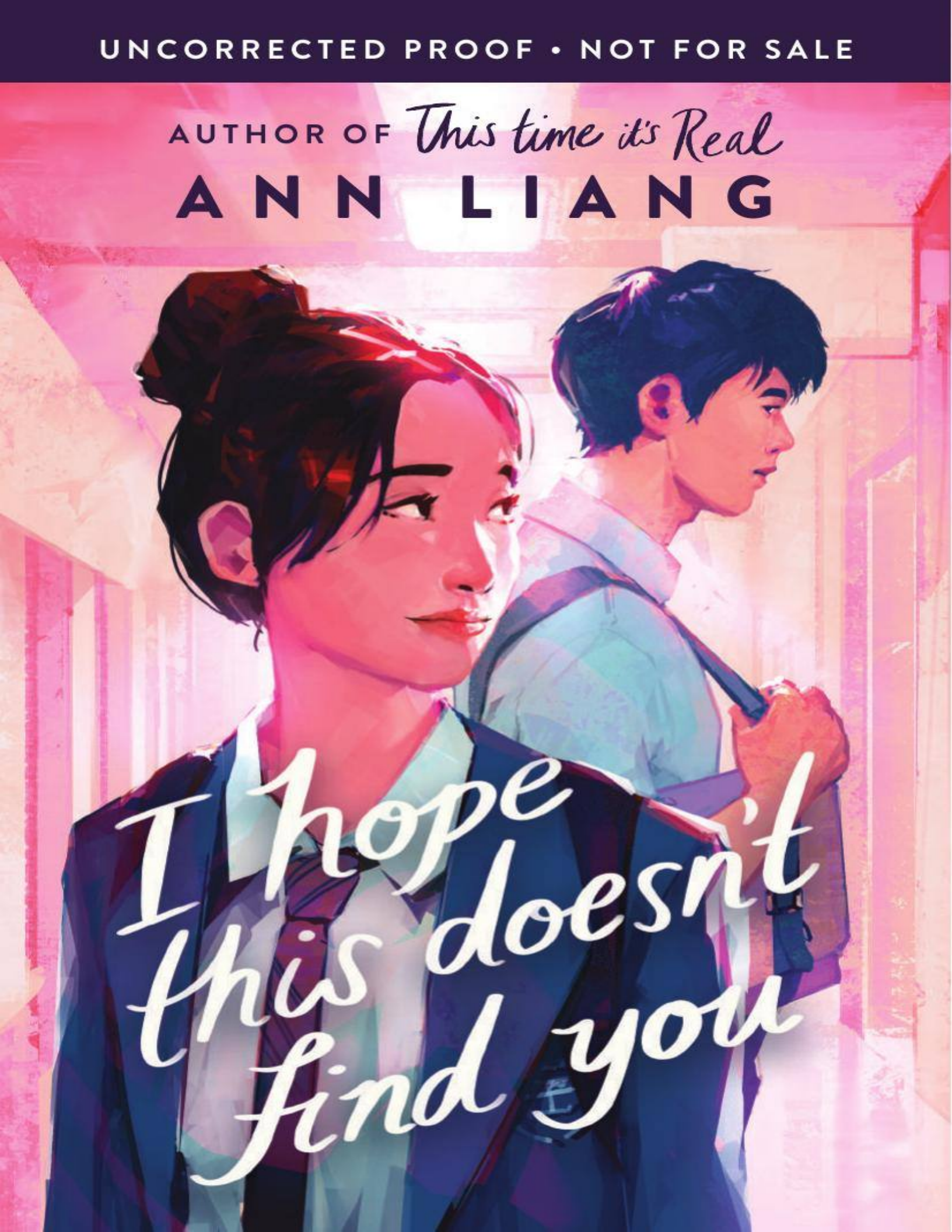


UNCORRECTED PROOF • NOT FOR SALE

AUTHOR OF *This time it's Real*

ANN LIANG

An illustration of a young woman and a young man in school uniforms. The woman is in the foreground, looking slightly to the right with a soft expression. She has dark hair tied up in a bun. The man is behind her, also looking to the right. He is wearing a light blue shirt and a dark tie. The background is a warm, pinkish-orange color with some architectural lines. The overall style is soft and painterly.

*I hope
this doesn't
find you*



*I hope
this doesn't
find you*

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AUTHOR OF

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FOR MY FAMILY

CHAPTER ONE

It's an honor to be waiting outside the school gates in the winter cold.

This is what I've been telling myself for the past hour as I shiver in my ironed blazer and watch my fingernails turn a concerning shade of purple. It's an immense honor. A privilege. A *joy*. It's exactly what I envisioned when Ms. Hedge, the year level coordinator, called for me in the middle of my math honors class yesterday and asked that I show a few visiting parents around the school.

"I trust that you're the right person to do it," she'd said with a wide smile, her gnarled hands folded neatly across her desk. "As school captain, you can tell them about how much Woodvale Academy cares for its students, and how well we've set you up for success. Feel free to also mention all the extracurriculars you're involved in and your many achievements— like how you recently came in first in the track- and- field regional finals. The parents will love that."

I'd smiled back at her and nodded along with so much fake enthusiasm I gave myself a neck cramp.

My neck is still stiff as I straighten the badges pinned to my front pocket, stamping my feet hard to ward off what feels like 1

imminent frostbite. My best friend, Abigail Ong, always jokes that I collect badges like a magpie. She's not wrong, exactly, but I'm not just admiring how the gold lettering for *school captain* catches the pale morning light. It's also a matter of symbolism.

Every single badge I own is proof of something: that I have perfect grades, that I'm the MVP of every sports team I'm in, that I'm an active member of the school community, that I help out at the local library. That I'm smart, and successful, and have a good future ahead of me—

Footsteps crunch over the dry grass.

I jerk my head up and squint into the distance. It's so early that the parking lot is still empty, save for a rusted brown Toyota that's probably been there since before the school was built. All the redbrick buildings on campus are quiet, the windows closed, the clouds rising over the bare trees painted a soft, watercolor pink.

No sign of any lost- looking parents.

Instead, a terribly familiar face comes into view, and out of habit, all the muscles in my body tense. Black eyes, sharp angles, a smile like a blade. That single, ridiculous strand of dark hair falling over his forehead. The school blazer draped around his shoulders like he's posing for a high- fashion magazine.

Julius Gong.

My co-captain, and the most prominent source of pain in my life.

At the mere sight of him, I experience a rush of loathing so 2

pure and visceral it feels akin to wonder. It's hard to believe that someone with such an awful personality could have such pleasing looks— or that someone with such pleasing looks could have such an awful personality. The equivalent of opening up a gift box with gorgeous silk ribbons and confetti and foil packaging and finding inside it a poisonous snake.

The snake in question stops three solid feet away from me. The patchy, yellowing grass stretched out between us is no-man's-land.

"You're early," he says, in his usual slow drawl, as if he can barely be bothered delivering the whole sentence. In the entire decade I've been unfortunate enough to know him, Julius has never started a single conversation with a proper greeting.

"Earlier than you," I tell him, like it's a major point of victory that I've been standing here so long I can't feel my toes.

"Yes, well, *I* was busy with other things."

I catch the implication: *I'm busier than you. I have more important things to do because I'm a more important person.*

"I'm busy too," I say immediately. "Very busy. My whole morning has been one urgent matter after another. In fact, I came here straight from my workout—"

"That does sound like a very urgent matter. I fear the nation's economy would collapse if you didn't get your daily push-ups in."

You're just bitter because I proved in our last PE class that I can do more push-ups than you. The words are perched right on the tip of my tongue. They would be so satisfying to say out loud, 3

almost as satisfying as beating him in another fitness test, but I swallow them down. Stuff my hands in my pockets. The chill seems to be spreading through my bone marrow in the particularly unpleasant kind of way I've come to associate with winters here in Melbourne.

Julius smiles with one side of his mouth, an expression so insincere I would rather he scowl. "Cold?"

"Nope," I say through chattering teeth. "Not at all."

"Your skin is blue, Sadie."

"Must be the lighting."

"You're also shaking."

"With anticipation," I insist.

"You do realize we only needed to get here at seven thirty, right?" He rolls back his sleeve, consults his watch. It's a brand too expensive for me to recognize, but fancy enough for me to know it's expensive. I actually wouldn't be surprised if he was checking the time for the sole purpose of showing it off. "It's seven twenty now. How long exactly have you been standing out here like an honorary human statue?"

I ignore his question. "Of course I realize. I was there when Ms. Hedge told us." Because after Ms. Hedge had given me her cheerful little speech about representing the school, Julius had shown up in her office too, and to my acute annoyance, she'd given him the exact same task. I'd then vowed that I would beat him in this— I would rock up to school way earlier, a hundred times more prepared, in case anyone else arrived early too, and 4

make an incredible first impression on the parents before he could. I'm aware that this isn't something we'll be *graded* on, but that doesn't matter.

In my head, I like to keep a running mental scoreboard of every test, competition, and opportunity in which Julius and I have clashed since we were seven, complete with its own specific point system that makes sense to only me:

Plus three points for earning one of Mr. Kaye's rare, approving smiles.

Plus five points for hitting a fundraiser goal.

Plus six points for coming first in the school basketball tournament.

Plus eight points for winning a class debate.

As of now, Julius is at 490 points. I'm at 495, thanks to the history test I came first in last week. Still, I can't be complacent.

Complacency is for losers.

"They better arrive soon," Julius says, checking his watch again. The vaguely American curl of his words has a way of making the disdain in his voice more pronounced. For some time now, I've suspected that his accent is fake. He's only ever set foot in the States for campus tours; there's no logical reason why he'd sound like that, except to seem special. "I have no interest in freezing."

I roll my eyes. *The world isn't made to serve you*, I want to snap at him. But the world must have been made to laugh in my face, because right on cue, as if he's manifested them into existence, 5

four cars roll into the parking lot. The doors click open, one by one, and an auntie steps out from each vehicle.

Auntie is the most accurate descriptor I can think of. I don't mean it in the blood- relative kind of way (though my own aunts are definitely all aunties), but as a state of mind, a particular mode of existence. It can be felt, it can be seen, but it can't be strictly defined. It has its unique markers: like the massive perms, the tattooed eyebrows, the Chanel bags, the valuable jade pendant tied together with a cheap red string. But there are also noticeable variations among them.

For instance, the first auntie to strut up to the gates is wearing six- inch heels and a neon-green scarf so bright it could function as a traffic light. The auntie in line after her is dressed in more subdued colors and has naturally stern features that remind me of my mom.

I'm not surprised that the parents interested in sending their kids to our school all happen to be Asian. We make up at least 90 percent of the student population at Woodvale Academy, and that's just a conservative estimate. *How* it came to be this way is sort of a chicken-and-egg question. Are the Asian kids here because their parents wanted them to attend a selective high school for gifted students? Or were their parents drawn to this school because they heard there were a bunch of Asian kids here?

I know for my mom it was the latter. A week after my dad left, she withdrew me from the practically all- white Catholic primary school I was in at the time and moved us to the other 6

side of town. *It's good to be surrounded by community*, she told me, her voice so weary I couldn't think of anything except to go along with whatever she wanted, that day and every day after-ward. *People who will understand.*

Julius shifts beside me, and I jolt back to the present. When he moves forward, I step out faster in front of him, my model-student smile snapping into place. I practice it in front of the mirror every day.

“Ayi, shi lai canguan xuexiao de ma?” I say in my very best Mandarin. *Are you here to tour the school?*

The first auntie blinks at me, then replies in smooth English, with an American accent that could put Julius’s to shame, “Yes. I am.”

Heat shoots up my face. Without even having to look, I can sense Julius’s quiet glee, his delight at my embarrassment. And before I can recover, he’s already made his grand entrance, his spine straight, chin up, the smug curve of his lips broadening into a warm grin.

“Hello,” he says, because he never has any problem greeting *other* people. “I’m Julius Gong, the school captain, and I’ll be showing you around campus this morning.”

I clear my throat.

He raises a dark brow at me, but adds nothing.

I clear my throat again, louder.

“And this is Sadie,” he says after a beat, waving a loose hand at me. “The other captain.”

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“School captain,” I can’t help emphasizing. My smile is starting to hurt my face. “I’m school captain. I’m also set to be valedictorian.”

“I honestly don’t think they care,” Julius murmurs into my ear, his voice low enough for only me to hear, his breath warm despite the freezing weather.

I try to act like he doesn’t exist. This is made somewhat difficult by the fact that all four aunties are busy scanning Julius from head to toe, like they’re trying to pick out their future son-in-law.

“How old are you?” one of the auntie asks.

“Seventeen,” Julius says readily.

“You look very tall,” another auntie says. “What’s your height?”

Julius regards her with all the patience in the world. “Six foot one.”

“That *is* tall,” she says, like this is an impressive feat on par with curing cancer. *It’s just genetics*, I’m tempted to point out, though of course I restrain myself. *He literally didn’t even have to do anything*. “And you’ve been at this school for how long, now?”

“Ten years,” he replies. “Almost my entire life.”

I press my tongue down against the sharp edge of my teeth. This part I could answer for him. By either curse or coincidence— and I’m increasingly leaning toward *curse*— we had entered Woodvale Academy in the same year. I had been the quiet girl, the shy one, the new kid nobody really wanted 8

anything to do with, while *he* was interesting, mysterious, effortlessly cool. He had acted as if he already knew he would one day rule the place, taking everything in with that calculating black gaze of his. Then in PE, we were placed on opposing teams for a game of dodgeball. The second he had the ball in his hands, his eyes had slid to me. Pinned me down. It was like those

David Attenborough animal documentaries where you watch in slow motion as the serpent closes in on its prey. I was the rabbit; he was the snake.

Somehow, out of the thirty- something kids in that sweaty, poorly ventilated gym, he had picked *me* as the person to beat.

But I was exceptionally good at dodging, light and fast on my feet. Each time he aimed at me, I swerved out of the way. In the end, it was only the two of us left. He kept throwing. I kept ducking. It probably would have gone on like that until the very last period, but the other kids in our class were getting tired of standing around, and the teacher had to step in and call it a tie.

From that point on, Julius Gong became the bane of my existence. The issue is that nobody else seems to share my frustrations, because he only ever bares his fangs at me.

In fact, the aunties are already in love with him. He's still smiling and nodding, asking the aunties about their health and their cooking and some upcoming farmer's market (when I'm certain Julius has never set foot into anything that starts with *farmer* in his life), and they're all just eating it up. As one of the 9

aunties asks him about his grades, he pauses, turns his head just a fraction toward me, and his smile twists into a smirk I alone can see.

"They're okay," he says, with false modesty. "I did receive the Top Achiever's Award for English just last semester. And chem-istry. And economics. And physics."

"*Wah*," the aunties gush in sync. They couldn't be more cooperative if he'd paid them. "That's incredible."

“You’re so smart.”

“To do so well at such a competitive school? You must be a genius.”

“Both handsome *and* intelligent. Your parents really raised you well.”

I can imagine my own blood boiling inside me, the steam scorching my throat. To the rest of the world, he might be an angel, a perfect student with a pretty face. But I know what he really is, what he’s like.

“We should get the tour going,” I say sweetly, clenching my teeth behind my fake beam. “There’s lots for us to see. Since there are four of you . . . I can show you two around.” I gesture to the aunties standing closest to me. Neither of them looks particularly happy about this arrangement. The auntie with the green scarf actually heaves an audible sigh of disappointment, which is always encouraging. “And Julius can lead the way for the others.”

The remaining two women step behind him at once, and 10

Julius pushes open the wrought iron gates with all the ease of a host at his own party. “Gladly,” he says. “Follow me.”

In the back of my mind, the numbers flash like a warning sign:

Three points to Julius.

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CHAPTER TWO

I spend the next hour talking until my throat hurts.