

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANN LIANG

AN
ORIGINAL

*I hope
this doesn't
find you*

NOVELLA

*I hope
this finds
you*



I
hope
this
finds
you

AN *I hope this doesn't find you* NOVELLA

A N N L I A N G



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FOR MY READERS

MELBOURNE, FINAL SEMESTER

SADIE

It's an honor to be waiting outside the school gates for Julius Gong.

Not that I'd ever admit it to him, of course. So I pretend to be busy rifling through my bag, even though I've already noticed him walking up the hill in my peripheral vision. Difficult *not* to notice him when he looks like that: dark hair falling over his eyes, unfairly pretty face, his tie straight as his grades, his blazer sleeves rolled up halfway. Despite the summer heat rising all around us, he's still sticking to his winter school uniform, for no reason other than his utter disdain for shorts in any kind of non-beach setting. When I was thoughtful enough to question him about it the other week—I *mean, surely you're hot in that*—he stared at me for a deliberate beat, then said slowly, eyes gleaming, *Yes, Sadie, I'm glad you think so.*

Another reason why I can't let him know I've been standing around waiting for him for the past half hour: His already inflated ego seems to have reached new peaks recently. And I'm probably partly responsible for it.

Still, as he draws closer, my heart does this funny little leap, like I'm seeing him for the first time in months, when I only just said goodbye to him last night on the steps of my family's bakery.

“Waiting for me?” he asks, easily crossing the remaining distance between us, a faint grin tugging at his lips.

“No,” I say at once. “I was just—looking for something.”

“Looking for what?” His brows rise. “A convincing lie?”

“No,” I repeat, louder. I yank out my daily planner and flip the pastel-pink cover open to a random page. “This.”

“Ah, right.” He hooks one casual finger around the strap of my bag and tugs, pulling me closer to him so he can read the planner over my shoulder. “You need to see what you were planning to do three Wednesdays ago? Wow. You know, I’ve only heard of people planning in advance. I didn’t realize you could also plan in hindsight—”

“Shush. That was just the wrong page,” I insist, trying my best to focus on the planner while his breath tickles my neck. At last, I find my list of tasks for the day. Beneath the vaguely threatening title I’ve written out for myself—*To Do, Or Else!!!*—I’ve highlighted and underlined *Final Math Test*. I make my way further down—*submit chemistry quiz, annotate pages 10–30 of text study, update exam booklet, finish writing mock essay, review speech for valedictory dinner, buy thank-you gifts for all teachers and principal, check bakery admin email*—before landing on a new task in someone else’s sharp, neat handwriting.

It says: *take a break (and go on a date with Julius)*.

I hold the planner up higher and whirl around. “Wait. When did you write this?”

Julius gazes innocently over at me. “What are you talking about?”

“I recognize your handwriting, Julius,” I point out, biting my cheek to stop from smiling too wide. “I’m pretty sure I’ve spent, like, a combined total of eighty hours staring at it.”

“That seems like an underestimation,” he says. “You have, by your own admission, spent longer than that just staring at my hands—”

I wriggle free from him and march through the gates with as much false indignation as I can muster, knowing he’ll follow right behind. And he does, his footsteps falling quickly after mine. “I thought we agreed we weren’t going to bring up the emails again—”

“Sorry,” he says, without sounding remotely apologetic. “Though I think you should rearrange the order of your tasks. Make the last task your first priority.”

“I’ll take a proper break after I beat you in the test today,” I tell him.

“Kind of cocky, aren’t you?”

“I must’ve learned it from you.”

Without glancing at him, I can tell he’s smiling. I hadn’t thought it was possible to know Julius Gong better than I already knew him, not when I’ve spent ten years doing everything within my power to outsmart him, becoming attuned to his quirks and routines and habits. But there’s so much more—with him, there’s

always more. More to do, more to hope for, more to say, more to learn. New spaces carved into our routines for each other, new habits we've created together. Like how, when we reach the math building, he pushes the heavy glass door open and holds it for me. Or how, when all the other students start streaming indoors with their backpacks and tennis rackets, he naturally puts his arm around my shoulders, careful not to let anyone bump into me. And isn't it strange, I find myself marveling, how the safest I've ever felt is beside the boy I once considered the bane of my existence.

"I can't believe you already have a list of tasks for the holidays," Julius says, nodding to my planner as I wrestle it back into my bag.

"Well, of course," I huff out. "I need to be productive." And I fully intend to be. During the half-year gap between when school finishes here in Melbourne and when college starts in the US, I'm going to complete an internship, learn a new language, get a part-time job as a tutor, hire and train two more employees to help out at the bakery, run a marathon, and read the forty books I've been meaning to get to all year.

"Rest assured that you're on track to have the most productive holiday ever," Julius remarks. "I hope that makes you happy."

"It does," I say cheerily, which earns me an affectionate shake of his head.

"I suppose it's just as well," he says, "since you won't have to set aside time to plan out our trip—"

“Oh, I’ve already set aside time for that,” I cut in.

He arches a brow. “So the bet’s still on?”

“Of course it is.” It’s all I’ve been thinking about ever since we made the deal two months ago. Whoever scores higher in this final math test will get to plan out the entirety of our upcoming US trip before he starts college at Stanford and I start at Berkeley, and the other person will have to go along with absolutely everything. Even if my pride weren’t on the line, the idea of not being able to control every single factor while traveling around another country is horrifying. And with only six months to go before we leave for the US, we’re already seriously pushing my limits when it comes to planning ahead. If I don’t start booking tickets and finalizing details soon, I might actually break out into stress hives. It’s not like I don’t *trust* Julius to organize our itinerary, but I’m used to doing these things by myself; from family vacations to girls’ trips with Abigail, I’m always the one people turn to for the check-in time and reservation code and restaurant recommendations.

Plus, Julius and I clearly don’t have the same idea of what makes for a pleasant trip. While I was leaning more toward a cute, cozy, conveniently located Airbnb, Julius has been eyeing a five-star boutique hotel with Pegasus statues and fountains inside the lobby.

“Just checking.” Julius fixes me with that beautiful, infuriating look I hate almost as much as I love. “No backing out if you lose.”

I slow to a stop in front of the math classroom. Lift my chin. Meet his gaze. “You’re the one who’s a sore loser.”

“Only because losing is so rare for me,” he says. “It offends my very being.”

“You offend my very being.”

He huffs out a laugh. “Excuse me?”

“Okay, that was unnecessary,” I say. “You don’t offend my very being. Well, you do, or you used to, but only sometimes.”

“When did you become so romantic?” he says dryly, but he reaches into his pocket and hands me a strawberry-and-yogurt granola bar. It’s both my favorite brand and flavor, the ones that are only available from the organic supermarket all the way on the other side of town, where everything costs triple the price and the customers almost exclusively wear Lululemon.

I blink at the bar in my hand, confused. “What is this?”

“Has all that late-night studying impaired your ability to recognize basic food, Sadie?”

“I know, but—I mean, why? Are you trying to poison me?”

He scoffs. “We’ve gotten dinner together like fifty times by now. I literally made you that steak dinner in my house just the other week—”

“It was delicious, by the way, I loved the sauce—”

“I can cook it for you again,” he says immediately. “But my point is, if I wanted to poison you, I would’ve had far better opportunities to do so.”

“Valid,” I concede. “But then—”

“You always lose your appetite before a test, don’t you? You can take a few bites or save it for later if you’d like. I just don’t want you fainting from hunger in the middle of class.”

As I slip the bar into my blazer pocket, I feel a rush of gratitude for him so strong it’s almost violent, like an attack on my system. Everything in me rendered raw and vulnerable, left reeling in his wake. God help us the day he finds out how much he affects me. “Thank you,” I tell him. “And—good luck with the test.”

The expression on his face is half smile, half smirk. Smugness without malice. “I don’t need any luck.”

“Yeah, sure you don’t,” I say. Then, scanning the corridor to make sure there aren’t too many people looking our way, I quickly step toward him. Reach around the back of his neck, hands finding his hair, and stand on my tiptoes. Before he can react, I press my lips to his. Soft, slow, open. Perfect. He exhales shakily, his arms already tightening around my waist, leaning into me, as if he’s amazed this is happening.

When I release him, his eyes are wide, dazed, like he’s forgotten where we are for a few seconds, before sharpening back on me. “You definitely did that on purpose,” he accuses. “To mess with my head before the test.”

I have to bite back my laughter. “Then maybe you shouldn’t let yourself get distracted so easily.”

“Can you blame me?” he says, with an air of something like resignation. Like defeat. “Have you seen yourself?”

And it's almost as if I'm able to: I see myself reflected in his eyes, my cheeks flushed and my ponytail swishing, and he's watching me with such clear, unabashed affection that it's difficult not to believe he wants me. Makes me slightly dizzy, to imagine I could hold that much power over another person, let alone someone like Julius Gong.

Then the first warning bell sounds and I straighten, forcibly pushing aside all tender thoughts of him. For the next period, he will not be my first and greatest love but my first enemy, my greatest rival. I will obliterate him. And then I will hold him gently while we celebrate my victory.

"See you in there," I tell him, and turn on my heel before he can do something evil and ruinous, like kiss me back.

MELBOURNE, FINAL SEMESTER

JULIUS

For a decade, Julius did his best to avoid being seated next to Sadie Wen.

He realized very early on that nothing was more detrimental to his studies. Her closeness was too overpowering. He'd find himself staring in her direction more often than he stared at the board. He became overly aware of his own body, his posture, and if he'd styled his hair well enough that morning and whether his blazer was wrinkled.

And her.

He was always instantly, pathetically aware of her in every room she entered, but it became unbearable when they were sitting side by side at the same table. His own thoughts taunted and betrayed him; he shouldn't be noticing how the freckles on her cheeks looked more prominent in the morning light, how she adjusted her bun whenever she had a headache, how she chewed the end of her pen when she was trying to solve an equation. He shouldn't be tensing whenever her shoulder accidentally brushed against his, or when she reached over his desk for a worksheet. He shouldn't be keeping track of how many times she faked a smile at the teacher or her classmates or nodded along when she was clearly uncomfortable, and how many times her face lit up

with genuine excitement. He shouldn't be concerned that the latter happened far less frequently than the former, and he most definitely shouldn't be wondering how to change that, as if her happiness had anything to do with him.

But that was back when he was still fighting against the idea of her, and no matter how strong his willpower, he can see in hindsight that he was destined to lose from the beginning.

Now he is grateful for every class where the teachers have allowed them to sit together. It makes even the duller subjects interesting—and today, it also makes the wait for their results that much shorter.

The second Mr. Kaye sets Sadie's math paper down before her, he glances over, faster than Sadie can hide her score.

97 percent.

"Not bad," he tells Sadie, impressed despite himself. Their final math test was undoubtedly the hardest one they've taken all year, and he heard that the year level's average was only 63 percent.

"Don't say anything until you get your score," Sadie warns him, but there's a small smile on her lips, the anticipation of victory.

He meets her gaze as steadily as he can, though he feels his pulse picking up. He knows for certain he's lost at least one mark—it was that cursed challenge question at the end, which he recalculated as soon as he got home after the test. A disgusting blunder. But as long as he didn't miss anything else, there's

still a chance he could beat her. He *has* to beat her. He already has the perfect US trip planned out for her—

“Well done, Julius,” Mr. Kaye says, sliding his paper over.

He flips it to the first page right away, blood pounding in his eardrums as he finds the score, almost afraid to see it . . .

96 percent.

“No,” he whispers, a physical reaction more than a verbal one. Automatic.

“Yes,” comes Sadie’s delighted response. “Oh my god, this is great—you have to honor the bet, okay?”

“Wait,” he says, shaking his head. He goes through all the questions he lost a mark on: three in total. He refuses to believe it. There must be something he can do, something to salvage this—

“It was a close match,” Sadie says happily, and she’s so exuberant, so pleased with herself, that he almost drops the matter. He would drop anything just to keep her smiling like that. “It’s okay if you need some time to accept your defeat. While *you* do that, I’m going to finish outlining the itinerary.”

But then he finds it. The third question. The teacher didn’t give him any marks for it, yet he’s sure his answer is right. “Can I see what you wrote for this one?” he asks Sadie.

“Sure,” she says, sliding her paper toward him. “If you need me to explain it—”

“We literally wrote the same answer, look,” he says, pointing down at the number like it’s a groundbreaking scientific discovery. “How did you get marks if I didn’t?”

Sadie studies the two tests for a minute. “Because you didn’t show your working out.”

“Because I didn’t *need* to show my working out,” he says, and can’t help adding a little smugly, “I did it in my head.”

Sadie offers him an indulgent sort of smile. “Good job.”

“The teacher clearly doesn’t think so.”

“Well, the teacher needs to see all the steps—”

“Those extra steps were unnecessary,” he insists. “It would have taken more effort to write it all down than to simply solve it—”

“But it’s about the *process*—”

“Does it really matter what the process is if I got the result?”

“See—morally, philosophically—you understand how that kind of thinking would be a problem, right?”

Julius rolls his eyes. “But this isn’t philosophy class. It’s *math*—”

“Is there a problem here?” Mr. Kaye asks, circling around to their desk again. Julius thought he and Sadie were discussing their tests in quiet, reasonable tones, but only now does he realize the whole class has stopped what they’re doing to watch them.

He forces his voice back down into a normal volume and offers the teacher his best smile. “I wouldn’t say there’s a *problem*, Mr. Kaye. But I am somewhat confused about the grading of this question—you see, I had written the right answer, but I wasn’t awarded any marks for it.”

“You have the answer, yes, but I wasn’t able to see how you

had reached it,” Mr. Kaye explains, lowering himself to peer over at the paper in that awkward semi-squatting position teachers do, like he doesn’t want to commit to lingering any longer than needed. “Sadie’s working out is a perfect example of what I was looking for. It’s neat, it’s logical, and you can follow exactly how she went from step A to step B.”

“See,” Sadie whispers into his ear, not even concealing her glee.

“But people might approach the problem differently,” Julius presses. “I saw the question, and my mind provided me with the answer right away. I don’t know how I’m expected to convey that.”

“You’re saying . . . the number just sprang into your head,” Mr. Kaye says.

“When you do enough practice questions, it’s entirely possible,” Julius says. “And I thought the school wanted to encourage us to learn using the method that best suits us. This *is* the method that best suits me.”

Mr. Kaye hesitates.

Julius seizes the beat of silence. “Even if you can’t award me the *full* marks, Mr. Kaye, surely I don’t deserve zero marks for getting the correct answer?”

“I suppose your answer *was* correct,” Mr. Kaye allows, and maybe it’s because he can sense that Julius is both willing and able to debate this point until lunchtime and is simply too tired for this, or because Julius has accrued enough credit after completing his challenge questions every week since the start of school, but

he picks up Julius's paper. Considers it for a moment longer, then adds one mark next to the question.

Sadie makes an indignant sound. "What? That's—"

"Thank you *so* much, Mr. Kaye," Julius calls after the teacher as he returns to his desk. Now it's his turn to grin at Sadie. "According to the calculations I just did in my head, that brings my overall percentage up to ninety-seven, which makes it a tie."

"You can't be serious," Sadie grumbles, prodding him in the ribs with her pen, but gently. "You negotiated your way to victory."

"As many brilliant strategists have done," Julius says. "Don't worry, I'll be fair."

"Yeah, right. Since when did you ever play fair?"

"Since now," he says sweetly. "How about I plan out the first half of the trip, and you plan out the second? That gives us a whole week of activities each. But if I'm taking the first half, I do think it makes sense for me to decide on the accommodation."

"I'm just concerned you're going to book us a deluxe suite in that horribly overpriced five-star hotel," Sadie says.

"Rest assured that if I *were* to book a deluxe suite, I'd book the honeymoon suite for us," he tells her. "But you'll see."

Sadie prods him one final time, but Julius just laughs, catches the pen in his fingers, and tugs her toward him until she's only a couple of inches away. She stares up at him, annoyance warring with affection on her face and ultimately losing, color spreading fast through her cheeks. God, he loves sitting next to her. Can't

believe he's wasted all this time resisting, trying to run away, when she's the only one he's ever wanted to run toward. "I hate you," she grumbles without conviction, her voice soft enough to be a sigh.

He tugs her closer still, taking his time to take her in, his smile widening slowly. "I know you don't," he says.

And she doesn't disagree.

SAN FRANCISCO, FIRST WEEK

SADIE

I keep waiting for a Pegasus to appear, but when our Uber pulls into the driveway, there are no statues of mythical creatures in sight. There isn't even a lobby, just a three-story building with robin-blue walls and wisteria draped over the iron gate, blending in perfectly with the other houses lining the streets.

"Are we . . . in the right place?" I ask Julius. "Where's our hotel?"

"There is no hotel," he says, sliding out of the back seat. He rounds the car from behind, then opens the door for me. "This is where we'll be staying. I booked us an Airbnb."

"What?" I hop outside, into the sun, following him as he unloads our luggage from the trunk. Well, it's mostly *my* luggage; he's somehow managed to condense two weeks of clothing into a single suitcase. Meanwhile, I've packed everything from my most trusted, dermatologist-approved brand of shampoo and sunscreen to my emergency supply of fuzzy socks. "But what about that fancy hotel you wanted—"

"I decided against it," he says with a shrug. "I know it's expensive, and you'd get all weird and guilty if I offered to pay for it on your behalf. Plus, the hotel was in a famously noisy area, and you're a super light sleeper."