

Boys I Know



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CHAPTER ONE

// **A**iya. You go to school all day looking like jì nǚ? Go change.”

I'd barely taken five steps into the kitchen before my mom called me a prostitute. I opened my mouth to tell her the correct term nowadays was *sex worker*, but she wasn't finished scolding me.

“Totally inappropriate.” She frowned, the pull of her mouth creating tiny wrinkles around her eyes that made her look closer to her real age. “What people think of you?”

I glanced down at my simple black scoop-neck T-shirt and jeans, trying to figure out why she kept looking at me as though my clothes were see-through. “What are you even talking about? I look fine.”

She swiped a bony finger across my chest. “Look. So much skin showing. I can see your bra.”

I swatted her hands away, pulling up the neckline of my shirt to cover myself. “You're supposed to, Mom. That's why the straps cross in front, it's the style.”

“Looks terrible, like you tangled in string. Looks cheap. No cheap clothes like this in Taiwan. Probably fall apart in the washing machine.”

I didn't bother replying that cheap American clothes were probably manufactured in Taiwan to begin with. Instead, I glanced at the clock, wondering anxiously how much longer she was planning to stick around. Rhys was due to show up in ten minutes, and I wasn't exactly looking forward to seeing my mom's reaction when she discovered the AP Biology partner I'd been "studying" with for the last month was a boy.

"I thought you'd still be at work," I said, casually pulling books and papers out of my backpack and setting them on the table like I was a diligent student, ready to study by myself.

"I come home to check on you before I go shopping. Today senior discount day at the fish market."

The only Asian grocer in the area, a full forty-five-minute drive from our house, offered a marginal discount for people aged sixty and older on Friday afternoons. My mom made the drive practically every week despite the fact that she was nowhere near sixty, always hoping she would get rung up by the one cashier who never checked IDs.

Nine minutes.

"Well, everything is great here," I replied with false cheeriness.

"You eat yet? There's *xī fàn* on the stove."

I eyed the dull, dented gray pot, a fixture in our household from before I was born. My older sister Wendy and I saved up and pooled our money together when we were little to buy our mom a new one for Mother's Day one year, but she continued to use the old one. *Dà shǒu dà jiǎo*, she'd explained. *Big hand, big foot*. Sometimes it was easier just to pretend we understood the Chinese proverbs she loved to spout instead of having to sit

through a long-winded lecture. *In Taiwan, everyone talks like this*, she always claimed.

I patted my belly. “I’m saving my appetite for fish tonight.” The thought of feeding me a full meal might motivate her to get going. Nothing could spring an Asian mom into action faster than declaring your possible hunger.

Eight minutes.

She frowned again, like she was forgetting to scold me about something before she left. “You practice yet today?”

“I will after I do my homework, which I can’t start if you keep standing here talking to me.”

I was practically herding her toward the door, my hands anxiously jammed in my pockets so I didn’t reach out and just shove her out of the room.

Seven minutes.

“You know,” she started. “Wendy—”

“—Yeah, yeah, yeah, *Wendy* was never like this. *Wendy* never needed to be reminded to practice.” For a moment I forgot all about being cheerful, and the bitterness of always falling short of my parents’ expectations that I be exactly like my sister cut through my voice. *Wendy was Valedictorian. Wendy had ten full-ride offers for violin. Wendy is studying premed to become a doctor like Daddy.* Anyone who thought youngest kids were the spoiled ones of the family had never met Asian families, where the first child was revered and celebrated and everyone who came after was watched like a hawk to make sure they lived up to the firstborn’s example.

Six minutes.

My mom sighed. “I don’t know why you always like this. Daddy say if you put this effort into practicing instead of arguing—”

“—Don’t call him Daddy, it’s weird.”

“*You* call him Daddy. I do it when talking to you.”

“I don’t call him Daddy, I’m not eight.”

“See? This is what he say.”

I bit my tongue.

Five minutes.

It wasn’t enough to get her out the door—she had to be clear out of the neighborhood or she’d see Rhys’s car pull into our driveway and my whole plan would be ruined. Sometimes it felt like she lived just to foil my best-laid plans. Like in seventh grade when it slipped out that I’d planned to go to the movies with a group that included boys and she refused to let me go, forcing me to concoct a fake reason for canceling so I didn’t have to explain that my parents were weirdly puritanical despite not actually following any organized religion.

“I’ll do my practice,” I promised. “I always do.” *Sometimes at the last minute*, I added silently. *But I always do it.*

She kept frowning at me like she wasn’t quite sure whether or not to believe me. Forget that I’d never actually missed a day of practice—apparently my existence itself was suspicious now. Like she could sense I was even *thinking* about doing something she wouldn’t approve of.

I kept eye contact, knowing that she’d take my looking away as an admission of guilt and finally she sighed again before making

her way toward the door where our shoes and jackets were tidily lined up. She took one last look around, stepped outside, and turned around to add, her eyes squinting, “Go change. Hurts my eyes to look at you dressed like that.” With that, she shoed me away and closed the door behind her.