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THE PRINCESS DIARIES SERIES AND NO WORDS

A N N L I A N G

This time it's Real





*This
time
it's
Real*

A N N L I A N G



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FOR ALL THE CYNICS WHO SECRETLY STILL BELIEVE IN LOVE

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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 Nüshi," 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.

I lean back in my seat and press my cheek to the cool, flat glass, watching our apartment complex grow smaller and smaller until it disappears entirely, replaced by the onrush of the inner city scene.

Since we moved back here, I’ve spent most of our car rides plastered to the window like this, trying to take in the sharp rise and fall of the Beijing skyline, the maze of intersections and ring roads, the bright clusters of dumpling restaurants and packed grocery stores.

Trying to memorize it all—and trying to remember.

It kind of amazes me how misleading the photos you tend to see of Beijing are. They either depict the city as this smoggy postapocalyptic world packed full of weathered, stony-faced people in pollution masks, or they make it look like something straight out of a high-budget sci-fi movie, all sleek skyscrapers and dazzling lights and dripping luxury.

They rarely capture the true energy of the city, the forward momentum that runs beneath everything here like a wild undercurrent. Everyone seems to be hustling, reaching, striving for more, moving from one place to the next; whether it’s the delivery guy weaving through the traffic behind us with dozens of takeout boxes strapped to his bike, or the businesswoman texting someone frantically in the Mercedes on our left.

My attention shifts when a famous Chinese rapper’s song starts playing on the radio. In the rearview mirror, I see Ma remove her sunglasses and visibly wince.

“Why does he keep making those *si-ge si-ge* sounds?” she demands after about three seconds. “Does he have something stuck in his throat?”

I choke on a laugh.

“It’s just how music sounds nowadays,” Ba says in Mandarin, ever the diplomat.

“I think it’s kind of nice,” I volunteer, bobbing my head to the beat.

Ma glances back at me with a half-hearted scowl. “Don’t bounce your head like that, Ai-Ai. You look like a chicken.”

“You mean like this?” I bob my head harder.

Ba hides a smile with the back of his hand while Ma clucks her tongue, and Emily, who I’m convinced is really an eighty-year-old grandma trapped inside a nine-year-old’s tiny body, lets out a long, dramatic sigh. “Teenagers,” she mutters.

I elbow her in the ribs, which makes her elbow me back, which sets off a whole new round of bickering that only ends when Ma threatens to feed us nothing but plain rice for dinner.

If I’m honest, though, it’s in these moments—with the music filling the car and the wind whipping past the windows, the late-afternoon sun flashing gold through the trees and my family close beside me—that I feel ... lucky. Really, truly lucky, despite all the moving and leaving and adjusting. Despite everything.

CHAPTER TWO

The mood doesn't last.

As soon as we pull up beside the Westbridge school buildings, I realize my mistake.

Everyone is dressed in casual clothes. Cute summer dresses. Crop tops and jean shorts. The teachers didn't specify what to wear this evening, and I naively assumed it'd be standard uniform, because that's what the expectations were at my previous school.

My family starts getting out of the car, and I push down a swell of panic. It's not like I'll get *in trouble* for wearing what I'm wearing—I just know I'll look dumb and stand out. I'll look like the Clueless New Kid, which is exactly what I am, but that doesn't make it any easier to bear.

"Ai-Ai." Ma taps the window. "Kuaidian." *Hurry.*

I say a quick thanks to the driver and step outside. At least the weather's nice; the wind's quieted down to more of a gentle, silky breeze, a welcome reprieve from the heat. And the sky. The sky is beautiful, a blend of pastel blues and muted pinks.

I inhale. Exhale.

This is fine, I tell myself. *Totally fine.*

"Come on, Baba," Emily is saying, already pulling Ba toward the primary school section of the campus, where all the walls are painted bright colors. Obnoxiously bright colors, if you ask me. "You *have* to talk to Ms. Chloe. I told her how you were a poet, and you do signings and stuff at big bookstores, and she was soooo impressed. She didn't believe me at first, I don't think, but then I made her search your name, and then ..."

Emily looks *actually* fine, because she is. No matter where we go, my little sister never has any trouble fitting or settling in. We could probably

ship her off to Antarctica and find her just chilling with the penguins two weeks later.

Ma and I walk in the opposite direction, where the senior classrooms are. The wide gray corridors are already pretty crowded with parents and students, some heading in, some weaving their way out. Just as I expected, a few people's eyes slide to my stiff skirt and too-big blazer, a mixture of pity and amusement flickering over their faces before they avert their gazes.

I lift my chin high. Walk faster.

This is fine.

We couldn't reach my homeroom fast enough.

It's loud inside. Classmates everywhere, teachers waiting behind rows of desks. None of them say hi to me, and I don't say hi to them either.

Even though school started almost a month ago, I haven't really gotten to know anyone. All the names and faces and classes kind of just blur together. The way I see it, we'll be graduating in less than a year anyway. There's no reason to *put myself out there*, as my past teachers all loved to recommend, and get attached to people only to grow apart months later. With Ma's job moving us around all the time, it's already happened too many times for me to keep track: that slow, painful, far-too-predictable transition from strangers to acquaintances to friends back to strangers the second I leave the school behind me.

I'd be a masochist to put myself through it again.

Besides, there are fewer than thirty kids in my whole year level, and everyone's clearly formed their own cliques already. To my right, a group of girls are squealing and embracing like it's been years since they last saw one another, not hours. And somewhere behind me, another group is deep in conversation, switching between three languages—English, Korean, and something else—within every sentence as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

Pretty on-brand for an international school, I guess.

“Ah! Look who it is!”

My English and homeroom teacher, Mr. Lee, waves me over, his eyes bright behind his thick, oversized glasses. He's been cursed with this round baby face and unruly gray-streaked hair, which has the combined, disorienting effect of making him look like he could either be in his early thirties or late fifties.

"Have a seat, have a seat," he says briskly, motioning to two chairs on the other side of his desk. Then his attention goes to Ma, and his expression grows more benevolent. The way someone would look at a cute kid in the park. "And this is ... Eliza's mother, I'm assuming."

"Yes. I'm Eva Yu," Ma says, instantly easing into the chirpy Work Voice she uses around white people, her accent flattened to sound more American. She extends a manicured hand. "It's lovely to meet you."

Mr. Lee's brows furrow a little as he shakes it, and furrow farther when he realizes how strong her grip is. I can tell he's trying to match up his impression of Ma with whatever preconceived idea he had of her, just based on the non-Western surname.

Ma lets go first, sitting back with a small, self-satisfied smile.

She's enjoying this, I know. She's always enjoyed surprising people, which happens often, because people are always underestimating her. Part of the reason she got into consulting in the first place was because a friend joked that she'd never survive in the corporate world.

"Now ..." Mr. Lee clears his throat. Turns to me again. "Since you're new to this, let's just go over the rules real quick, yeah?" He doesn't wait for me to respond. "In the next ten minutes or so, I'll be talking to your mother about your academic performance in your English classes so far, your learning attitude, possible areas for improvement—yada yada ya. No interrupting, asking questions, or drawing attention to yourself until the very end, when I call on you. Is that clear?"

And people wonder why teenagers tend to have authority issues.

"Ah, I see you've already got the hang of it," Mr. Lee says cheerfully, waving a hand at my stony face.

I let my gaze and attention wander.

Then, across the room, I spot one of the few people here I do recognize.

Caz Song.

For all my lack of effort, it'd be hard *not* to have at least some idea of who he is: Model. Actor. God—if you were to go by the way everyone gushes over him and follows his every move, despite him never actually *doing* anything apart from standing around and looking obnoxiously pretty. Even now, in this depressing, heavily supervised setting, a substantial crowd of students has already gathered around him, their mouths agape. One girl's clutching her side in hysterical laughter at a joke he probably never made.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

I've never really understood the hype around him, unless it's from a purely aesthetic perspective. There *is* this certain elegance to the cut of his jaw, the slight pout of his lips, the sharp, lean angles of his frame. His dark hair and darker eyes. It's not like his features are inhumanly perfect or anything, but together, they just *work*.

Still, I get the sense that he's every bit as aware of this as all his adoring fans, which kind of ruins it. And of course the press loves him; just the other day, I stumbled across some article that deemed him one of the "Rising Stars of the Chinese Entertainment Industry."

He's leaning against the back wall now, hands shoved into pockets. This seems to be his natural state: leaning on something—doors, lockers, tables, you name it—as if he can't be bothered standing upright on his own.

But I've been staring too hard, too long. Caz looks up, sensing my gaze.

I quickly look away. Tune back into the interview, just in time to hear Mr. Lee say:

"Her English is really quite good—"

"Yeah, well, I *did* learn English when I was a kid," I point out before I can stop myself. Years of getting vaguely condescending comments about just how *good* my English is and how I *don't even have an accent*—almost always spoken with a note of surprise, if not confusion—have made this a natural reflex.

Mr. Lee blinks at me. Adjusts his glasses. "Right ..."

“Just wanted to put that out there.” I lean back in my seat, suddenly unsure if I should feel triumphant or guilty for interrupting. Maybe he really *had* meant it in your typical she-sure-knows-her-conjunctions kind of way, rather than an I-don’t-expect-people-who-look-like-her-to-speak-any-English way.

Ma clearly seems to believe the former, because she shoots me a sharp look.

“Sorry. Carry on,” I mutter.

Mr. Lee glances over at Ma. “So what I’m curious to know, if you don’t mind, is a bit about Eliza’s background before she came here ...”

Ma nods, well prepared for this, and launches into the usual script: *born in China, moved when she was five, went to this school and that school and moved countries again ...*

I try not to fidget, to flee. Being talked about this way makes my skin itch.

“Ah, but the best thing about having lived everywhere is that she belongs *anywhere*.” Mr. Lee stretches his hands out wide in a gesture that I’m assuming represents “anywhere”—and knocks over a tissue box in the process. He pauses, flustered. Picks it up. Then, unbelievably, continues right where he left off. “You should know that Eliza is not a citizen of one country or even one continent, but rather a—”

“If you say *citizen of the world*, I’m going to throw up,” I mutter under my breath, low enough for only me to hear.

Mr. Lee leans forward. “Sorry, what’s that?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head. Smile. “Nothing.”

A beat.

“Well, since we’re on the topic of Eliza’s circumstances,” Mr. Lee says delicately, hesitantly, and I have a terrible feeling I know what’s coming. “I do worry that Eliza is having a hard time ... adjusting.”

My throat tightens.

This. This is why I hate parent-teacher interviews.

“Adjusting,” Ma repeats with a frown, though she doesn’t look too surprised. Just sad.

“She doesn’t seem to be close with anyone in her class,” Mr. Lee elaborates. The trilingual group waiting for their parents in the back choose this time to burst into loud laughter at whatever it is they’re chatting about, the sound banging against all four walls. Mr. Lee raises his voice, almost yelling, “That is to say, it’s somewhat concerning that she still doesn’t have any friends here.”

Unfortunately for me, the noise levels happen to die down again halfway through his sentence.

And of course, everyone hears every last word. There’s an awkward pause, and about thirty pairs of eyes burn holes into my skull. My face catches fire.

I rise from my seat, wincing inwardly when the chair legs squeak against the polished floor, scraping against the silence. I mumble something about using the bathroom.

Then I get the hell out of there.

In my defense, I’m generally pretty good—an expert, even—at pushing my feelings aside and disconnecting myself from everything, but sometimes it just hits me hard: this horrible, crushing sense of *wrongness*, of *otherness*, regardless of whether I’m the only Asian kid at an elite Catholic all-girls school in London or the only new kid in a tiny cohort at a Chinese international school. Sometimes I’m convinced I’ll spend the rest of my life this way. Alone.

Sometimes I think loneliness is my default setting.

To my relief, the corridor is empty. I retreat into the farthest corner, bend down into a half crouch, and take my phone out. Scroll through nothing for a minute. Feel intuitively for the rough string bracelet around my wrist, a gift from Zoe, let it comfort me.

This is fine, I’m fine.

Then I head onto the Craneswift website.