

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *I hope this doesn't find you*

**ANN LIANG**

Never  
thought  
I'd  
end up  
here





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A N N L I A N G

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FOR ALL THE PEOPLE WE MEET  
IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

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# CHAPTER ONE

The last thing I want is to make a dramatic entrance at my cousin's wedding.

Actually, the last thing I want is to *attend* this wedding. It's not that I have anything against my cousin Xiyue; she's seemed like a lovely person from the brief times we've spoken, even if most of those conversations consisted of me communicating via elaborate gestures instead of Mandarin while she stared in faint confusion.

But that's exactly what I'm dreading.

Once she says her vows, the event will become an intensive, three-hour-long version of those awkward exchanges, with all our relatives and family friends and strangers grouped together in one hotel ballroom. There'll be small talk. Jokes. Questions—none of which I'll be able to answer without slipping into English. And while I'd been clinging to the possibility that I could keep a low profile and slide in and out without anybody noticing, those hopes have now been left to rot somewhere on the road behind us.

"We're going to be late," I warn, leaning as far forward in the back seat as my seat belt will allow.

"Nonsense," my mom says. She takes one hand off the steering wheel to point at the massive white-domed building ahead of us, rising elegantly above the rows of palm trees and picket fences. "You can already see the hotel."

"We've been able to see it for the past ten minutes," I say. When she ignores my very valid observation, I catch my dad's eye in the rearview mirror. *Help*, I mouth.

He clears his throat and adjusts his glasses, though they immediately slip down his long nose again. "We could afford to go just a little faster," he says in the gentlest tone possible.

Three cars rush past us as he speaks. Someone honks.

"I'm going very fast already," my mom snaps. To be fair, for someone who generally seems to be on a mission to prove that walking is more efficient than driving, she is. At least we're not so far below the speed limit that we're at risk of being fined, like last time.

"You've made a convincing case," my dad says at once. "There's no rush. No rush at all." He shoots me a helpless look over his shoulder, which I return with a sigh. This is about as close as either of us will ever get to arguing with my mom. He adores her too much to ever accuse her of doing anything wrong, and I simply don't like to invest energy into battles I know I'll lose.

Besides, I've upset her enough in the past week.

So I lock my jaw shut, will away the slow churning sensation in my gut, and refresh my makeup for the third time since lunch. No matter what products I use, they tend to melt off my face within an hour, and it's always worse when the air is as hot and humid as it is today. Every makeup artist I've worked with has pointed this out. That, and the "lack of real estate" around my eyelids, and the sallowness of my complexion, and the thinness of my lips.

*Not that it's an issue anymore*, I remind myself, feeling a pang behind my sternum. It's another reason why I don't want to draw any unnecessary attention to myself at the wedding, but there's no way I'm avoiding my fate now.

We're running half an hour late by the time my mom pulls into the crowded parking lot. I yank open the door and jump out onto the pavement in my stilettos, then smooth my dress out over my knees, ready to bolt into the hotel—

Except Mom pauses on her way to the front steps, scrutinizing me with her hand on her hip, her mouth pursed. I've never seen her in court before, but I imagine this is how she appears before her clients. Focused, serious, and slightly frightening. "You look pretty," she says.

I release an internal sigh of relief. It doesn't matter how often I hear it—I still want the confirmation that I can be beautiful. Crave it, chase it, like an adrenaline junkie seeking their next high. If too much time passes without getting *some* kind of positive feedback about my appearance, I imagine myself shriveling away, all the work I've put into my face and my body gone to waste. "Thanks," I tell her. "That's very nice—"

"It's not meant to be nice. Why are you so put together?" she demands. "You're going to upstage your cousin."

"I'm not trying to upstage anyone." And I'm really not. My goal is never to look better than other people—it's just about making sure that I don't look bad. Still, I tug the bottom of my dress even farther down. It's a fairly straightforward navy piece, with a modest collar and basic lace design on the side. A model scout once told me in passing that darker tones suit me better, and I haven't worn anything else since.

"Maybe tie your hair up," she suggests.

"Fine." I attempt to follow her advice, scraping my hair back with my nails. "Is the ponytail better? I mean, well, worse?"

My mom pulls my dad over onto the sidewalk. "What do you think? Does she look uglier?" she asks hopefully.

"Our daughter is perfect. She could never be ugly, no matter what," my dad says, which is both really moving and unhelpful.

"She's certainly suited for modeling," my mom says, then catches herself. Remembers once again. It's hard to describe the emotion on her face. Disappointment? Anger? Resentment? I feel all of it in my throat, and more, an ache I can't get rid of.

"Let's just go inside," I say, walking well ahead of them before either can continue. I could run in five-inch heels, if I wanted to. Every now and then, at my high school friends' gatherings, they'd ask me to demonstrate it as a party trick, and the response would be overwhelming.

I pick up my pace, my heart beating in sync with the sharp, satisfying *clack* of my shoes against the marble floor when I step inside.



Even though I'd much rather not be here, I do have to appreciate the venue. Lilies and violet orchids bloom in vivid clusters all the way down the wide corridor, and a six-foot-tall poster of my cousin and her fiancé is perched before the entrance. In the photo, they're gazing at each other on a balcony, both beaming, their skin near perfect thanks to some combination of the golden-hour light and professional airbrushing. There's a sign too but it's written in Chinese characters—the only one I recognize is the *Zhang* from my own family name.

Judging from the sounds of tinkling laughter and shuffling footsteps and rumbling voices, the wedding must be well underway by now. My heart rate spikes the way it always does before I'm about to enter a crowded room, and I have to consciously steady my breathing. It's an old trick, picked up and perfected two years ago at two different schools, when the simple act of grabbing a salad from the cafeteria or finding my seat in class was something I had to brace myself for.

*Breathe in for four.*

*Hold.*

*Out for four.*

*Good.*

*You're good now.*

Or I'm supposed to be. But when I walk through the doors, the noise drops away.

It's like I'm back at my old school again, the very last place I'd ever want to return to.

The stares. The raised brows. The exchanged glances. Even though the people here don't have a reason to dislike me the way my classmates did, there are still way too many of them, filling up almost every single table in the ballroom. Countless faces turn, assessing me, and I get that pit-in-my-stomach feeling I've always hated, this sense that I'm looming over everyone like a dark cloud, a giant in the metaphorical and, at five feet ten, literal sense, unable to blend into any crowd, incapable of fitting into any room. I

can only stand here and let them stare as my face grows hot and my fingers go clammy.

There are times when I agree with my mom that maybe I *was* cut out to be a model, when I'm convinced that it's the only thing I can ever be cut out for—standing still and looking pretty— and I've wasted that, played my cards wrong. Then there are times when I'm convinced I was never suited for it, that it was ridiculous I ever believed otherwise. That the past two years were the true waste, because how can you be a model if you loathe the feeling of being looked at?

“Leah!”

More eyes flicker up as Xiyue strides over to us. The wedding poster really didn't do her justice. She's glowing. Gorgeous in her joy and in her qipao, which seems to have been designed just for her. Each delicate silver thread gleams as she moves, weaving together images of peonies and phoenixes that wrap around her shoulders and waist. She's everything you'd imagine a happy bride to be, with her red dress and rosy cheeks.

I open my mouth to tell her that I'm sorry for being so late, but the only Mandarin words I manage to recall on the spot are: “I'm sorry.”

This comes out much more ominous than I'd hoped.

“Sorry?” She frowns slightly.

My mom jumps in with what I'm assuming is an explanation, and then she spots Xiyue's mother behind her. Her face tightens for just a second before her already-wide smile stretches further, into a beam so beatific it can only be fake, her arms stretching out with it.

“Jiejie,” she coos, pulling my aunt into a polite hug, neither of them really touching.

I stay quiet as they exchange loud air kisses and step back to study each other. My aunt hasn't changed since I last saw her at the Spring Festival dinner a couple years ago. Same expensively coiffed, pitch-black hair, same stern, thin brows, same powdered skin pulled taut over high cheekbones. I actually don't think she's changed at all since I *first* saw her when I was a baby. The woman is walking proof that genes can only get you so far when it

comes to anti-aging, because while she looks like she's been sipping from the Fountain of Youth every morning, I was helping my mom pluck out the white hairs near her temple just the other night.

The bizarre thing is that in almost any other family, my mom would be the favorite child. The success story you brag about at events like this one. Good grades, good house, good career, happy marriage. Unfortunately for her, my aunt just happens to be one of the youngest and most esteemed professors in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Stanford and a Grammy-nominated composer on the side, because being good at just *one* thing is too primitive. The family legend goes that she's so accomplished she caught the attention of NASA, who wanted to send her into space, but she declined because she was too busy. Like, too busy *for the moon*.

"Hey," I say when my aunt turns toward me with an expectant look.

My mom tugs at my wrist harder than she typically would. "You don't say *hey* like you're bumping into a friend at the mall. You say *xiaoyi hao*," she hisses.

"Xiaoyi hao," I amend, but I seem to have already failed some kind of test. And I fail it again when my aunt asks me something in Chinese. I look helplessly over at my mom, who answers for me in a strained, high-pitched voice, then waves me off to a table in the corner.

It's the kids' table, I realize. Piles of candy have been laid out around the crimson rose centerpiece: chocolates in the shape of hearts and peanut brittle and strawberry swirls and pink marshmallows. There's even the corn-flavored jelly candies I remember from my childhood, as artificially sweet as they are bright yellow, yet so good I could never stop eating them.

A few of the kids have started digging into the sweets already, the shiny wrappers crinkling in their little fists. As I sit down in the only empty chair left, I recognize two of them as my very distant cousins, but everyone else at the table is a complete stranger—

No.

My gaze catches on the person next to me, the only boy here who's also seventeen, and I feel my heart drop.

It can't be him. It *shouldn't* be.

Yet there he is, with his dark hair falling like silk over his forehead, the angles of his face so finely rendered it's almost a taunt to contemporary sculptors, the softness of his lips a lie. He looks like he hasn't smiled once in the two years since I last saw him. He's definitely not smiling right now. His eyes are pinned on me, and though they're the exact same shade of brown—the kind that turns to liquid amber in the light, and black onyx at night—there's something different about them. Something heavier and melancholy.

"Hello," he says, and his voice is different too. Low. Leveled.

I never thought I would hear it again.

I prayed I would never have to.

"Hi," I say. Or I attempt to say, the effort of that single word exhausting. My whole body is numb. The moment doesn't seem real, but I can feel moisture gathering over the bare nape of my neck.

I like to consider myself a reasonably amiable person. I've never gotten into a heated argument or physical altercation with anyone before. I have a healthy number of friends, and though we're not exactly drive-across-the-country-at-midnight-to-help-you close the way I wish to be, at least we're you-can-borrow-my-sunglasses close. And I might dislike a number of people, or disagree with them on multiple points, but I don't *hate* anybody—

Except for the boy sitting down beside me.

Cyrus Sui.

\* \* \*

Ever since I was a child, I've had abnormally vivid nightmares. They're so believable that in those moments when I wake up in a cold sweat, I'm convinced that my life is what I experienced when I was asleep, and everything else is an illusion. I have nightmares about everything: About doing a shoot in the middle of Grand Park only to discover halfway through

that I wasn't dressed. About the sky falling, about my parents turning into flesh-eating aliens, about my parents growing old, which was even more terrifying. And without fail, starting from the day of the Incident, I've had nightmares about Cyrus Sui.

Nightmares where he joined the other kids at my previous schools in making my life miserable, shrinking away dramatically every time I walked close in the corridors, flinging the ball across the court a little too hard in gym so it would hit me. Where he kept spreading rumors about the Incident, following me from school to school and shouting about it through a speaker before I could even introduce myself. Where he openly gloated about ruining my life when I was fifteen, an arsonist grinning up at the flames while I choked on the smoke.

Even though it's been two years since the Incident itself, my grudge hasn't faded. If anything, it's only festered. Strengthened like wine, grown so potent that one small taste of it is enough to cloud your head.

My part-time friend and full-time classmate, Cate Addison, accused me once of holding grudges too easily. I've been holding a grudge against her for that as well.

"Remember me?" Cyrus asks, tipping his chin up a few degrees, as if he isn't the reason my school records are permanently stained. The reason I went through hell.

My throat closes. My fists clench. How I wish this were another nightmare. "I—"

"I'm sure you do," he says. He picks up one of the chocolates using two fingers but doesn't unwrap it. Just tosses it in the air. Catches it without looking. "I remember *you* very well, Leah. Nobody else has left such a strong impression."

"What are you doing here?" I hiss, my initial shock wearing off.

"There's someone here I need to see," he says, tossing the chocolate again, then cuts me a look I can't quite parse. "Believe me, I had no idea you'd be here."

To be fair, right up until I quit modeling last month, I had no idea I'd be here either. If I hadn't quit, the chances are that I would have had to cancel last minute, and one of my parents would've also had to miss out on the wedding just to drive me to some shoot on the other side of LA. But now I have no reason to miss out on any family functions, not when my current summer schedule mostly involves me crawling out of bed at noon, making myself spicy ramen for breakfast at lunchtime, and watching celebrity documentaries to avoid my looming college application deadlines.

"Sorry to disappoint," I mutter.

"What is life if not disappointing?" he says, just dryly enough that I can't tell if he's joking or making a genuine, depressing statement.

"Well," I say, crossing my ankles together under the table to keep from fidgeting or kicking something, "don't let me ruin your enjoyment of one of the greatest joys in the world."

"Free drinks?"

"I meant the wedding."

"Oh, I wouldn't enjoy it much anyway." He makes a general gesture toward the overhanging red tassels and fake, gold-foil trees and confetti balloons floating around the ballroom. "I find these overt displays of love to be somewhat nauseating."

I must be staring, because he lifts his brows.

"Something wrong?" he asks.

"You've changed," I can't help observing aloud.

His expression flickers, but he merely tosses the chocolate again. "How so?"

I study him. It's hard for me to pinpoint myself—whether it's the alertness in his eyes, despite the insouciance of his posture; the slight pause after each sentence, as if he's assessing my immediate reaction; or even the way he's dressed, his simple button-down so crisp it must be freshly ironed.

But I remember him as the boy who would smile all the time, though it was always a crooked smile, the type that assured you he was up to no good. He was also the one who'd make sure he was sitting behind me in every



class, just so he could tap my seat and annoy me. Who'd pester me during quiet reading sessions and pretend to be busy working when the teacher glared in our direction. Who'd steal my pencils. My homemade snacks. My scrunchies. My *science homework*, which is how I confirmed that he was stealing for the sole pleasure of stealing from me, because my grades were far worse than his.

He was the monster who left a real, live, buzzing bee inside my locker on Valentine's Day when all the other girls were opening theirs up to find flowers.

Not to mention that he was the culprit who got me kicked out of my old school.

He was evil. He is still evil, I'm certain, but more somber, and—if we're doing an honest evaluation—even more appallingly, unnervingly beautiful.

"Never mind," he says, setting the chocolate down flat on the crimson tablecloth, the heart pressed beneath his palm. "I can already predict the answer."

Like a fool, I rise to the bait. "How could you—"

"It's the cologne," he says. "I started using it last year. Nice, right?"

Entirely against my will, I find myself shifting forward and breathing in the clean, sandalwood scent of his shirt. It is new, and it is nice, not overpowering like the colognes the guys at my school seem to soak themselves in, and—I should absolutely not be smelling him right now.

I jerk back with a scowl. Then I remember the other guests in the room and stop myself. Force my facial muscles to relax. Multiple sources have informed me that I have a severe case of Ready to Kill You Face whenever I'm not making a concentrated effort to seem friendly. I blame it on my features. My arched brows and sunken cheekbones and angular chin might help me stand out in a photo, but they also make me look *downright hostile* and *unapproachable*—both quoted from other sources—in real life.

Cyrus leans over a little. "What happened to your face just now?"

"It's called disgust," I tell him, keeping my expression as serene as possible, just in case one of my cousin's maids of honor chooses this moment

to glance over at our table. I must appear perfect at all times. “Something I’d think you would be very familiar with.”

“It *was* disgust, perhaps. Now you look like you’re about to begrudgingly embark on a journey of inner healing somewhere deep in the woods,” he remarks.

“Then you’re disrupting my journey,” I say.

And he continues to disrupt it. “You’ve changed too.” His dark eyes trace my dress, my lips, then move up to my bangs, which get in the way of relatively important things like seeing, but help cover my forehead. The wedding seems to fade in my periphery, until the only sound I can hear is the strain in my own throat when I swallow. Part of me is surprised that Cyrus even recognizes me when I hardly recognize old photos of myself.

The last time he saw me, I wasn’t a model yet. I wasn’t pretty at all.

“Of course I’ve changed. It’s been two years,” I say, like the dramatic transformation in my style and face can be explained away by something as simple as the natural passage of time.

“I know,” he says, “but you just seem really ...”

*Gorgeous?* I fill in. *Elegant?* *Well-adjusted?* *Sophisticated?* *Glamorous?*

“Worn out.”

My mask of serenity cracks, and my cheeks prickle. In no world is this a compliment. I guess I shouldn’t have been expecting a compliment from someone like him, but I hadn’t been braced for a personal attack either.

“How nice of you,” I say coolly.

He starts to speak again, but his voice is drowned out by the most cheerful wedding music I’ve ever heard in my entire life. The chorus is vaguely familiar, like the particular sweetness of the corn-flavored jelly candies, something I can’t name but know that I should be able to, if only for the way it creates a faint stirring under my breastbone. Familiar, but forgotten.

As I twist around in my seat to watch my beaming cousin make her way up to the front of the ballroom, I’m still fuming over Cyrus’s choice of words. *Worn out*. As if even the four layers of makeup can’t conceal my exhaustion.

As if he can tell from one glance that I've been buckling under the pressure, pouring my tears into an industry that couldn't care less if I disappeared—and so I did. I have.

I left it all behind me, and now, somehow, I've ended up here: at a wedding I never wanted to attend, next to the old nemesis I never wanted to be reunited with, who's retained the uncanny ability to get under my skin after two years.

And I have no choice but to bear it until it's time to go.

# CHAPTER TWO

I'm pretty sure my cousin gets married.

Almost certain. I do my best to pay attention as she goes through the rituals while the guests sniff into their napkins and the children continue munching on the candy. The only reason I know what the rituals even are is because my mom had been talking about them before we left the house. First, the pair must bow to the sky and the earth, and then to their parents, and then to each other.

Wine is poured into little ceramic cups. Vows are probably made, and the scene is probably beautiful, a celebration of true love and whatnot against a backdrop of brilliant scarlet and gold banners.

I would know for sure if I weren't so distracted by Cyrus and his reactions. Or, rather, his lack of reaction. He's the only person here who looks decidedly unmoved. Unimpressed. He barely seems to be paying attention to the bride and groom at all—he spends more time watching my aunt fold up her silk handkerchief into a neat square after she wipes her eyes.

“What's your problem?” I mutter as Xiyue starts to move toward one of the round tables, one hand balancing a glass of wine, the other holding on to her new husband's arm. “This is meant to be a happy occasion. They're in love.”

“They think they're in love, as most newlyweds tend to,” Cyrus says with a shrug. “It'll pass.”

“Or,” I counter, “they could grow old together in a yellow cottage with its own vegetable patch and duck pond.”

This earns me a brief head tilt. “Is that your dream for the future?”

“God, no,” I say. “Ducks scare me. My dream is—”

I stop halfway, reaching for something that's no longer there. My dream *was* to become a successful model, to see my face in magazine spreads, to meet the most esteemed designers and walk the most influential runway shows and get invited to the most exclusive parties. Not even because I thought it'd be fun, but just to say I was there. It used to be so simple, so clear-cut.

Now I have no idea. I imagine myself graduating from high school, and then—nothing. It's like trying to spot a distant shore through ocean fog, or recognizing a stranger's face from miles away.

"To sleep," I finish, looking off to the side. Xiyue has already moved on to the neighboring table, where all the elderly aunties take turns pinching her cheeks and showering her with their blessings. "To sleep forever."

"I believe you're describing death," Cyrus says.

"At least it's attainable."

He makes a light scoffing sound. "A low bar."

"Yes, well—" I'm distracted by a sudden, harrowing realization as Xiyue begins walking over to us. "Oh my god."

"What?" he asks immediately, shifting forward.

"*We're* not expected to say anything, are we? To Xiyue, I mean."

"Of course we are," he says, looking confused by my panic. "It's basic etiquette. You don't need to give a speech—just offer up a few congratulatory words or something."

"I—I can't—" I don't know what I'm supposed to say. My Mandarin skills are limited to simple greetings and common sayings in my household, such as "stop leaving your cups everywhere" and "clean out your wardrobe" and "math requires practice." None of them are applicable here.

"I know," one of the kids speaks up from the other side of the table. She looks no older than eight. Her hair is bunched into pigtails that bob around when she grabs another handful of candy. "Zhu nimen xinhun yukuai, zaosheng guizi."

"What—what does that mean?" I ask, tracking my cousin's movement out of the corner of my eye.

“It means you wish them a happy marriage, and hope that they start a healthy family soon,” Cyrus explains.

I hesitate. “Are you sure?”

“You can look it up if you don’t believe me,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Okay, thank you so much,” I tell the little girl, both genuinely grateful and devastatingly humbled to be receiving Mandarin help from someone half my size. “And thank you too, I guess,” I say to Cyrus with far less enthusiasm. “So it’s ... What was it again?”

“Zhu nimen xinhun yukuai, zaosheng guizi,” he advises. Even though we’ve both grown up here in LA, his pronunciation is perfect, but I don’t have time to be annoyed about it.

“Got it.” I repeat the phrase rapidly under my breath as my cousin and her husband approach. *Zhu nimen xinhun yukuai, zaosheng guizi*. It’s only a few words. Even though I might not understand them, I can rely on my short-term memory to know the sounds. I just have to focus and recite them until it’s my turn. *Zhu nimen xinhun yukuai*—

“I thought your Mandarin was decent,” Cyrus says.

Dammit.

“Please don’t talk to me right now,” I say, wiping my hands against my dress. “I’m concentrating.”

*Zhu nimen xinhun yukuai*.

“I can tell. Your concentrating face looks the same.” He points to the space between his brows, then to mine. “You get this little crease here.”

*Xinhun. Xin. Hun.*

*Zhu nimen xinhun*—

“But really. Have you been slacking off on your Chinese studies these past two years or what?” Cyrus asks.

I glare at him. “Could you not—”

“Hi!” Xiyue appears at our table, her husband following close after her. She smiles over at me expectantly, her glass of wine refilled. And then she waits. Her husband waits too. This is my first time seeing him up close, and he has the sort of face that just belongs to a banker: a soft jaw, gelled hair,