

This
time
it's
Real

A N N L I A N G



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CHAPTER ONE

I'm about to change into my school uniform when I notice the man floating outside my bedroom window.

No, *floating* isn't the right word, I realize as I step closer, my plaid skirt still crumpled in one hand, my pulse racing in my ears. He's *dangling*. His whole body is suspended by two metal wires that look dangerously thin, considering how we're on the twenty-eighth floor and the summer wind's been blowing extra hard since noon, kicking up dust and leaves like a mini tornado.

I shake my head, bewildered as to why anyone would put themselves in such a position. What is this—some kind of new extreme sport? A gang initiation?

A midlife crisis?

The man catches me staring and gives me a cheerful little wave, as if he isn't one faulty wire or loose knot or particularly aggressive bird away from plummeting down the side of the building. Then, still ever-so-casual, he pulls out a wet cloth from his pocket and starts scrubbing the glass between us, leaving trails of white foam everywhere.

Right. Of course.

My cheeks heat. I've been away from China for so long that I completely forgot this is how apartment windows are cleaned—the same way I forgot how the subway lines work, or how you're

not supposed to flush toilet paper, or how you can only bargain at certain types of stores without coming across as broke or stingy. Then there are all the things that have changed in the twelve years that my family and I were overseas, the things I never had the chance to learn in the first place. Like how people here apparently just *don't use cash anymore*.

I'm not kidding. When I tried to hand a waitress an old one hundred yuan note the other week, she'd gaped at me as though I'd time-traveled straight from the seventeenth century.

"Uh, hello? Eliza? Are you still there?"

I almost trip over my bed corner in my haste to get to my laptop, which has been propped up on two cardboard boxes labeled ELIZA'S NOT VERY IMPORTANT STUFF—boxes I haven't gotten around to unpacking yet, unlike my VERY IMPORTANT STUFF box. Ma thinks I could afford to be a bit more specific with my labels, but you can't say I don't have my own system.

"Eli-za?" Zoe's voice—achingly familiar even through the screen—grows louder.

"I'm here, I'm here," I call back.

"Oh, good, because literally all I can see is a bare wall. Speaking of which . . . girl, are you *ever* going to decorate your room? You've been there for, like, three months and it looks like a hotel. I mean, a *nice* hotel, sure, but—"

"It's a deliberate artistic choice, okay? You know, minimalism and all that."

She snorts. I'm a good bullshitter, but Zoe happens to have a great bullshit detector. "*Is it*, though? Is it really?"

“Maybe,” I lie, turning the laptop toward me. One side of the screen has been taken up by a personal essay for my English class and about a billion tabs on “how to write a kiss scene” for research purposes; on the other side is my best friend’s beautiful, grinning face.

Zoe Sato-Meyer’s sitting in her kitchen, her favorite tweed jacket draped around her narrow frame, her dark waves smoothed back into a high ponytail and haloed by the overhead lights like a very stylish seventeen-year-old angel. The pitch-black windows behind her—and the bowl of steaming instant noodles on the counter (her idea of a bedtime snack)—are the only clue it’s some ungodly hour of the night in LA right now.

“Oh my god.” Her eyes cut to my worn polka-dot sweatshirt as I adjust my laptop camera. “I can’t believe you still have that shirt. Didn’t you wear it in eighth grade or something?”

“What? It’s comfortable,” I say, which is technically true. But I guess it’s also true that this ugly, fraying shirt is one of the only things that’s remained consistent throughout six different countries and twelve different schools.

“Okay, okay.” Zoe holds up both hands in mock surrender. “You do you. But, like, still, shouldn’t you be changing? Unless you plan to wear that to your parent-teacher conferences . . .”

My attention snaps back to the skirt in my grip, to the foreign-looking WESTBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF BEIJING logo embroidered over the stiff, plasticky fabric. A knot forms in my stomach. “Yeah, no,” I mutter. “I should definitely be changing.”

The window cleaner's still here, so I yank the curtains closed—but not before I catch a glimpse of the sprawling apartment complex below. For a place called Bluelake, there's very little that's actually *blue* about the neat rows of buildings or curated gardens, but there is plenty of green: in the man-made lake at the heart of the compound and its adjoining lotus ponds, the spacious mini golf course and tennis courts by the parking lot, the lush grass lining the pebbled paths and maidenhair trees. When we first moved in, the whole area had reminded me of a fancy resort, which seems fitting. After all, it's not like we'll be staying here longer than a year.

While I wriggle into my uniform, Zoe snaps her fingers and says, "Wait, you're not getting out of this—tell me again why you're writing about a nonexistent boyfriend for your essay?"

"Not writing. *Written*," I correct, pulling my shirt over my head. "I've already turned it in. And it's not like I *wanted* to make up a story about my love life, but I didn't know what else to write . . ." I pause to free a strand of my long, inky hair from one of the shirt buttons. "This thing is due tonight, and it counts as part of our coursework, so . . . you know. I had to get a little creative."

Zoe snorts again, so loud this time her microphone crackles. "You realize personal essays shouldn't be made up, right?"

"No," I say, deadpan. "Personal essays should be personal? Totally news to me. Shocking. My life is a lie."

The truth is, I chose to turn my serious nonfiction assignment into what's essentially a four-thousand-word romance

because of how personal it's meant to be. The topic itself is bad enough, inspired by this sappy book we studied in the first week of school: *In When the Nightingales Sang Back, Lucy and Taylor are described to have their own "secret language" that no one else knows. Who do you share a secret language with? How did it develop? What does that person mean to you?*

Even so, I might've held my nose and gone along with it, written an only lightly exaggerated piece about either one of my parents or my little sister or Zoe . . . except we have to post our finished essay on the Westbridge school blog. As in, a very public platform that anyone—any of my classmates who know me only as “the new kid” or “the one who recently moved from the States”—could see and comment on.

There's *no way* I'm sharing actual details about my closest personal relationships. Even the *fake* details are embarrassing enough: like how I'd traced the lines of this pretend boyfriend's palm, whispered secrets to him in the dark, told him he meant the world to me, that he felt like home.

“ . . . not even remotely concerned that people at your school might, I don't know, read it and be curious about this boyfriend of yours?” Zoe's saying.

“I've got it covered,” I reassure her as I tug the curtains back open. Light floods in at once, illuminating the tiny specks of dust floating before my now-empty window. “I didn't include a name, so no one can try and stalk him. Plus, I wrote that I met this fictional dude three months ago while I was apartment hunting with my family, which is a pretty plausible meet-cute

without revealing what school he might go to. *And*, since our relationship is still pretty new and everything's kind of delicate, we like to keep things private. See?" I step in front of the camera and make a grand gesture toward the air, as if the entirety of my essay is written right there in glowing letters. "Foolproof."

"Wow." An intake of breath. "Wow. I mean, all this effort," Zoe says, sounding exasperated and impressed at the same time, "just so you don't have to write something real?"

"That's the plan."

There's a brief silence, broken only by the slurp of noodles on Zoe's end and the thud of footsteps outside my room. Then Zoe sighs and asks, in a tone far too concerned for my liking, "Are you doing okay at your new school, girl? Like, are you . . . settling in?"

"What?" I feel myself stiffen immediately, my muscles tensing as though anticipating a blow. "Why—why would you say that?"

"I don't know." Zoe jerks a shoulder, her ponytail bouncing with the motion. "Just . . . vibes."

I'm saved from having to answer when Ma calls down the hall at a volume one would usually reserve for search-and-rescue missions. "Ai-Ai! The driver's here!"

Ai-Ai is my Chinese nickname, which translates directly to *love*. Fictional relationship aside, I can't quite say I've lived up to it.

"I'm coming!" I yell back, then turn to the screen. "I assume you heard that?"

Zoe grins, and I relax slightly, relieved whatever heart-to-heart conversation she was trying to have is over. “Yeah, I think the whole planet heard it. Tell your mom I said hi,” she adds.

“Will do.” Before I shut my laptop, I make a cheesy heart sign with my fingers; something I wouldn’t be caught dead doing around anyone else. “I miss you.”

Zoe blows a dramatic kiss at me in response, and I laugh. “I miss you too.”

The hard knot in my stomach loosens a little at the familiar words. Ever since I left LA two years ago, we’ve ended every single call like this, no matter how busy and tired we are, or how short the conversation is, or how long it’ll be until we can talk again.

I miss you.

It’s not as good as the sleepovers we used to have at her place, where we’d sprawl on the couch in our pajamas, some Netflix show playing on her laptop, a plate of her mom’s homemade rice balls balanced between us. And it’s nowhere near as good as our weekend trips down by the beach, the California sun warming our skin, the breeze tugging at our salt-tangled hair. Of course it isn’t.

But for now, this small, simple ritual feels enough.

Because it’s ours.

Our driver has parked his car just outside the apartment complex, under the dappled shade of a willow tree.

Technically, Li Shushu isn’t so much our driver as *Ma’s* driver—one of the many perks of being an executive at a

super-prestigious global consulting company, and part of the sorry-for-asking-you-to-uproot-your life-almost-every-year! package—which is why he rushes out to greet her first.

“Yu Nūshi,” he says, opening the door for her with a little bow. *Madame Yu*.

This kind of treatment always makes me uncomfortable in a way I can’t articulate, even when it’s not directed at me, but Ma just smiles at him through her sunglasses and slides gracefully into the front seat. Looking at her now, with her pale, unblemished skin and custom-made blazer and razor-sharp bob, you’d never guess she grew up fighting for scraps with six other siblings in a poor rural Chinese town.

The rest of us squeeze into the back of the car in our usual order: me and Ba beside the windows, and my nine-year-old little sister, Emily, squashed in the middle.

“To your school?” Li Shushu confirms in slow, enunciated Mandarin as he starts the engine, the smell of new leather and petrol fumes seeping into the enclosed space. He’s been around me long enough to know the extent of my Chinese skills.

“To the school,” I agree, doing my best to ignore the pinch in my gut. I hate going to Westbridge enough as it is, but whatever the school, parent-teacher interviews are always the worst. If it wasn’t for the fact that Emily goes to the same school as me and also has her interviews this evening, I’d have made up a brilliant excuse to keep us all home.

Too late to do anything now.