

She'd ruled out prostitution as a funding source. *At least that would be a sure thing*, Hannah mused, as she perched eyeing the clock in the posh Baltimore office of Wang Honqi, VP of Marshall Engineering. She'd driven two and a half hours in the rain for this fifteen-minute appointment.

Hannah smoothed the skirt of her best suit, careful not to let her bitten nails snag it. If she clasped her clammy hands together, she wouldn't fidget.

Her mouth curved as she snorted silently. There were more similarities with hooking than she liked. Selling herself? Check. Dependence on important men? Check. Fancy clothes? Check, but at least she wasn't in crotchless black lace. *Dad would be so ticked if he knew I was here.*

She shook it off. She couldn't afford to let her father's paranoia become her own, ruining this chance. She slowly breathed in the fragrance of boutique coffee, dragging her eyes from the clock. The status corner office commanded an excellent view of the February gloom.

Deadlines were looming, and she'd emptied out her bank accounts. Hydrolab time was limited—and expensive. She needed funding for the testing phase for her prototype, but she'd come up empty; the bank had declined a loan without anyone to cosign.

The sleek blonde receptionist had ignored Hannah after her arrival fifty minutes ago—she'd arrived early, not wanting to risk problems on the drive from Delaware, but it was now well past her two o'clock appointment. The phone shrilled, the receptionist diving to pick up before the first ring stopped. "Yes, sir?" She glanced at Hannah and pasted on a smile. "Ms. Larssen? Mr. Wang will see you now."

Showtime. Hannah's heart skipped, excitement fizzing up through her deliberately muted expectations. Her invention was a game-changer, even if all people could see was a young

redhead. She wiped her palms on her skirt and followed the receptionist in, trying to look relaxed.

A square pockmarked man stood up, as poised as an executioner, but stayed behind his polished desk. Her heels sank into the luxurious Persian rug. His office was much more impressive than her father's. Then again, her father cultivated the image of being an everyman. Wang's proffered hand felt oily in her palm.

"Ms. Larssen, it's a pleasure to meet the daughter of Senator Larssen. I'm eager to hear about your work." He waved her to an immaculate cream suede couch, next to a plump young man wearing glasses. "My nephew, Wang Guowei, is interested in engineering. You don't mind if he sits in?"

Hannah smiled. *Great. It's Take Your Nephew to Work Day.* "No, of course not." The receptionist had implied that Mr. Wang was much too busy to waste time listening to her so-called advance when Hannah made the appointment, but was humoring her because of her father.

"Please, tell me what you are working on," said Wang, glancing at his watch.

So tell me, little lady, what you've entered in the science fair. Hannah's jaw clenched on another smile. "I've invented a hydrodynamic streamlining system that can be retrofitted to any vessel." It was always hard talking about science to administrators, and the nephew looked like a kid in junior high. Were his eyes glazing over already? She went on.

"The resistance of water to a ship's passage requires a significant amount of energy to overcome, just as it's hard for you to run in waist-deep water. Currently, special coatings can make water slip past a surface faster, but that leads to swirls. Each vortex causes turbulence. The

faster you go, the more vortices, and the bigger the drag on the hull.” She pulled an illustration from her briefcase. “A solution has been a Holy Grail of hydrodynamics. There’s even a poem about it, by Lewis Fry Richardson, back in 1922:

‘Big whirls have little whirls,
That feed on their velocity;
And little whirls have lesser whirls,
And so on to viscosity.’”

Wang frowned. *Okay, not a poetry fan.* Hannah hurried on, “It becomes more complicated when you add in drag from biologics like barnacles and slime, and the interaction of waves.”

“And your invention helps in what way?” asked Mr. Wang.

“Well, water molecules are polar, so they line up in an electrical field. This makes a surface interface more slippery—”

“But how is that different than a coating?” interrupted Wang, another glance at his watch.

Hannah stifled her irritation. “My invention aligns the molecules and then releases them a microsecond later, to diminish the vortices, and thus the drag.”

“This makes a difference?” Wang looked skeptical.

“Yes, sir, it increases speed, while saving energy. It’s likely that the Department of Defense and the shipping companies will be interested. I can tell you more if you will sign a non-disclosure, noncompete agreement.”

Mr. Wang glanced at his nephew, then stood up, beaming. “I’m afraid we’re out of time, but we should speak again soon.”

Wow. That was fast. She smiled and shook his hand, thanking him for his time.

The drive back was filled with idiots, but she'd missed the worst of the traffic. Hannah slumped into the entryway chair of the apartment she shared with Rob, cored like an apple. She yanked off her high heels with a sigh, skinned off her panty hose and shoved them into a shoe, wriggling her toes. Rob's key scraped into the lock. An allergic sniffle preceded him.

"How'd it go?" he asked. "What's the plan for dinner?"

Dinner? Hannah blinked. *Well, he asked in the right order, at least.* A dull heaviness settled in her chest. He knew how much her project meant to her—he was an engineer himself. Surely he wasn't envious of her work. She'd only moved in two months ago, but it was already so mundane living with him.

Hannah frowned. "I don't know," she said. "I spent five hours on the road for ten minutes with him. I think he did it mainly because of my father, rather than from any real interest. He was patronizing, he was late, and he had his nephew in on the appointment." She sighed. "I should have just kept my Big Sisters volunteer appointment instead of rescheduling—at least there I know I'm doing some good. He did say he wanted to speak again, but maybe that was just trying to be polite." She picked up her shoes, heading towards the bedroom. "As far as dinner goes, I'm fine with opening a can of soup, after today." *Rob won't be, though.*

Her phone pinged with an email. She stopped short in the hall. "It's from him," she said, heart rate escalating.

"Don't worry," said Rob, sniffing, "Things have a way of working out, if they're meant to be." He dodged around her to go change. "I'll order out Thai for dinner."

Hannah stared after him, eyes narrowing. She wasn't in the mood for him to spout platitudes, and she didn't believe in things that were meant to be, or waiting patiently for God or destiny to arrive, not anymore. Her brother had taught her that.

She scanned the email. Mr. Wang said he'd be pleased to support her work—if she agreed to take on his nephew as an observer, and to share her data to date. *That's a big change. He was too busy to give me the time of day before.* Her chest constricted. She didn't want a VIP to babysit, nor to share her advance with anyone before testing and patent application, even if theft of intellectual property was uncommon. She shook her head.

But she couldn't let her project get derailed, either. Eventually someone else would think of it, possibly beating her to the finish line, especially if they had fewer financial constraints. She pushed back her wayward curls in irritation. She'd find a way, somehow.

The next evening, Hannah sat braced in a chair on her father's back porch, rain drizzling off the eaves. Why had he sent for her? The location signaled his need for privacy, to avoid airing family laundry in front of Greta, the longtime housekeeper. Hannah waited, clutching hot tea against the evening chill. *Waiting again, for a different important man.* There was no defense against her father's chill, though, other than Hannah's slow burn at the summons, sent via text this morning.

He arrived, looking like a photo shoot. "How are you, kid?" He had a perfect politician's voice, warm and sincere-sounding.

"Fine, Dad." She'd promised her mother she would try to get along with him. *What do you want this time?*

He frowned as if he could hear her. “I got a call from Wang Honqi today. He said that you came to solicit financial support.”

He makes it sound sleazy. Hannah flushed, annoyed to be put on the defensive right off the bat. *Wang didn’t waste any time taking advantage, whether he is going to help me or not.* She hadn’t figured on that. It would have been better to announce a done deal. “Dad, I need to get funding from somewhere.”

He pinched the bridge of his handsome nose under his glasses. “Hannah, if your advance is really so revolutionary, you should go to the Department of Defense, not a foreign national.”

If? Her own father couldn’t give her the benefit of the doubt. How long since he was proud of her? She was tired of people thinking that a twenty-four-year-old woman wasn’t capable of achieving anything. Hannah took a deep breath, determined not to fight. She’d promised her mother that they’d get along.

“Dad, I got a runaround with the DOD when I looked into that. I tried there first, because I know you don’t want any hint of scandal.” He’d have worried that corporations might try to leverage the connection—as Wang had already tried to do. She unclenched her jaw. His political career always took first priority. “Marshall Engineering is a well-respected U.S. firm. I didn’t ask for Wang. They set it up.”

“He’s been suspected in several cases of industrial espionage,” said her father. “Did you share any of your research with him? Did you get a signed non-disclosure agreement?”

“No, I just mentioned the basic idea,” said Hannah. “We had all of ten minutes, and he seemed pretty uninterested at first.” It stung to admit that.

“At first?” her father said. His eyes narrowed.

“He emailed that he wants to talk more, and wants his nephew to observe,” said Hannah.

Her father pinched his nose again. “Christ! Hannah, don’t tell him anything until I can get an engineer to look over your research, and don’t let his nephew or anyone else in there.”

“I don’t need anyone’s review,” she said. She thumped down her mug, standing up to leave. There were limits. She took a deep breath. “They can’t reverse engineer it because I have the algorithms. They need me for that. But if you have any constructive ideas, I’m happy to hear them,” she said. “I was trying not to involve you at all.”

His face transformed from the long-suffering-one-with-the-naive-daughter into the benevolent Senator one, ready to fix the world’s problems. “Well, let’s see what we can do,” he said. “I’m involved now.”

That was what she was afraid of.

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