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IF YOU COULD SEE THE SUN
ANN LIANG

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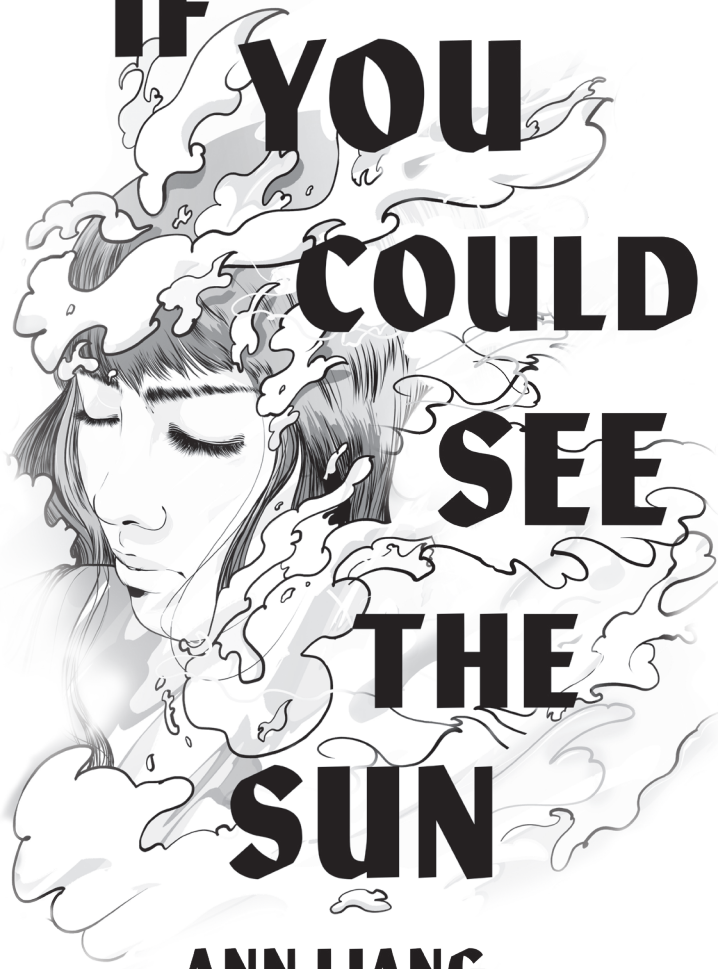

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To my wonderful parents, who aren't allowed to read this book.

And to my little sister, Alyssa,
who would like everyone to know how awesome she is.

1

My parents only ever invite me out to eat for one of three reasons. One, someone's dead (which, given the ninety-something members in our family WeChat group alone, happens more often than you'd think). Two, it's someone's birthday. Or three, they have a life-changing announcement to make.

Sometimes it's a combination of all the above, like when my great-grandaunt passed away on the morning of my twelfth birthday, and my parents decided to inform me over a bowl of fried sauce noodles that they'd be sending me off to Airington International Boarding School.

But it's August now, the sweltering summer heat palpable even in the air-conditioned confines of the restaurant, and no one in my immediate family has a birthday this month. Which, of course, leaves only two other possibilities…

The anxious knot in my stomach tightens. It's all I can do not to run right back out through the glass double doors.

Call me weak or whatever, but I'm in no state to handle bad news of any kind.

Especially not today.

"Alice, what you look so nervous for ya?" Mama asks as an unsmiling, qipao-clad waitress leads us over to our table in the back corner.

We squeeze past a crowded table of elderly people sharing a giant pink-tinted cream cake shaped like a peach, and what appears to be a company lunch, with men sweating in their stuffy collared shirts and women dabbing white powder onto their cheeks. A few of them twist around and stare when they notice my uniform. I can't tell if it's because they recognize the tiger crest emblazoned on my blazer pocket, or because of how grossly pretentious the design looks compared to the local schools' tracksuits.

"I'm not nervous," I say, taking the seat between her and Baba. "My face just always looks like this." This isn't exactly a lie. My aunt once joked that if I were ever found at a crime scene, I'd be the first one arrested based solely on my expression and body language. *Never seen anyone as jumpy as you*, she'd said. *Must've been a mouse in your past life.*

I resented the comparison then, but I can't help feeling like a mouse now—one that's about to walk straight into a trap.

Mama moves to pass me the laminated menu. As she does, light spills onto her bony hands from the nearby window, throwing the ropey white scar running down her palm into sharp relief. A pang of all-too-familiar guilt flares up inside me like an open flame.

"Haizi," Mama calls me. "What do you want to eat?"

"Oh. Uh, anything's fine," I reply, quickly averting my gaze.

Baba breaks apart his disposable wooden chopsticks with a

loud snap. "Kids these days don't know how lucky they are," he says, rubbing the chopsticks together to remove any splinters before helping me do the same. "All grow up in honey jar. You know what I eat at your age? Sweet potato. Every day, sweet potato."

As he launches into a more detailed description of daily life in the rural villages of Henan, Mama waves the waitress over and lists off what sounds like enough dishes to feed the entire restaurant.

"Ma," I protest, dragging the word out in Mandarin. "We don't need—"

"Yes, you do," she says firmly. "You always starve whenever school starts. Very bad for your body."

Despite myself, I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. Less than ten minutes ago, she'd been commenting on how my cheeks had grown rounder over the summer holidays; only by her logic is it possible to be too chubby and dangerously undernourished at the same time.

When Mama finally finishes ordering, she and Baba exchange a look, then turn to me with expressions so solemn I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind: "Is—is my grandpa okay?"

Mama's thin brows furrow, accentuating the stern features of her face. "Of course. Why you ask?"

"N-nothing. Never mind." I allow myself a small sigh of relief, but my muscles remain tensed, as if bracing for a blow. "Look, whatever the bad news is, can we just—can we get it over with quickly? The awards ceremony is in an hour and if I'm going to have a mental breakdown, I need at least twenty minutes to recover before I get on stage."

Baba blinks. "Awards ceremony? What ceremony?"

My concern temporarily gives way to exasperation. "*The* awards ceremony for the highest achievers in each year level."

He continues to stare at me blankly.

"Come on, Ba. I've mentioned it at least fifty times this summer."

I'm only exaggerating a little. Sad as it sounds, those fleeting moments of glory under the bright auditorium spotlight are all I've been looking forward to the past couple of months.

Even if I have to share them with Henry Li.

As always, the name fills my mouth with something sharp and bitter like poison. God, I hate him. I hate him and his flawless, porcelain skin and immaculate uniform and his composure, as untouchable and unfailing as his ever-growing list of achievements. I hate the way people look at him and *see* him, even if he's completely silent, head down and working at his desk.

I've hated him ever since he sauntered into school four years ago, brand-new and practically glowing. By the end of his first day, he'd beat me in our history unit test by a whole two-point-five marks, and everyone knew his name.

Just thinking about it now makes my fingers itch.

Baba frowns. Looks to Mama for confirmation. "Are we meant to go to this—this ceremony thing?"

"It's students only," I remind him, even though it wasn't always this way. The school decided to make it a more private event after my classmate's very famous mother, Krystal Lam, showed up to the ceremony and accidentally brought the paparazzi in with her. There were photos of our auditorium floating around all over Weibo for days afterward.

"Anyway, that's not the point. The *point* is that they're handing out awards and—"

"Yes, yes, all you talk about is award," Mama interrupts, impatient. "Where your priorities, hmm? Does that school of yours not teach you right values? It should go family first, then health, then saving for retirement, then—are you even listening?"

I'm spared from having to lie when our food arrives.

In the fancier Peking duck restaurants like Quanjude, the kind of restaurants my classmates go to frequently without someone having to die first, the chefs always wheel out the roast duck on a tray and carve it up beside your table. It's almost an elaborate performance; the crispy, glazed skin coming apart with every flash of the blade to reveal the tender white meat and sizzling oil underneath.

But here the waitress simply presents us with a whole duck chopped into large chunks, the head still attached and everything.

Mama must catch the look on my face because she sighs and turns the duck head away from me, muttering something about my Western sensibilities.

More dishes come, one by one: fresh cucumbers drizzled with vinegar and mixed with chopped garlic, thin-layered scallion pancakes baked to a perfect crisp, soft tofu swimming in a golden-brown sauce and sticky rice cakes dusted with a fine coat of sugar. I can already see Mama measuring out the food with her shrewd brown eyes, most likely calculating how many extra meals she and Baba can make from the leftovers.

I force myself to wait until both Mama and Baba have taken

a few bites of their food to venture, "Um. I'm pretty sure you guys were going to tell me something important…?"

In response, Baba takes a long swig from his still-steaming cup of jasmine tea and swishes the liquid around in his mouth as if he's got all the time in the world. Mama sometimes jokes that I take after Baba in every way—from his square jaw, straight brows and tan skin to his stubborn perfectionist streak. But I clearly haven't inherited any of his patience.

"Baba," I prompt, trying my best to keep my tone respectful.

He holds up a hand and drains the rest of his tea before at last opening his mouth to speak. "Ah. Yes. Well, your Mama and I were thinking… How you feel about going to different school?"

"Wait. *What?*" My voice comes out too loud and too shrill, cutting through the restaurant chatter and cracking at the end like some prepubescent boy's. The company workers from the table nearby stop midtoast to shoot me disapproving looks. "What?" I repeat in a whisper this time, my cheeks heating.

"Maybe you go to local school like your cousins," Mama says, placing a piece of perfectly wrapped Peking duck down on my plate with a smile. It's a smile that makes alarm bells go off in my head. The kind of smile dentists give you right before yanking your teeth out. "Or we let you go back to America. You know my friend, Auntie Shen? The one with the nice son—the doctor?"

I nod slowly, as if two-thirds of her friends' children aren't either working or aspiring doctors.

"She says there's very nice public school in Maine near

her house. Maybe if you help work for her restaurant, she let you stay—"

"I don't get it," I interrupt, unable to help myself. There's a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, like that time I ran too hard in the school Sports Carnival just to beat Henry and nearly threw up all over the courtyard. "I just… What's wrong with Airington?"

Baba looks a little taken aback by my response. "I thought you hated Airington," he says, switching to Mandarin.

"I never said I *hated*—"

"You once printed out a picture of the school logo and spent an entire afternoon stabbing it with your pen."

"So, I wasn't the biggest fan in the beginning," I say, setting my chopsticks down on the plastic tablecloth. My fingers tremble slightly. "But that was five years ago. People know who I am now. I have a reputation—a good one. And the teachers like me, like *really* like me, and most of my classmates think I'm smart and—and they actually care what I have to say…" But with every word that tumbles out of my mouth, my parents' expressions grow grimmer, and the sick feeling sharpens into ice-cold dread. Still, I plow on, desperate. "And I have my scholarship, remember? The only one in the entire school. Wouldn't it be a waste if I just left—"

"You have half scholarship," Mama corrects.

"Well, that's the most they're willing to offer…" Then it hits me. It's so obvious I'm stunned by own ignorance; why else would my parents all of a sudden suggest taking me out of the school they spent years working tirelessly to get me into?

"Is this… Is this about the school fees?" I ask, keeping my voice low so no one around us can overhear.

Mama says nothing at first, just fiddles with the loose button on her dull flower-patterned blouse. It's another cheap supermarket purchase; her new favorite place to find clothes after Yaxiu Market was converted into a lifeless mall for overpriced knockoff brands.

"That's not for you to worry," she finally replies.

Which means *yes.*

I slump back in my seat, trying hard to collect my thoughts. It's not as if I didn't know that we're struggling, that we've been struggling for some time now, ever since Baba's old printing company shut down and Mama's late shifts at Xiehe Hospital were cut short. But Mama and Baba have always been good at hiding the extent of it, waving away any of my concerns with a simple "just focus on your studies" or "silly child, does it look like we'd let you starve?"

I look across the table at them now, really look at them, and what I see is the scattering of white hairs near Baba's temples, the tired creases starting to show under Mama's eyes, the long days of labor taking their toll while I stay sheltered in my little Airington bubble. Shame roils in my gut. How much easier would their lives be if they didn't have to pay that extra 165,000 RMB every year?

"What, um, were the choices again?" I hear myself say. "Local Beijing school or public school in Maine?"

Evident relief washes over Mama's face. She dips another piece of Peking duck in a platter of thick black sauce, wraps it tight in a sheet of paper-thin pancake with two slices of cucumber—no onions, just the way I like it—and lays it down on my plate. "Yes, yes. Either is good."

I gnaw on my lower lip. Actually, *neither* option is good.

Going to any local school in China means I'll have to take the gaokao, which is meant to be one of the hardest college entrance exams as it is without my primary school–level Chinese skills getting in the way. And as for Maine—all I know is that it's the least diverse state in America, my understanding of the SATs is pretty much limited to the high school dramas I've watched on Netflix, and the chances of a public school there letting me continue my IB coursework are very low.

"We don't have to decide right now," Mama adds quickly. "Your Baba and I already pay for your first semester at Airington. You can ask teachers, your friends, think about it a bit, and then we discuss again. Okay?"

"Yeah," I say, even though I feel anything but okay. "Sounds great."

Baba taps his knuckles on the table, making both of us start. "Aiya, too much talking during eating time." He jabs his chopsticks at the plates between us. "The dishes already going cold."

As I pick up my own chopsticks again, the elderly people at the table beside us start singing the Chinese version of "Happy Birthday," loud and off-key. "Zhuni shengri kuaile… Zhuni shengri kuaile…" The old nainai sitting in the middle nods and claps her hands together to the beat, smiling a wide, toothless grin.

At least someone's leaving this restaurant in higher spirits than when they came in.

Sweat beads and trickles from my brow almost the instant I step outside. The kids back in California always complained about the heat, but the summers in Beijing are stifling, mer-

ciless, with the dappled shade of wutong trees planted up and down the streets often serving as the sole source of relief.

Right now it's so hot I can barely breathe. Or maybe that's just the panic kicking in.

"Haizi, we're going," Mama calls to me. Little plastic takeout bags swing from her elbow, stuffed full with everything—and I mean *everything*—left over from today's lunch. She's even packed the duck bones.

I wave at her. Exhale. Manage to nod and smile as Mama lingers to offer me her usual parting words of advice: Don't sleep later than eleven or you die, don't drink cold water or you die, watch out for child molesters on your way to school, eat ginger, lot of ginger, remember check air quality index every day…

Then she and Baba are off to the nearest subway station, her petite figure and Baba's tall, angular frame quickly swallowed up by the crowds, and I'm left standing all alone.

A terrible pressure starts to build at the back of my throat.

No. I can't cry. Not here, not now. Not when I still have an awards ceremony to attend—maybe the last awards ceremony I'll ever go to.

I force myself to move, to focus on my surroundings, anything to pull my thoughts from the black hole of worry swirling inside my head.

An array of skyscrapers rises up in the distance, all glass and steel and unabashed luxury, their tapered tips scraping the watery-blue sky. If I squint, I can even make out the famous silhouette of the CCTV headquarters. Everyone calls it The Giant Underpants because of its shape, though Mina Huang—

whose dad is apparently the one who designed it—has been trying and failing for the past five years to make people stop.

My phone buzzes in my skirt pocket, and I know without looking that it's not a text (it never is) but an alarm: only twenty minutes left until assembly begins. I make myself walk faster, past the winding alleys clogged with rickshaws and vendors and little yellow bikes, the clusters of convenience stores and noodle shops and calligraphed Chinese characters blinking across neon signs all blurring by.

The traffic and crowds thicken as I get closer toward the Third Ring Road. There are all kinds of people everywhere: balding uncles cooling themselves with straw fans, cigarettes dangling out of mouths, shirts yanked halfway up to expose their sunburned bellies, the perfect picture of *I-don't-give-a-shit*; old aunties strutting down the sidewalks with purpose, dragging their floral shopping trolleys behind them as they head for the open markets; a group of local school students sharing large cups of bubble tea and roasted sweet potatoes outside a mini snack stall, stacks of homework booklets spread out on a stool between them, gridded pages fluttering in the breeze.

As I stride past, I hear one of the students ask in a dramatic whisper, their words swollen with a thick Beijing accent, "Dude, did you see that?"

"See what?" a girl replies.

I keep walking, face forward, doing my best to act like I can't hear what they're saying. Then again, they probably assume I don't understand Chinese anyway; I've been told time and time again by locals that I have a foreigner's air, or qizhi, whatever the hell that's supposed to mean.

"She goes to *that school*. That's where that Hong Kong

singer—what's her name again? Krystal Lam?—sends her daughter, and the CEO of SYS as well… Wait, let me just Baidu it to check…"

"Wokao!" the girl swears a few seconds later. I can practically *feel* her gaping at the back of my head. My face burns. "*330,000 RMB* for just one year? What are they teaching, how to seduce royalty?" Then she pauses. "But isn't it an international school? I thought those were only for white people."

"What do you know?" the first student scoffs. "Most international students just have foreign passports. It's easy if you're rich enough to be born overseas."

This isn't true at all: I was born right here in Beijing and didn't move to California with my parents until I was seven. And as for being rich… No. Whatever. It's not like I'm going to turn back and correct him. Besides, I've had to recount my entire life story to strangers enough times to know that sometimes it's easier to just let them assume what they want.

Without waiting for the traffic lights to turn—no one here really follows them anyway—I cross the road, glad to put some distance between me and the rest of their conversation. Then I make a quick to-do list in my head.

It's what works best whenever I'm overwhelmed or frustrated. Short-term goals. Small hurdles. Things within my control. Like:

One, make it through entire awards ceremony without pushing Henry Li off the stage.

Two, turn in Chinese essay early (last chance to get in Wei Laoshi's good graces).

Three, read history course syllabus before lunch.

Four, research Maine and closest public schools in Beijing

and figure out which place offers highest probability of future success—if any—without breaking down and/or hitting something.

See? All completely doable.

"Are you sure you're a student here?"

The security guard furrows his bushy eyebrows and stares me down from the other side of the wrought iron school gates.

I swallow my exasperation. We go through this every single time, never mind that I'm wearing the school uniform or that I checked in only earlier this morning to move my stuff back into my dorm. Maybe it wouldn't bother me so much if I hadn't personally witnessed the guard waving Henry Li inside with a broad grin, no questions asked. People like Henry probably don't even need to carry an ID around; his face and name alone are verification enough.

"*Yes*, I'm sure," I say, wiping at the sweat coating my forehead with my blazer sleeve. "If you could please let me in, shushu—"

"Name?" he interrupts, now taking out some kind of expensive-looking tablet to record my details. Ever since our school decided to go completely paper-free a few years back, there's been no end to the amount of unnecessary technology they've brought in. Even the menus at our cafeteria are all digital now.

"Chinese name is Sun Yan. English name is Alice Sun."

"Year level?"

"Year Twelve."

"Student ID?" He must catch the look on my face, because

his frown deepens. "Xiao pengyou, if you don't have your student ID—"

"N-no, no, it's not that—okay, look, I'm getting it," I grumble, fishing my card out and holding it up for him to see. We took our student ID photos during exam season last year, and as a result, I look like something that just crawled out of a gutter in mine: my usually sleek black ponytail is an oily mess from a week of skipping hair washing to revise, my face is covered with stress blemishes, and there are giant dark circles sagging under my eyes.

I swear I see the security guard raise his eyebrows slightly at my photo, but at least the gates heave open a few moments later, creaking to a stop beside the two guardian stone lions facing the streets. Scooping up the last of my dignity, I thank him and hurry inside.

Whoever designed the Airington school campus clearly intended to create an artistic blend of Eastern and Western, old and modern architectural elements. It's why the main entrance is paved with flat, wide tiles like those in the Forbidden City, and farther down are artificial Chinese gardens with koi ponds and tiered pagodas with slanting vermillion roofs, but the actual school buildings are built with polished floor-to-ceiling windows and glass bridges stretching over slices of green lawn.

If I'm being honest though, it looks more like someone started filming one of those ancient Chinese costume dramas here and forgot to clean up the set.

It doesn't help that everything is so spread out. It takes me almost ten minutes to run across the courtyard, around the

science building, and into the auditorium, and by then, the vast, brightly lit space is already packed with students.

Excited voices bounce off the walls like waves off a shore. The volume is even louder than usual as people launch into monologues on everything they did over the summer. I don't even need to listen to know the details; it was all over Instagram, from Rainie Lam's bikini pics at some villa the Kardashians once stayed in, to Chanel Cao's many filtered selfies on her parents' new yacht.

As the noise reaches a crescendo, I scan the auditorium for a place to sit—or, to be more accurate, people I can sit beside. I'm friendly enough with everybody, but the social divisions are still there, shaped by everything from your first language (English and Mandarin are most common, followed by Korean, Japanese, and Canto) to how many times you've achieved something impressive enough to be featured in the school's monthly newsletter. I guess it's the closest thing to a meritocracy you could expect to get in a place like this, except Henry Li's been featured fifteen times in his four years here.

Not that I'm counting or anything.

"Alice!"

I glance up to see my roommate, Chanel, waving at me from the middle row. She's pretty in that Taobao model kind of way: pointed chin, pale glass skin, air bangs kept deliberately messy, a waist the size of my thigh, and double eyelids that definitely weren't there two summers ago. Her mum, Coco Cao, actually *is* a model—she did a shoot with *Vogue China* just last year, and you could spot her face on pretty much every magazine stand in the city—and her dad owns a chain of upscale nightclubs all over Beijing and Shanghai.

But that's more or less the extent of everything I know about her. When we first moved into our dorms at the start of Year Seven, part of me had hoped we'd grow to become best friends. And for a while, it seemed like we would—we went to the cafeteria together for breakfast every morning and waited for each other at our lockers after class. But then she started asking me to go out shopping with her and her rich fuerdai friends at places like Sanlitun Village and Guomao, where the designer bags sold probably cost more than my parents' entire flat. After I turned her down the third time with some vague, stammered excuse, she simply stopped asking.

Even so, it's not like we're on bad terms or anything, and there's an empty seat right beside her…

I motion toward it, hoping I don't look as awkward as I feel. "Can I sit here?"

She blinks at me, clearly a little taken aback. Her waving at me was out of politeness, not an invitation. But then, to my relief, she smiles, her perfect porcelain veneer teeth almost glowing as the auditorium lights begin to dim. "Yeah, sure."

No sooner than I've sat down, our senior coordinator and history teacher, Mr. Murphy, strolls out onto the stage, microphone in hand. He's one of the many American expats at our school: English degree from decent but non–Ivy League university, Chinese wife, two kids, probably came to China because of a semi midlife crisis but stayed because of the pay.

He taps the microphone twice, creating an awful screeching sound that makes everyone wince.

"Hello, hello," he says into the resulting silence. "Welcome to our first assembly of the academic year—a very special assembly too, if you might recall…"

I sit up a little straighter in my seat, though I know the awards are coming only at the very end.

First, we have to get through a whole round of self-promotion.

Mr. Murphy makes a signal with his hand and the projector comes on, filling the screen behind him with familiar names and numbers and easily recognizable school logos. Acceptance rates.

According to the PowerPoint, over 50 percent of last year's graduating class were accepted into Ivy Leagues or Oxbridge.

A few students in the audience murmur in amazement—most likely this year's newcomers. Everyone else is used to this already, impressed enough but not in awe. Besides, the graduating class from the year before had an even higher rate.

Mr. Murphy drones on and on about *success in all areas* and *a commitment to excellence* for what feels like years. Then he announces our performers for the day, and everyone's alert at once when Rainie Lam's name comes up. Somebody even cheers.

Rainie sashays her way up to the stage to deafening applause, and I can't help the slight tug in my chest, half admiration and half envy. It's like kindergarten all over again, when a kid shows up at school with the shiny new toy you've secretly been eyeing for weeks.

As Rainie sits down at the piano, the spotlight spilling over her in a bright golden halo, she looks just like her mother, Krystal Lam. Like a legitimate Hong Kong star who's toured all around the world. She must know it, too, because she flips her glossy mahogany hair as if she's in a Pantene commercial and winks at the crowd. Technically, we're not even allowed to dye our hair, but Rainie's been strategic about it. Over the

past year, she's been dying her hair a subtle shade lighter every two weeks to stop teachers from noticing the change. It's almost impressive, her dedication. Then again, I guess it's easy to be strategic when you have the time and money.

Once all the cheers finally die down, Rainie opens her mouth and starts singing, and of course it's one of JJ Lin's newest singles. A shameless nod to the fact that he was a guest at her mum's concert last November.

After her, Peter Oh comes up and performs one of his original raps. If it were anyone else, people would probably be cringing and giggling in their seats, but Peter's good. *Really* good. There are rumors he's already got a deal lined up with some Asian hip-hop company, though it's just as likely he'll inherit his dad's position at Longfeng Oil.

More people take their turn on the stage: a violin prodigy from the year level below, a professionally trained Asian-Australian opera singer who's performed at the Sydney Opera House before, and a guzheng player dressed in traditional Chinese robes.

Then at last, at long last, it's my turn.

The piano is wheeled away to some dark corner behind the curtains and the presentation slides change. The words *Top Achiever Award* flash across the screen in bold. My heart sings a little.

There's really not much suspense when it comes to these award ceremonies. We're all notified through email if we're up for an award months in advance, and aside from Year Eight, when I underperformed in my Chinese exam because I came down with a severe case of food poisoning, Henry and I have tied for Top Achiever every single year since he

got here. You'd think I would've grown used to it by now, maybe started to care a bit less, but the opposite is true. Now that I have an established streak of success, a reputation to uphold, the stakes are even higher, and the thrill of winning greater than ever before.

It's sort of like what they say about kissing the person you love (not that I would really know): each time is like the very first.

"Alice Sun," Mr. Murphy booms into the microphone.

All eyes swivel to me as I rise slowly from my seat. There aren't any wild cheers, not like with Rainie, but at least they're looking. At least they can see me.

I smooth out my uniform and head toward the stage, careful not to trip along the way. Then Mr. Murphy is in front of me, shaking my hand, guiding me into the spotlight, and people start clapping.

See, I could shrivel up and die on the spot if I ever thought people were judging me or talking shit behind my back, but this, this kind of positive attention, with my full name on display as applause pounds through the room like a drumbeat—I wouldn't mind bathing in this moment forever.

But the moment barely lasts a few seconds, because then Mr. Murphy calls out Henry Li's name, and just like that, everyone's attention shifts. Refocuses. The applause grows noticeably, painfully louder.

I follow their gazes, and my stomach clenches when I spot him standing up in the front row.

It's truly one of life's greatest injustices—aside from youth unemployment and taxes and all that, of course—that Henry Li gets to look the way he does. Unlike the rest of us, he

seems to have skipped that awkward midpuberty stage altogether, shedding his cute, Kumon-poster-boy image almost overnight near the end of last year. Now, with his sharp profile, lean build and thick, black waves of hair that somehow always fall perfectly over his dark brows, he could just as easily pass for an idol trainee as the heir to China's second biggest tech start-up.

His movements are smooth and purposeful as he steps onto the stage in a single stride, that look of mild interest I hate so much carefully arranged on his beautiful, terrible face.

As if he can hear my thoughts, his eyes cut to mine. The twisting, burning sensation in my stomach sharpens to a knife.

Mr. Murphy steps out in front of me. "Congratulations, Henry," he says, then releases a loud chuckle. "Must be getting tired of all these awards by now, eh?"

Henry merely offers him a small, polite smile in response.

I force myself to smile too, even as I clench my teeth so hard my jaw hurts. Even as Henry takes his place beside me, leaving only two terrible, maddening inches of space between us. Even as my muscles tense as they always do in his presence, as he leans over, crossing the unspoken boundary, and whispers so only I can hear—

"Congratulations, Alice. I was afraid you wouldn't make it this year."

Most international schoolkids end up with some watered-down version of an American accent, but Henry's accent has a distinct British lilt to it. At first I thought he was just following a step-by-step tutorial on how to become the most pretentious person alive, but after some stalking—no, *researching*—I found out he'd actually spent a couple years of primary school

in England. And not just any primary school, but the same school as the prime minister's son. There's even a photo of the two of them together by the school stables, all wide smiles and ruddy cheeks, while someone's cleaning out horse manure in the background.

Henry's accent is so distracting it takes me a full minute to register his insult.

I know he's talking about our most recent chemistry finals. He'd gotten full marks as usual, and I'd lost a mark just because I rushed through a particularly difficult redox equation. If not for the two extra-credit questions I aced at the end, my whole rank would've slipped.

For a moment, I can't decide which I hate more—redox equations, or him.

Then I see the smug smile now playing at the corners of his lips, and remember, with a new spike of resentment, the first time we stood on the stage together like this. I'd tried my best to be civil, had even *complimented* him on doing better than me in that history test. But he'd simply worn the exact same smug, infuriating expression on his face, shrugged a little, and said, *It was an easy test.*

I clench my teeth harder.

It's all I can do to remind myself of the goal I made earlier: refrain from pushing Henry off the stage. Even if it'd be very, *very* satisfying. Even if he's been the bane of my existence for pretty much half a decade, and totally deserves it, and is still looking at me with that ridiculous smirk—

No. Refrain.

We're forced to stay in place anyway as a photographer hurries forward to take our photo for the annual yearbook.

Then realization washes over me like ice-cold water: by the time the yearbook's out, I won't be a student here anymore. No, not just that—I won't be graduating in this auditorium, won't have my name listed under the Ivy League acceptances, won't be walking out these school gates with a bright future laid out at my feet.

I feel the smile on my face freeze, threaten to dissolve at the edges. I'm blinking too quickly. In my peripheral vision, I see the school slogan, Airington is Home, printed out in giant letters on a strung-up banner. But Airington isn't home, or isn't *just* a home for someone like me; Airington is a ladder. The only ladder that could lift my parents out of their dingy flat on the outskirts of Beijing, that could close the distance between me and a seven-figure salary, that could ever allow me to stand as equals with someone like Henry Li on a large polished stage like this.

How the hell am I meant to climb my way to the top without it?

This is the question that gnaws at my nerves like a starved rat as I return to my seat in a daze, barely registering Mr. Chen's special little nod of approval or Chanel's smile or my other classmates' whispered congratulations.

The rest of the ceremony crawls by at a snail's pace, and I sit for so long, my body frozen to the spot while my mind works in overdrive, that I start to feel cold all over, despite the stifling summer heat.

I'm actually shivering by the time Mr. Murphy dismisses us for the day, and as I join the tides of students pushing out through the doors, a small part of my brain entertains the idea that maybe this chill isn't normal.

Before I can check if I have a fever or anything, someone behind me clears his throat. The sound is oddly formal, like a person readying themselves to deliver a speech.

I spin around. It's Henry.

Of course it is.

For a long moment he just stares at me, cocks his head, considering. It's impossible to tell what he's thinking. Then he steps forward and says in that infuriating British accent of his: "You don't look very good."

Anger spikes inside me.

That's it.

"Are we insulting my looks now?" I demand. My voice sounds shrill even to my own ears, and more than a few students pushing past us turn to shoot us curious looks.

"What?" Henry's eyes widen slightly, the faintest trace of confusion disrupting the precise symmetry of his features. "No, I just meant…" Then he seems to catch something on my face—something cruel and tightly wound—because his own expression shutters closed. He shoves his hands into his pockets. Looks away. "You know what? Never mind."

The bottom of my stomach dips at the sudden flatness in his tone, and I hate him for it, hate myself even more for my reaction. I have at least twenty thousand better things to worry about than what Henry Li thinks of me.

Things like the cold still spreading under my skin.

I whirl back around and run out through the doors, onto the grass courtyard. I expect to feel better in the sunlight, but my trembling only grows more violent, the chill running down to my very toes.

Definitely not normal.

Then, without warning, something slams straight into my back.

I don't even have time to cry out; I crash hard onto my knees. Pain shoots through me, the stiff, fake grass digging into my raw palms.

Wincing, I glance up in time to see that the culprit isn't *something*, but *someone*. Someone built like a bull and twice my height.

Andrew She.

I wait for him to help me up—to apologize, at the very least—but he simply frowns as he regains his balance, his eyes passing right over me, and turns around to leave.

Confusion wars with indignation in my head. This is *Andrew She*, after all; the boy who cushions his every sentence with phrases like "sorry" and "I think" and "maybe," who can't speak up in class without his face going red, who's always the first person to greet the teachers good morning, who's been teased mercilessly by everyone in our year level for being polite to a fault.

But when I turn toward the tinted glass doors to check for any injuries, all thoughts of Andrew She and basic etiquette vanish from my head. My heart slams violently against my ribs, a loud, ragged beat of this-can't-be-happening-this-can't-be-happening—

Because the doors reflect everything like a mirror: the kids spilling out onto the basketball courts, the emerald bamboo groves planted around the science building, the flock of sparrows taking to the skies in the distance…

Everything but me.