

'John le Carré filtered through Tom Wolfe.' – *The Millions*

KATHY WANG

Author of *Family Trust*

**IMPOSTOR
SYNDROME**

A NOVEL

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BOOKS

LEO

Whenever Leo Guskov met a person of interest, he liked to ask about his or her parents. If the response was cagey, he made note, and if he thought he'd go further, then he was careful to ensure the subject's family-history paperwork was complete. Though it wasn't that Leo believed you needed good parents to be productive. In fact, in his line of work, bad parents were often an advance indicator of success. An early acquaintanceship with adversity, of conquering that high mountain of disappointment and dread; the desire to serve, to be loyal and exceed expectations, if only to garner the approval earlier denied.

Where he sat now, inside a university auditorium by the Moskva River, Leo was surrounded by mothers and fathers (likely most good, some bad). He slouched and let wash over him the flotsam of idle complaint that comprised the background of Moscow life: a two-hour delay on the MKAD; expensive cucumbers at the grocer; a callous dermatologist at the state clinic, who'd refused to stay late and do a body check—*there was alcohol on his breath and he said he had to bring home dinner. Just because his wife cannot keep house, so I have to die . . . ?*

Years earlier Leo had stood onstage in a similar auditorium, his mother in a back row, clutching tulips. A week later he'd arrived for his first day of work, at a twenty-story concrete skyscraper in the Moscow city line. Inside the lobby, a brass plaque with initials: SPB. State Protection Bureau. The best of Russia's three intelligence agencies.

Now the weather outside was warm, which meant the auditorium was near stifling. Peter Stepanov, Leo's colleague from Directorate Eight, fidgeted to his right. Peter was tall and thin, and in the slim seat he was reminiscent of a pocket tool knife, his scissory arms and corkscrew legs all neatly confined in the space. "How about that one?" Peter asked, subtly pointing, though Leo already knew to whom he gestured. The blonde in front, with hair down to her waist.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I need more than just a pretty face."

"You think I'm only scanning for the faces?" Peter looked insulted. "Look at her colors." Meaning the blue-and-yellow sash over her shoulder. Leo's own was in a box, on a high shelf in his closet.

"I don't need a top graduate."

"Oh, so a simpleminded one." Peter leaned forward. "Then the possibilities widen. Over there, the redhead on the right. Better looking than the blonde, and even under that loose gown, you can still tell she has a substantial rack."

Leo had seen the redhead when they first entered, noting her for the same reasons as Peter, though he didn't say this. Last Friday, as he'd prepared to leave work, he'd been cajoled by Peter into a "quick stop" at a fashionable hotel bar; there Leo had nursed the cheapest drink, a bottle of Georgian mineral water, while Peter trawled awkwardly for haughty women. Leo had returned home after midnight, somehow still having gotten drunk, only to find his girlfriend, Vera Rustamova, waiting in the kitchen. Vera was a correspondent for

Russia Central Media, or RCM, the state-owned news group. She had a newscaster's voice, low and rounded, which she could adjust to the precise desired pitch of disapproval. "No, not her."

"What, not beautiful enough? If you want something more, I don't know if the computer science department is where we hunt."

"I don't need beautiful. Don't want it, in fact."

Peter thought about this. "So you want dumb and bad-looking, is that it? I don't know what you're working at, but the next time you take me on one of your scouting trips . . ."

Leo didn't hear the rest. He'd asked Peter along only to be sociable, to share an excuse to leave the office—Leo had little pressure to recruit, as he'd had a good run this year, had already advanced multiple assets. One, a Bashkir, was still in training, while the other two, a pair of siblings, were active: the brother, a trained chef, now worked in London at a hotel frequented by Saudi royals, while the sister was engaged to a corporate lawyer in St. Louis. Leo had awoken this morning with a bad headache and had nearly elected not to come.

But now he was glad he'd made the effort. Back of the stage: fourth row, on the left. Limp auburn hair, pale skin, which, combined with small, sharp dark eyes, gave her a look of feral alertness. How long had it been? Nine years? Ten? And yet he knew her.

Julia. From the institute.

THEY CALLED THEM INSTITUTES BUT what they really were was orphanages, landing zones for unwanted children. Large low-slung buildings with rusted fixtures and faded carpets; visible on the floors were the paths worn by heavy boots and wheelchairs, their adolescent owners wielding the machines like skaters on ice. The institutes were mostly located in larger towns, occasionally on the outskirts of big cities. It was on a trip to one of these that Leo first saw Julia.

He'd been in search of a boy. An older one, which was difficult,

because if robust, boys were usually adopted young. The task was both delicate and important, involving the Canadian ambassador and his wife. They were religious people, the wife in particular, who'd made known her wishes to adopt before they permanently returned to Ottawa: to answer God's call and grant some unwanted soul another chance.

But also, you know, they really wanted a boy.

So Leo was sent to seek an acceptable candidate. A child old enough, clever enough to be groomed.

The children were gathered by this institute's director, a brittle matron of unverifiable age named Maria, into lines in the community room. Leo asked Maria to instruct each to introduce themselves, and to repeat a sentence from a favorite book.

One by one they spoke. *Hello, sir, my name is . . .*

Raisa.

Julia.

Svetlana.

Misha.

My favorite book is the Bible, and here is the part that has meant so much to me, blah blah blah.

By the ninth introduction, Leo's focus began to drift. He kept his face attentive, maintained eye contact, and when the one he'd earlier identified as most promising moved forward, the boy with straw-colored hair who came up to Leo's chest, he returned to full attention.

"My name is Pavel," the boy began. "My favorite book is the one with the man in blue who has muscles and can fly." Pavel closed his eyes, as if summoning the image. "I don't remember any of the words."

Leo knew the man to whom Pavel referred. A Western fabrication, with Western values.

Bye-bye, Pavel. Have a nice life.

As Leo prepared to depart, he felt a tap and turned to find a girl. She was short, with long thin eyelashes that drooped toward sloped cheeks and an even flatter nose; her eyebrows, which were fat and unruly, lent a somewhat deranged note to her appearance. "You could take me."

"I was looking for something else today," Leo said, inwardly grimacing as he realized he sounded as if he were at the butcher, declining a cut of meat. "I'm sorry. Perhaps next time."

"I can be very good," she said, not moving. "I am very, very interested in doing a good job. I would not say what Pavel did. You were right to leave him behind."

"How did you know I was interested in Pavel?" A little curious now.

"They talked about it before you came. That you wanted a boy. The adults here speak as if none of us have ears."

He was amused by her phrasing. "Pavel is not the only boy."

"You make a fist when you are paying attention. You did it in the beginning, when Sophia bent for the tea. She only wears that sweater when we have visitors, you know."

Instantly, Leo thrust his hand behind his back. He slowly loosened his grip, feeling absurd. He knelt and said in a low voice: "You say you would do a good job. But you don't even know what sort of job it is I would ask."

Her face scrunched as she thought. "Well whatever it is, I am interested."

"What's your name?" He could see Sophia of the famous V-neck hovering near, looking both wary and hopeful; she knew he sought a male, but the institute was compensated for every child taken by Directorate Eight, regardless of gender.

"Julia."

"Julia." He nodded, as if committing the name to a mental ledger. "And how long have you been here?"

“Since I was little.”

“Oh? So you do not remember your time before?”

A shadow flicked across her face. “I have been here my whole life.” She cleared her throat. “You know, I can also sing.”

He rocked on his heels. “Go ahead, then. Sing me a song.”

She closed her eyes. “I’m so happy . . .”

“An American song?”

Her eyes opened. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be. It’s never wrong to practice other languages. A very good idea, actually.” He rose, and then after a hesitation patted her on the head. “Perhaps I’ll see you later.”

She took a small step, deftly rejecting his touch. “When?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps next year. Or the next.”

Julia settled on him a hard look. “You won’t come. We will never see each other again.”

THEY SAT ACROSS FROM EACH other now, in a room in the back of a mechanical parts warehouse owned by the SPB. The space was unofficially Leo’s—no one else from the department liked to use it, because it was far away, in Mitino. Over the years he’d rearranged the decor: he’d kept a campaign photo of the current president, in case he ever were to visit, which he wouldn’t; the Gorbachev junk he’d removed, though he’d left up a single poster, of a cartoon alcoholic mistakenly chugging silver polish. *Evil for your body and soul* was printed on the bottom, which Leo would occasionally chant as he poured for himself and Vera. *Glug glug glug*.

“Do you remember meeting me?” He shifted, and his chair made an ugly noise against the floor. “It was a long time ago.”

“Yes,” Julia said, and Leo took the moment to study her up close. Unfortunately, Julia was not one of those plain children who grew into their features (though from Leo’s experience it was never the perfect tens who worked hardest, anyway). She wore a red wool dress with a dirndl collar, as a younger girl might, and had brought

along with her a paper sack of food, from which Leo could discern the smell of hot bread and cheese. Sloykas, he guessed. His stomach rumbled.

“When we first met, you said you did not know your parents.”

“Yes.”

“Is that still the case?” Though he knew the answer, as by now—a week after the graduation—he had assembled her complete file.

“Yes. I do not know them. Or think of them.”

“And you understand what the SPB does.” Watching her carefully, as here was where some of his potentials flamed out. Though they were initially drawn by the excitement, something about hearing the actual name, the initials, seemed to move them to reconsider. As if by not working for the SPB they might exist farther from its eye, their sins unrecorded.

Julia shrugged. “As much as anyone else.”

“You understand our country is under attack. From our enemies, and even our supposed friends.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And that any harm done to the West is a benefit to us.”

“Right. So what do you want?” Her voice brusque, as if she were busy, had many other people to meet, interviews to complete, though Leo knew better. If Julia had graduated with top marks she might have been able to land a job at a telecom, perhaps even a multinational, but her university transcript confirmed such avenues were closed.

“Nothing right now. You’ll have to finish the security paperwork, complete introductory training. Then I believe the first order of business will be a voice coach.”

“A voice coach?” She sneered. “What do I need *that* for?”

Over Leo’s career he’d managed dozens of men and women who mistakenly equated unpleasant behavior with an expression of power; by now he knew it was best to extinguish such beliefs right away. “The way you speak, it’s intolerable.”

Julia flinched. There was silence, and she glared at the floor. “If you think my speaking is so bad, then why did you request me?” she asked at last, her face reddening. “Because it wasn’t for my looks.”

Ah, he thought. So you want to take that away before it can be used.

“I believe you are a woman with tenacity,” Leo said, deliberately using the word *woman*. “That, plus creativity, is what I search for.”

She snorted and flushed deeper. “And what does a voice coach have to do with creativity?”

“What I do for my job is construct a package. A human package, for a specific purpose. I need you to be convincing beyond doubt; it’s not your voice that’s so much the issue as the way you speak. No elegance. Perhaps the problem came after so much time in the institute. Because when we first met, it was not so bad.”

“I sang that song,” she said, and Leo knew she must recall nearly every detail of their first interaction. That perhaps she’d nursed hopes of his reappearance for years after. “In English.”

“Yes, and your command of language was already decent. With a coach to refine the pronunciation you could become nearly fluent. You’ll never get rid of your accent entirely, but you’d be surprised what focused training can accomplish.”

He waited for Julia to ask why English was important, but she refrained. “And say I do the voice coach and learn the good English. Then what?”

“Perhaps we do acting training. There are no guarantees. During each step your performance would be evaluated.”

“And after?” Her fingers drummed. “A piano teacher, and then gymnastics, and I go join the circus?”

He shook his head. “If you were ready, you’d begin the next phase. To serve our country, in secret, abroad . . .”

Julia perked at this. She began to tick off fingers. “New York, Shanghai, Paris . . .”

“Not any of those.”

“Cairo, Munich, Sydney . . .”

“None of those, either.”

“All right, where?” Eager in her curiosity. She’s just a child, Leo thought. A rude one, but a child nonetheless.

“Silicon Valley.”

“Silicon Valley,” Julia repeated, not entirely disappointed. “You mean San Francisco?”

“We can determine the right city later. We have people at both Berkeley and Stanford. You’ll need to be enrolled in a graduate program, for the visa.”

“And what would you have me do?”

He laced his fingers. “You have heard of the start-up culture there?”

“Yes.” Her voice held an edge of derision.

“What, you don’t think the internet is interesting?”

“I’m not the sort to stare at a computer all day.”

“Well, perhaps you could add a hobby. Another boom is coming. I want you to start a technology company. A true Silicon Valley one, based locally.”

“A company,” Julia repeated uncertainly.

“Yes. One viable enough to attract good investors. The investors will be key, especially in the beginning. From them you will receive introductions to other entrepreneurs, partners—become part of the local ecosystem, as it were. What we refer to as a bridge.”

From outside came the beeps and clangs of construction. Maybe the Metro, Leo thought, which they were forever promising would be built. He waited for Julia’s response, which he assumed would be positive. He recalled the first time he’d breathed the air outside San Francisco, its sweetness in his lungs—which he’d quickly become used to, and then taken for granted, until he was back on the plane.

But instead of a quick smile or other signs of enthusiasm, Julia only tugged at her collar. Both hands fiddled with the cotton; her

eyes were wide and she kept her gaze on the table. “You have seen my grades,” she said.

So that was the problem. “Yes.”

“Well,” she huffed. “Then you already know I don’t have much talent. For a while I thought that even if I didn’t like my classes, I could still work hard. But it wasn’t enough.”

Leo was surprised: he had not thought she’d acknowledge her own deficiencies. But this meant only that he was all the more correct about her suitability as an asset. Yes, it’d be good to have a computer genius, but such a person wouldn’t necessarily want the job—and above average at home was close to brilliant in America, anyway.

“I don’t need an expert. Just some technical proficiency. A hard worker, which you’ve just told me you are.”

“So am I going to have help? A technical coach?”

“No.”

“A team of programmers?”

“No. You’re going to do it all. Create the company, and lead it.”

“But I already told you, I can’t manage the technical portion.”

“Don’t worry about that.” He checked his watch. The metal chair was numbing his back. He wanted to start home, stop at the butcher’s before returning to Vera.

“But isn’t the whole point of a start-up to have a product?” She rocked back and forth in her chair. “It has to have an offering. A reason for its existence.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Then I don’t understand! Where is it going to come from?”

And finally they had arrived at the heart of the matter. A queer feeling overtook Leo and he felt himself hoping she’d prove worthwhile. I could change your life, he thought.

He let the quiet settle. Watched her face.

“We’ll steal it.”

JUNE 2018

JULIA

Julia Kall was getting married.

Though Kall wouldn't be her last name, not for long; after the events of the afternoon she'd be known as Julia Lerner, wife of Charlie Lerner. Julia knew that in Silicon Valley, and especially at the levels on which she operated, changing one's last name was considered passé, an incline of the head to the patriarchy: why not ask for an allowance while she was at it, let her husband manage the money; carry out munchies for the boys on poker night, squealing at the ass slap on her way back to the kitchen. It was the expected thing, to keep one's last name, especially given her career. But that was why Julia was changing her own. To hint at an inner traditionalist. She already courted that market, subtly; when giving speeches, she usually mentioned that while her job as *the second-highest executive* at one of the world's *most valuable technology companies* was tremendously difficult, it was nothing compared to that of a mother, so bravo, bravo, let's hear it for the mothers. The audience dutiful in its applause, like junior congressmen saluting veterans, and then she would press forward: balance, childcare, empower. Her (subtly) enhanced red hair, cut to the shoulders, rounding out

the image—her heels high, sweaters tight, though with conservative necklines.

Once married, Julia planned to add some bits about her and Charlie to the mix, reflections on her good taste in landing the perfect partner. And then, once they had kids—because naturally kids would follow—she would post about the whole family. I used to think what I did at work, you know, managing billions of dollars at one of the world's most valuable companies—I used to think that was the important thing! But it wasn't until I became a mother that I understood it's what I do at home that truly matters. Raising our next generation. Our future.

You know, all that stupid shit.

Plus, Kall wasn't even her real last name, anyway.

The temperature outside was in the high seventies, the sun's flame reduced by a thin gauze of clouds: a perfect Saturday afternoon in Napa Valley. Though Eisner Gardens had not been her first choice of venue. Originally Julia had thought Napa too basic: yes there were the nice parts, the private estates and wine caves, but there were also the factory wineries stuffed with tour groups, the traffic on Route 29; all the slurring Marina bros and escaped housewives, cheeks fat from bad fillers. Julia's first choice had been Indonesia—not Kuta or Seminyak, but rather a private resort in Borobudur. Her boss, Pierre Roy, the CEO and founder of the social media and internet giant Tangerine, had done something similar, flying all his guests, Julia included, on his 767 to the Caribbean. She'd already asked to borrow the plane, knowing Pierre would agree, but had then been informed that the wedding was not to take place overseas.

The wedding should be in California, Leo said. In California, more people would come.

At least Eisner was undeniably magnificent, with acres of meticulously attended gardens. A popular historical drama had been filmed on-site, the protagonist galloping up on his polo pony to be

met by an umbrella-wielding servant (this always fascinated Julia about Americans, how prideful they were about their democracy while worshipping those who lived like kings). She stood now on the second floor of the same mansion as a seamstress buttoned her into the gown (Ralph & Russo, she'd spent a boatload, and now felt as if she might keel over from the weight of the beading). "You're doing a wonderful job," she said to the girl, who appeared thrilled to have received such praise from Julia herself.

Holding her train, taking tiny steps, Julia looked out the window at the view below. The food was circulating, which was good; she'd requested the hors d'oeuvres begin as soon as the first guests arrived. Julia hated parties where the food was served late, the hostess (it was always a hostess) entering triumphantly to the pent-up demand, like a captor doling out warm showers to a pack of hostages with Stockholm syndrome. She scanned the crowd. It appeared most of the two hundred were already here. There was Alan Mark, a Microsoft executive who frequently announced he had no interest in being Tangerine's next CEO, which meant only that he did. Then there was Pierre himself, with his new girlfriend (despite the Caribbean wedding, the bride herself had not stuck); clearly Pierre was going through one of his Japan-worshipping phases again. His date, in one of those tacky jersey dresses cut to the navel, tossed her black hair and laughingly cajoled Pierre to take a selfie. At the last second, with expert agility, Pierre pulled away, said hi to someone just out of the camera's reach.

Finally, Julia sighted him. Leo, in a charcoal suit, in the shade by Rebecca Mosley, the wife of a Tangerine board member. Rebecca was one of those older intellectual housewives with something to prove—who, whenever she encountered Julia, liked to pose all sorts of middling questions on Russia, as if it were not a global power with twice America's landmass but rather one of those minor landlocked countries with a hilarious McDonald's menu. Chances were she was subjecting Leo to the same abuse, since he was here as

Julia's "uncle"—poor Julia, with no other living family to speak of, and represented solely by this humble, well-formed former water bureau manager. How was he finding the first world, Rebecca was likely pressing, did he love California? Wasn't it nice here, because as everyone knew, Russia was so cold, all the time?

Though Julia did, in fact, love California. Imagine if they'd sent her to one of those other states—and she knew the SPB occasionally did do this, seeding assets to small politicians, hoping they might one day become big ones. What would she be doing then? Attending the openings of car dealerships, frying chicken nuggets, falling asleep in church. Shopping on the weekends for wooden plaques to hang on her wall: *The Conner Family, Est. 2011!*

The wedding planner was back in the room. "Are you excited?" Libby Rosenberg was one of those competent former sorority girls Julia liked to hire into marketing. Though Libby had been clipping between the gardens in a full suit, her makeup was still perfectly matte. "I'm getting excited."

"Of course."

"You eat? You should have something in your stomach before you go out. Michael, why doesn't Julia have a plate? It's her food, you know."

She's right, Julia thought. It is my food. I'm the one paying for it. And then she returned to the window, to enjoy the view a while longer.

OF COURSE, JULIA WASN'T FOOLISH enough to believe she'd achieved everything on her own merit. There was help, especially in the beginning. Arriving at her depressive studio in San Carlos, initially stunned by the strip malls and sheer ugliness of the place, only to visit Stanford University days later and fall in love, because here—amid the Romanesque architecture and towering palms and lopsided wealth—was the California of her dreams. A PhD candidate in electrical engineering, she'd been set up with Kurt Marshall,

described by Leo as a “friendly” professor, who proceeded to match her with another “accommodating” company, at which the ancient Marshall was paid a quarter million a year as an advisor. The company sponsored her visa, no one in Immigration Services curious why a small business repackaging USB keys was navigating the hurdles of an H1-B for an analyst; she’d worked there a year before Leo returned to California and presented her with a laptop. “Now you go fundraise.”

She stroked the machine, chunky and metallic. “What is it?”

“Facial recognition software. I assume you still recall enough of your studies to give a convincing demo. I made up the working name, VisionMatch, but change it if you like. It’s your company.”

She disliked the name but sensed he was proud of his creative output. “Face recognition?”

“Properly deployed, it can match each face in a crowd of thousands in seconds. Such technology has also been on the SPB’s wish list. So why not multitask?” He laughed.

“Where did you get it?”

He named an American technology giant, the sort that sponsored stadiums.

“And they won’t realize we took it?” Julia was surprised that such a thing could be lifted without consequence. At the institute, if someone stole even an apple, blood was drawn, the accumulation and tracking of possessions being of chief interest among the residents.

“These companies have so much, they probably won’t ever use it. It’s not their chief business, only one of hundreds of side projects. Something to remember about America: waste is part of their culture.”

Just a year after she launched VisionMatch, Tangerine—the social network already frequented by half of all Americans—came to call. Pierre Roy, who’d started as a freshman at Waterloo at fifteen, had at one point, due to his semi-dreamy looks and a habit of

grandiose announcements, been referred to in the press as the “Frat Genius.” A nickname Pierre hated, because he thought it undercut the fact that he really was, you know, a genius. By twenty-eight, he’d built Tangerine to deca-unicorn status and no longer cared what the media said. He held 88 percent of the outstanding voting shares and was thus not subject to the hedging and consensus building of lesser entrepreneurs; he made brash declarations and dated a string of minor actresses and very good-looking academics. Pierre wanted VisionMatch’s facial identification software—Tangerine could do it in-house, he informed Julia, but this was just easier.

“There’s another company that’s got something similar, you know,” Pierre murmured during their closing dinner at Alexander’s. Bankers on both sides, ordering the A5 Wagyu because they could. “But the company’s one of those big bad corporations, so they’d never give it to me. Hopefully yours is as good.”

Oh oh oh, Julia thought. You have no idea.

And now she was chief operating officer of Tangerine, second only to Pierre. Total comp last fiscal year: \$39 million.

Julia knew she had a reputation—what was her latest nickname? It used to be the Sweetheart of Silicon Valley, but that was when she was doing the stuff that embarrassed her to think of now: baking cookies for reporters, giving interviews on her twelve-step skin-care routine. While publicly railing against gender inequality, she’d quietly torched the path of any rising female at Tangerine, the same as any man would have done to his own competition. As Tangerine’s user count continued to explode, journalists sought a female executive to quote—please, any woman! And then they found Julia, her finger in the dam just in time, before male hubris overflowed and drowned them all . . .

She looked back out at the crowd. She could sense Libby hovering behind, waiting to speak.

Leo had separated himself from Rebecca and was now by the bar, his face tilted at the windows.

Julia waved and blew him a kiss, and he tapped a finger against his watch. *Don't waste time.*

She turned to the room, to the assistants, the planner. Weeks later each would receive a handwritten note thanking them for their contribution. In the room were no bridesmaids, no sisters clutching at modest bouquets.

"I'm ready," she said.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, JULIA SAT with Leo.

The wedding had been lovely, of course. Lovely, charming, inspiring—Julia's frequently deployed descriptors, used for everything from baby showers to politicians. Her nuptials conducted beneath two willows, the pool's midafternoon reflection casting a gleam. The party afterward, the dinner, the dancing (Julia hated dancing), the fireworks, which she'd watched with utter joy, tracking the arc of each light as it shattered in the sky.

It'd been a month since she and Leo last met. A year earlier, when Leo announced he was moving, Julia was alarmed. She'd not wanted a local handler, one available to observe at close range the vast perks of being free and rich in California. But since his arrival, Leo had mostly left her alone. Their meetings were brief, quiet lunches at her house or empty restaurants, as she passed interesting gossip.

She'd rented the entirety of the Golden Rock Ranch for the weekend, set on its own hill in Stags Leap. She and Leo sat on the deck outside her suite, a table between them. Leo was drooped with his head against the chair's back, eyes ringed with red. His left hand slowly stroked his stomach, as if easing some inner queasiness.

"Drink too much last night?" Julia asked, amused.

He shifted uncomfortably. "I'm getting older, yes? I know that's your implication."

"You should probably wait until the evening to indulge again. If you do." She rose and retrieved a pitcher of water.

“Thank you,” Leo said as she poured. “Charlie seems nice,” he added. Julia’s new husband was at the airport, seeing off his mother and father, the former who had worn an insane red sequined ball gown last night, designed to steal attention.

“He is nice,” she agreed.

Leo set down the glass. “*Very American.*”

Julia suppressed a smile. Two years earlier she’d been informed she ought to get a husband—*time to establish family ties* was what Leo said, and instantly Julia had understood. She pretended to be insulted, resistant, but secretly began her endeavor immediately. She knew the SPB had likely already begun to strategize; she was not going to be controlled, told to spread her legs for some septuagenarian with a high security clearance or a closeted CEO with a secret phone line.

She met Charlie through a friend, because she now had friends, because guess what? Once your company was acquired and your net worth climbed into nine digits, you became more interesting not only to yourself but also to others. Like magic! Athena, an Israeli biologist who ran a gene-mapping company, had come up to her at a party. Murmuring: “*Have I got a man for you.*”

At the time, Julia already had a semi-boyfriend. Zack Stein, venture capitalist on the rise, excessive hair product, obnoxious car, but he was decent-looking and not too short and seemed willing to learn and improve. By now Julia had undergone her own modifications: gone were the bad clothes, lurid makeup, clumsy hair color and cut. When she recalled how she’d first appeared in California, wearing her neon tracksuit (tracksuit!) as she hiked Rancho San Antonio, mascara clumped around her eyes—she wanted to die. Why hadn’t Leo helped? Why get a voice coach and an acting teacher but not a stylist? But men didn’t think of such things.

Zack was fine, and Julia could picture herself married to him—maybe. The only problem was that lately his communications had assumed a certain tenor, as if she were not an executive who out-

earned him twelve to one but rather one of his firm's many analysts, some young nubile recent grad:

- I find it sexy when a woman is always THRILLED to see me
- Happy to mentor you ;)
- Really busy this month, you know how intense I am about work . . .

So okay, Julia told Athena, let's meet him—not expecting much. And then Athena brought over Charlie. Charlie: dark blond hair, perfect American teeth, like a white picket fence in his mouth. Julia was five nine and he was half a head taller, even when she was in heels.

“You have a bit of a sunburn,” Julia had said, spotting a patch of red behind his temple.

“Really?” He touched the area. “Right. From surfing.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Do I surf professionally, you mean?” He laughed. “No. I'm a doctor. Cardiologist.”

Cardiologist. Julia liked doctors as a rule: they earned less than her, as nearly all men did, but didn't have a complex about it.

“I would ask what you do, if only to be polite,” Charlie said, still smiling, still friendly. “But I already know.”

That had been the start. The draw was that he did not care. Did not pretend otherwise, went and said out loud what so many men would not, that she was who she was. It was as if the champagne she held spilled into the air between them—that heady mixture of interest and lust that was so delicious and yet totally unexpected. Because how often in life did you get exactly what you want? How rare was it not only to find love, but for the person to love you back?

Charlie. Charlie Charlie Charlie. She had chosen him. He was perfect.

But instead of rolling around in bed, eating breakfast with her

flawless new husband, Julia was stuck outside with this old, hung-over, and frequently tedious man.

Leo was fussing about with a fork, hovering over the food. Earlier that morning the manager had delivered a charcuterie platter and sliced fruit; Julia had taken some bites of pineapple, but the rest was untouched. Leo speared into the dragon fruit, nibbling suspiciously at its edges.

“It’s good,” Julia said. “Even better in Thailand.”

He wagged a finger. “Don’t forget we come from the same place.”

Julia kicked the table. “How’s business?” she asked, before regretting the question. She didn’t want Leo to think she was nosing about his work—she knew very little of his cover in California. From what she understood, he worked out of an office, one of those sad single-man consulting shops, as befitting a minor relative riding on her coattails.

“It’s fine.” He crumpled a piece of bresaola into his mouth. “Busy.”

“Good.” She considered asking some polite follow-ups, but was afraid there was no way of doing so without sounding disingenuous, like when she was forced to compliment toddlers during the annual Take Your Kids to Tangerine event. “Perhaps you can share some thoughts about marriage,” she said instead. “Any guidance, tips for success.” Julia was actually curious to hear his answer. They rarely spoke about personal matters, Leo dodging her probes while simultaneously pressing for details on Tangerine’s organizational chart.

“Guidance,” Leo repeated. He made another pass at the meats, his fork darting for the duck confit. “What’s to say? Marriage is just power constantly being renegotiated.”

This? This was all he had to offer? Sometimes Julia thought Leo might be losing it. His random confidences on various failings of the SPB, like an attempt to implant Scottish fold kittens with listening devices, intended for the daughter of a Japanese executive, only for the cats to disappear into the streets of Osaka (“Even our ani-

mals,” he mused, “want to defect”); the way he would occasionally lapse into gloom without provocation or warning, sulking his way through the last course of dinner. Late forties wasn’t too young for a midlife crisis, right?

“Well, you’re not married, anyway,” she teased. “Yet.”

He ignored this. “What we do is important. Sometimes I wonder if you forget. Who you truly work for.”

Julia bristled. “I’ve done everything you’ve asked. The wedding was exactly as you wanted.”

“Right.” Leo cut a banana into neat slivers. “And now that the wedding’s finished, we’ll be asking more of you.”

She fought her temper. “More? Please be fair. I’ve contributed. Have *been* contributing.” How much dirt had she passed along over the years? A tech CEO’s drug problem. The Lockheed executive sleeping with his brother’s wife. An attorney general with real estate dreams and credit card debt. Wallet fantasies, Leo called them. Zipper problems.

“As you should. As you will continue to do.”

I just got married yesterday, dickhead. She wondered why he was being such a hard-ass. What did Leo want? Fine, she would get out and eavesdrop more; even though it was technically her wedding week she would attend Sarah Kleiner’s boutique opening next Tuesday, since her husband was CEO of CyberSoft, and purchase one of Sarah’s hideous handbags.

“We want you to run a deep search on some people.”

“*What?*”

“We need information,” Leo said. Depositing a slice of banana into his mouth. “On a group of individuals. All their Tangerine data: messages, browsing, search activity.”

Julia dug her nails into her thigh. What Leo was asking was an enormous breach of the trust and privacy Tangerine’s entire business model was based upon. Users would never browse, message, search, or upload if they believed someone was watching—machines, fine;

algorithms, maybe; but never humans. No one person sitting in judgment over their Valtrex, their porn, their gambling, their shopping; the stalking of their ex from high school, and his wife, and whether she was fat now after the twins, going to the album and then clicking again, click click click click click.

Though it wasn't the privacy that was her main concern.

"I can't get caught. If I'm caught, my career's over."

"So don't get caught."

"It's harder than that, you understand? What you want, it isn't easy. Otherwise everyone would do it."

"If I believed my requests easy, I could send anyone. Train anybody from off the street." *But instead I picked you, being unsaid. I picked you, and now it's time for payment.*

"I—I'll see what's possible."

Leo nodded. They both knew this meant she would do it. With a short grunt he stood and reached for the coffee. "We also want you to start transferring data from Tangerine's servers."

The hot pit of temper inside her gut instantly re-flared. "This was never part of the arrangement. It places me at risk."

"We don't want *all* the server data," Leo argued as he poured. As if this were even possible. "Our requests would be specific. All queries coming from Tel Aviv over a certain weekend, for example."

Julia shook her head, more violently this time. She realized that despite her earlier training she had not truly thought this day would come—when she would have to risk something important, an accomplishment she alone had achieved, for a bunch of old generals she'd never met and who likely knew nothing about technology. And what would they do if she were caught? What responsibility would they take, other than to say that yet again a woman had messed up?

"Is there anything else you're planning to request?" she fumed. "If so, tell it to me now. All of it."

Leo blinked at her. "We also want access to FreeTalk. Messages and location."

For a moment Julia was unable to speak. Though the air outside was warm her hands were cold and when she looked down they were leached of color. “No,” she said. “No. *No*. Absolutely impossible.”

FreeTalk, a five-year-old app through which users could send messages and photos, was Pierre’s latest acquisition and darling; the service was enormously popular, ostensibly for its encryption features. The two founders, Sean Dara and Johan Frandsen, who’d frequently stated that privacy was their highest priority, that they could never sell the company, had nevertheless in the end sold, to Tangerine, for \$9 billion—upon which they’d moved into Tangerine’s headquarters, faces flush with embarrassment and money. Julia didn’t like Sean or Johan, but better two dudes than one woman. She had yet to see any large company support more than one high-profile female executive at a time—it was as if too many might suck up all the oxygen, causing the entity to collapse in on itself like a dying star.

“What’s impossible about it?” Leo actually looked curious.

“Pierre promised Sean and Johan total autonomy. FreeTalk’s technical infrastructure is separate from Tangerine’s. As is its management. It was one of the key deal points of the acquisition.”

“You’ll change their mind. You’re good at that.”

“This isn’t something you can propel me to deliver through flattery. I can’t.”

“Yes you can.” And then quietly: “You will.”

A bubble of hate, for his humiliating her with a direct order. “What’s it all for? Some kind of grand plan?”

“You’ve been watching too many movies. This isn’t a one-time request. There will be an ongoing expectation.”

“It must be for something.”

“You have development cycles at work, do you not? Periods where you invest, spend to create products. Eventually though, your goal is for such products to earn money.”

Not in the Valley, Julia thought, recalling an autonomous start-up

she'd met with last week, which projected it would need to lose at least \$4 billion before turning profitable. She'd thanked them for coming and then directed Tangerine's venture arm not to invest; later the CEO had emailed Pierre, complaining of her "catty" demeanor.

Taking her silence for assent, Leo continued: "All our rivals are investing in technology. The political situation in the West is, at best, unstable. You understand you've already been extended a long period of dormancy? For years, I pushed the SPB to leave you alone, let you rise. And now you have. They're impatient, Julia. It's only fair they see some return."

She shoved her legs against the chair. "I like my life. I've earned it."

"No one's taking away your life. In fact, it would only please me if you flew even higher. What a lot of fun that'd be, yes? All we're asking is that you share some back. With the country that brought you here."

"You think that's all it is, that you drop me in California and this is what automatically happens? That you take—how did you put it?—any *nobody* off the street, and they end up as COO? Twelve-hour days, seven days a week, for years. Hundreds of others, working just as hard to try and take my position."

"What do you want me to say, thank you? I thank you. Your country thanks you in advance."

Julia pushed away from the table and stood. "Are we done?"

Leo gaped at her, surprised. In all their years together, Julia had never ended a conversation. It had always been Leo who called, Leo who asked, Leo who left and came. She thought he might object, order her to sit, but instead he exclaimed: "Look!"

She looked. In her haste, she had jolted the table, and the carafe was on its side, coffee pouring from its beak. If this were her home, she would already be running for a napkin; scrubbing at the linen with soap, her fingernails digging out the stain.

"You clean up," Julia said, and then went inside and shut the door.

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'A sharp and prescient novel about women in the workplace, the power of Big Tech, and the looming threat of foreign espionage.' — *Harper's Bazaar*

Julia Lerner was recruited by Russia's largest intelligence agency shortly after graduating in computer science. Now she's in Silicon Valley as COO of Tangerine, one of America's most famous tech companies.

In between executive management (offer to buy promising startups, crush them and copy their features if they refuse); self promotion (check out her latest op-ed in the WSJ, on Work/Life Balance 2.0); and work in gender equality (transfer the most annoying females from her team), she funnels intelligence back to the motherland. But now Russia's asking for more, and Julia's getting nervous.

Alice Lu is a first generation Chinese American whose parents are delighted she's working at Tangerine (such a successful company!). Too bad she's slogging away in the lower echelons, recently dumped, and now sharing her expensive two-bedroom apartment with her cousin Cheri, a perennial "founder's girlfriend". One afternoon, while performing a server check, Alice discovers some unusual activity, and now she's burdened with two powerful but distressing suspicions: Tangerine's privacy settings aren't as rigorous as the company claims they are, and the person abusing this loophole might be Julia Lerner herself.

Part page-turning cat-and-mouse chase, part sharp and hilarious satire, *Impostor Syndrome* is a shrewdly-observed examination of women in tech and Silicon Valley hubris.



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