.” “Really?” Her smile brings out deep dimples.

“I’ll pick you up at eleven.” If she does not bring up their dating rules, I’ll know we have something.

“I can be at your studio at eleven.”

“Do you own a car?” It would be proper for her to come alone if she is locked inside the safety of a car.

“Don’t you worry.”

“All right then,” I say. “I won’t worry.”

Unable to think of a way to keep her on the line, I let her go, but lunge for the button to capture her image. On my screen, she is a whirl of creamy skin and flying hair. I save it to my desktop, so I can return again and again to this feeling of hope and of belonging.

I go beyond my usual vacuuming and trash-emptying routines to eradicate the kind of grime my mother would have noticed. Between clients, I wipe down, disinfect, and reorganize all the free weights. I dust and shine every machine, every exercise ball, every jump rope and flexibility strap. I stay late wiping the fingerprints and streaks off the mirror walls. I go through an entire roll of tape ridding the dark floor mats of lint.

I reassess my Wall of Fame and move the Happy Alumni section, the wedding and baby photos of clients who completed their exercise requirement here, more front and center. I want May-ling to see how I value the hope of family, how I encourage my clients to stay optimistic. I edit, rearrange, and square up the announcements— the promotions, birthdays, and newsworthy items. I pride myself on maintaining longtime clients. They are my second family. Finally,

I put the beefcake pictures of the men who've set studio records in squat, bench press, and deadlift well below eye level. There is no need to focus her attention on my competition.

At home, I study the advice on matchmaking sites. Bathe. Arrive on time. Be a gentleman. Compliment. I find the tips elementary until this: Learn to dance. If your woman is out on the floor with someone else, you might as well not exist. I imagine Husband One and Two left in the dust while May-ling and I shimmy, twist, and twirl together, communicating with our bodies our horizontal desires. I spend the rest of the evening studying up on salsa and merengue, listening to, downloading, and organizing Latin beats. The music of a fourteen-piece orchestra will infuse my studio with sexy, hip-shaking rhythm when May-ling arrives. Casually clad in a form-fitting black tee and my shortest shorts, I will give her a tour of my facility. I will assess her flexibility, her muscular strength and endurance, her cardiovascular capacity, her body composition. I will coach her through the use of my equipment. I imagine that my wit, my charm, my virility will be everything her husbands are not.

Our last stop will be my basketball court/movement studio. A catered Cuban lunch will await us there, as well as mojitos that I will personally mix. I will tell May-ling that it is her turn to coach me. Though I've studied the steps online, I will play the uncertain, but ultimately brilliant, student.

Murmuring apologies, May-ling stumbles into my studio a half hour late, a sleeping toddler on one shoulder and a gigantic

bag hanging off the other. Her hair is up in a messy ponytail, loose pieces everywhere. Whitish curds mottle the shoulder of her red shirt. Sweat rings her armpits.

This is not the date we agreed upon.

She groans when I relieve her of her bag and whispers that she walked all the way here. BeiBei was up all night teething. He is a light sleeper, and getting into a vehicle would have interrupted his much-needed nap.

I cannot help noticing the echo of Husband Two in the child's extraordinarily big head. "You walked here alone?"

"Not alone," she said. "I had my little man."

"Surely your husbands do not allow you out unescorted?" Stories of women abducted and sold on the black market appear all the time in the news. Mao's Mausoleum has become a sanctuary for a number of such disgraced and discarded wives. May-ling's flash of offense makes me back off.

"I need to wash my hands. Would you mind holding him?" She transfers her baby onto my shoulder. "I'll be fast."

The boy starts whimpering that very second and arches off me toward his mother. She croons and kisses his cheek. He wraps his arms around her neck and pulls her breasts into my elbow. I freeze. She tells me it always takes him a minute to wake up.

Shushing her boy, May-ling circles us with her arms, puts her cheeks to his, and rocks. Soon, both their heads are on my shoulder. I'm coaxed into swaying with them. Their warmth melts into me, and this sustained, whole-body consciousness of another is not something I know. I touch my head to May-ling's, BeiBei a ball of heat between us. I place a tentative hand on her back and sway like they are my loving wife and child. May-ling is a whisper of sweet almond, of sweat and soured milk. My neck is sticky with BeiBei's perspiration, but lulled and slightly euphoric, I hold on tight.

May-ling cups BeiBei's head with a hand. "Say hi."

He arches back to regard me and sticks his fingers in my mouth. Kissing him again, she tells BeiBei that MaMa is going to the toilet. Smiling, she peels herself away and waves. "Be right back."

BeiBei's mouth turns down and quivers. His eyes pool. I too feel a measure of loss.

"It's all right," I bounce and tell him again and again. "MaMa will be right ba-a-a-ck."

He is small yet substantial, a ball of nonstop movement and distress. His baby hands bang on my mouth as he howls ba-ba. It sounds like he's calling me daddy. I move my head like a New Year's dancing lion to make myself a more difficult target.

Nothing comforts him. He nearly pokes my eye out, and I chomp down on his fingers the next time his hand comes near. I flush when May-ling returns and finds my teeth around her son's hand and him alternately wailing and calling me daddy.

"He likes you." She cuddles her child. "He calls everyone he likes BaBa."

BeiBei mouths his fingers and pouts at me from his motherly perch. When he mumbles ba-ba again in between the sucking, May-ling grins at me, delighted.

Back in my main studio, BeiBei shrieks and covers his ears. His sneakered feet pommel his mother's stomach.

Cooing all the while, May-ling faces him away from her and apologizes to me again. "I think it's the music."

He doesn't like music? It's not even loud. "I think the beat agitates him."

There goes all my planning. What can I do but be a gentleman and turn off the merengue? I cross my arms and stand a distance away. I thought we had something, a special connection—the hots for each other even. I thought the two of us were in cahoots, securing a date without going through the proper channels. It turns out she's the one who's pulled a fast one on me. May-ling has

apologized repeatedly, but not once has she said sorry for bringing BeiBei.

He nearly falls out of her arms lunging for the ground. His squat legs motor toward the stability balls. He crashes into the largest one, knocking it off the rack. The thing is bigger than he is. “You found a purple ball!” May-ling claps as if he’s managed the impossible. She asks if it’s all right for him to play with it.

Before I can answer, BeiBei pushes another off its perch. May-ling stops it from rolling away and asks what the balls are for.

“I’ll show you.” I set one behind me, rest a foot on it, and put my hands on the ground. There is an extremely difficult maneuver—the ball pike—that I planned on executing for her. Toes balanced on the ball, my torso behind up in the air, every muscle taut—it is a dazzling display of strength and agility.

I hear another ball thump to the floor, and May-ling stops watching me in order to corral it. She bounces the thing. “Let’s play.” BeiBei is too young to listen. He goes for a kettle bell next.

When it refuses to budge, he pulls with two hands and makes as if to sit down. My heart skips a beat as I tumble off my ball and lunge for the sixteen-kilo weight.

BeiBei pushes away my hand and renews his bawling. He tries again to dislodge the kettle bell, and I brace his back so he does not pull the weight on top of himself. On the rack, there are a half a dozen more kettle bells with which he could off himself. I lift and fly him through the air like an airplane. I even make whooshing noises.

May-ling beams at us and spreads her arms to zoom alongside. “Isn’t this fun?”

Eyes still wet, BeiBei looks alarmed, but game. It’s clear his ancient dads do not do this with him. We careen around the room, and he tries to grab the lat pull-down bar. I allow him to bat it and hop back every time the bar swings at his face.

“You’re good with kids,” May-ling says.

Good at not allowing them to maim themselves on my turf. I wonder if all this is a test. I wonder too if I like her enough to go through the trouble of passing.

Finally, I say, “Why did you give me the note?”

That good-humored glint is back in her eyes. She cants a shoulder. “I liked you.”

BeiBei twists toward the ground, and I ease him down. He approaches a stack of weights, pushes his finger into their pin slots. I kneel next to him, pick up the chained pin, and show him how to slide it in.

I look up at May-ling. “You make up your mind awfully fast.” “I’m a good judge of people.”

I arch an eyebrow, not sure whether to be flattered or alarmed. “Really. I get this feeling, this ticklish happiness in the pit of my stomach. It’s excitement and also calm, like everything is the way it’s supposed to be. It’s like how I feel around my childhood dog. My favorite people all make me feel like this right away.” “I tickle you. Like a dog.”

She bugs her eyes out at me. “I’m seldom wrong.” She is serious. “There’s something between us. Tell me you don’t feel it.”

I feel lust is what I feel. I pull the pin out of BeiBei’s mouth. “What do you see in me?”



She considers my question. "A kindred loneliness. A loyal heart." Her eyes zero in on me. "A brave, but false front."

I frown. "Does your second husband tickle you as well?" Her smile is tight. "He's really smart. A genius."

Yeah, a clueless genius. "Why'd you marry him?"

She is quiet for a second. "I don't regret it." She strokes the downy swirl atop her son's head.

I pause as well, trying to process her seeming honesty. "And Husband One?"

She tsks good-naturedly at the name. "He's a tickler." I do not like her answer one bit.

The floor of my studio is littered with elastic bands, foam blocks, Ping-Pong balls, paper cups. Tired of luring BeiBei away from one dangerous situation after another, I sit him on my shoulder and usher May-ling into my movement studio. Maybe the boy can entertain himself with the mirrors.

"What's this?" May-ling approaches the table in the corner crowded end-to-end with beef empanadas, shrimp croquettes, pork cubanos, and rum cake.

"I was hoping that you'd teach me to merengue. Hence the music that we shut off. And this lunch is supposed to complement the Latin dancing." I rest my head ruefully on BeiBei's thigh. She should know what she's missing.

"You did all this for us?"

For you, you dumb egg, I want to say.

She approaches and tugs on BeiBei's foot. "Look. Yummy." From my outer studio, a man calls out BeiBei's name.

"BaBa is here!" May-ling exclaims to her son. She scampers to the door.

Husband One comes floating in with a tray of meat buns. He hands the food to May-ling, stretches out his arms, and BeiBei kicks off my shoulder, leaping for a hug. That this old goat commands such affection from this child, a child who is most likely not his biologically, makes me see red. That he comes to my gym in yet another impeccable suit irks me further. I am a naked midget next to him.

He notices my spread in the corner. "We think alike." He shakes my hand. "It's good you called. It's best we get to know each other without intermediaries."

So, he's a cheapskate and a sneaky one at that. "Our match-maker is a longtime client of mine." He is no such thing, but I want to see Husband One's reaction. I have no intention of stiffing anyone.

"We like him too." This guy is smooth.

May-ling tells Husband One that I want them to teach me to dance. "He has music, and the Cuban food completes the theme." Husband One's eyes light up with an enthusiasm uncharacteristic of the man I met at lunch. "We haven't danced in such a long time." Asking me to turn on the music, he hands BeiBei to May-ling and sheds his blazer. How is it possible for a shirt to stay so crisp under a jacket? "BeiBei hates music," I say.

“No such thing.” He glides toward May-ling, a panther on the prowl.

I could have let it go, but I make him take off his shoes. “Of course,” he says. “We mustn’t scuff up your floor.”

They sandwich BeiBei and begin to shimmy. They look practiced. Sleek. Like they belong together.

Feeling like a dunce, I crank the music, pounding it out louder than my ears can stand. Four fingers in his mouth, BeiBei drools between them, unperturbed. Happy even. They sway, dipping him side to side. Like the matchmaking site says, I might as well not exist.

Husband One spins May-ling out, pauses, and turns to me. “Come. Join us.”

“I’m not much of a dancer,” I say. That was the line that I rehearsed last night—the line I was going to utter with great humility and then prove wrong—but the words could not be more true. “I should go see if, uh,” I stall, unable to recall his name, “your other husband is lost outside.”

May-ling tells me he’s at work and drags me by both hands to the center of the floor. Still holding on, she smiles into my eyes and shows me how to take side steps, to lead with my rib cage and then hips. Husband One circles us with BeiBei, modeling the move. She tells me I’m doing the merengue and repositions my right hand on her side just below her breast and straightens my left arm. My face is hot, my hands shaky, my armpits gushing. She encourages me to feel the music, to let the orchestra live inside me. Just as I get the hang of it, Husband One butts in. May-ling wraps an arm around him, BeiBei on his shoulder between them. She drapes her other on me. Husband One does the same. Together, they smile at me.

“Okay. Let’s go left first,” he says. “Count of ten.”

Their steps sweep me sideways. Husband One keeps count and encourages me to hold on to them. There is nowhere to put my hand except around his waist. Lest I be thought uncooperative, or worse—slow—I back up as much as possible and complete the stifling circle. My face is on fire, my limbs granite. I hardly know how to move, where to look.

“Close your eyes,” May-ling says.

I could not be more grateful to shut them out. “Rib cage, then hips,” Husband One chants.

I block out his feline grace, loosen my shoulders, and try to feel the music again. I concentrate on my ribs and my hips, the rhythmic step and drag of my feet. I bump into Husband One as our circle changes direction. He steadies me.

“You move like an athlete,” he says.

I suspect he’s making fun of me, but the corners of his eyes crinkle with warmth.

“I’m so glad you want to dance,” he continues. “I’ve forgotten the joy dancing brings. This togetherness, this intimacy, this common direction, and built-in safety net—all this is very much what I envision for our family.”

His rhapsodizing reminds me of the little tidbit I learned last night to impress May-ling: merengue originated in cane fields among slaves who danced, dragging one foot, because they were ankle-chained.

I ask if he likes athletes. "Physical types?"

"Very much so. Athletes know discipline and hard work. They've learned to play fair."

I suspect that a dense workhorse is what he wants.

He pauses and catches my eye this time before leaning and easing me in the opposite direction. I can't deny that I feel welcomed, that he has extended his hand to me time and again. I wonder if my cynicism is the false front May-ling mentioned. I flash to my fathers practicing qigong together at dawn, challenging each other to wéiqí every night. To their decade of steady companionship since MaMa died.

BeiBei reaches for the floor.

"You want to dance too?" Husband One trills to the little guy and puts him down.

BeiBei runs over and wraps himself around my thigh.

"You like Uncle Wei-guo," Husband One says, both amused and a little taken aback. He offers a hand to his son. "Hold mine too?"

BeiBei tightens his grasp of my leg, and I am touched that our earlier play meant something to the little guy.

I take one of his hands and point to his father. "How about you hold hands with both of us?"

Together, we show him how to step one foot and drag the other. BeiBei wiggles his butt in imitation. He squeals as we count aloud and lean into each other ten times to the right, ten times to the left. Quickly bored by the subtleties of merengue, BeiBei's short legs churn. He leads the circle, pushing up against his father. Our steps hurry into a shuffle, and soon, we too give up on the dance. May-ling catches my gaze as we gallop faster and faster, round and round. My neck and shoulders loosen. The orchestra drums and pounds inside me. In the mirrors around us, we are a whirl of red, white, and black, of big smiles and open faces. BeiBei's laughter rings and fills my studio, and at a deeper register, I hear myself join in.