Praise for
IF YOU STILL RECOGNISE ME

"An epic fandom, a scavenger hunt for a lost love and an ode to cultural inheritance – this is a wonderfully heartfelt and joyously queer romance"
Lauren James, author of *The Loneliest Girl in the Universe*

"A poignant, perfectly formed debut about queer love, fandom and family"
Lex Croucher, author of *Reputation*

"A lyrical, complex tale of friendship, family, and all the stories we tell ourselves – true and not – about what it means to love"
Kelly Loy Gilbert, author of *When We Were Infinite*

"Suffused with queer wistfulness and the ache to be known ... as intimate and revelatory as the first touch of a first crush's hand"
Riley Redgate, author of *Seven Ways We Lie*

"Refreshing, relatable and raw in its honesty, this is the book I wish I'd had as a queer teen discovering my identity"
Sarah Underwood, author of *Lies We Sing to the Sea*

"Beautifully written with moments of sheer lyricism. A must-read for humans of all ages and walks of life. I loved it so much!"
Wibke Brueggemann, author of *Love is for Losers*

"So has a uniquely poetic style that sees beauty in the everyday and makes the familiar feel fresh and new"
Ciara Smyth, author of *Not My Problem*

"A celebration of fannish glee, queer joy and family in all senses of the word. *If You Still Recognise Me* asks what it means to find yourself, when we are all more than a single story"
Kat Dunn, author of *Dangerous Remedy*

"A beautiful and intricately layered tale of friendship, fandom and finding yourself – I absolutely adored it"

Sophie Cameron, author of *Out of the Blue*

"Vivid, touching and romantic – the perfect summer read. This delightful love story heralds the arrival of a brilliant new talent in YA."

Cat Clarke, author of *Girlhood*

"Exploring the bonds of friendship, family, fandom, culture and queer community, this is a story about finding who you really are at the heart of all the things you love. Absolutely stunning."

Sera Milano, author of *This Can Never Not Be Real*

"A delight to read; warm as the last days of summer and overflowing with heart"

Tom Pollock, author of *White Rabbit, Red Wolf*

"Luscious writing that leaves you aching with feelings! Cynthia So deftly weaves a story that explores queerness, love, and relationships across distance, both geographical and time."

Lizzie Huxley-Jones, author and editor

"Cynthia So is an exciting, fresh and much-needed new voice in YA"

Simon James Green, author of *Gay Club!*

"A book that will make your emotions sing"

Sinéad O'Hart, author of *The Eye of the North*

"An absolutely beautiful and dreamy love letter to Queer Love across years, distance and through generations. Utterly phenomenal."

Lily Fae, children's book blog

IF YOU STILL RECOGNISE ME

If You Still Recognise Me contains content that some readers may find triggering, including references to emotionally abusive relationships, racism and homophobia.

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CYNTHIA SO

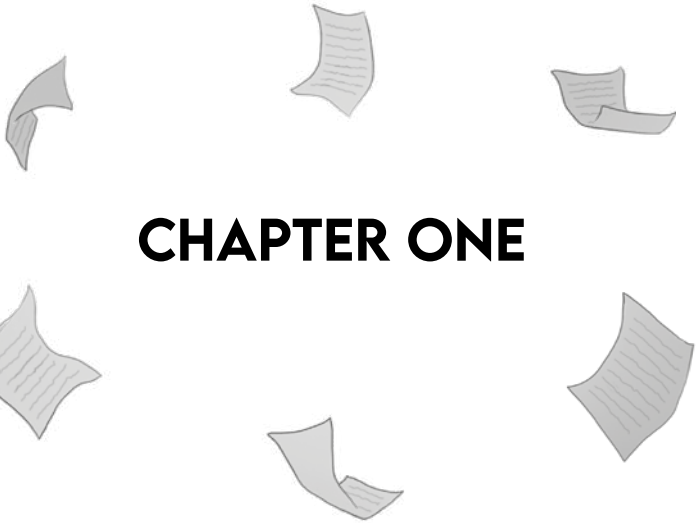
IF YOU STILL RECOGNISE ME

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

For my mother, who worries
she didn't do enough to encourage
my creativity as a child – I hope you
can stop worrying now, 媽.

And for Olivia – without writing
this book, I wouldn't have found you.
That alone has made it worth every word.

VOLUME I



CHAPTER ONE

Ritika lets out a whoop when we emerge from the stuffy air of the building where we just had our last exam, and she's not the only one. The school playground fills with cheers, the sounds bursting like fireworks around us. Ritika chats with Mara and Delphine, her friends from orchestra, while I hover by the gates. I gaze up at the school, its cluster of brown buildings smaller today than they've ever seemed before. It wasn't long ago that they loomed.

I think about standing in front of these gates with Joan, under the tree that has always stood watch by the entrance. I was showing her the school I'd be going to for what seemed like the rest of my foreseeable future at that point. The school I'd be going to without her because she was moving to Hong Kong, where both of our families are from. Her dad's job taking her away from me.

"Do you think I'll make another best friend?" I asked her.

"Of course you will. But don't forget me, OK?"

"I won't. You'll still be my best friend even if I make another one. I can have more than one best friend, right?"

"Sure. You can have as many as you want."

I haven't forgotten her. The reverse doesn't hold true, though. I wonder where she is now. Even back then, we were already talking about which university we wanted to go to. She liked the idea of college in the US, the sound of Yale or maybe MIT. "Science sounds cool. I hope I'm good at science when we start secondary school."

I got into Cambridge to study English like I always wanted, and, if I get the results I need, I'll be starting there this October.

Time feels strange and malleable, as though my future – university and life beyond that, *adulthood* – is suddenly so close and blazing in front of me that it has burned a hole right through to my past. As if I could walk through those gates, leaving school forever, and arrive seven years ago, under that tree, where eleven-year-old me is standing with eleven-year-old Joan, and I could pull Joan into the present with me. Drag her by the hand into whatever's coming next.

I step outside the school gates, but I don't go anywhere. I'm still here. Still eighteen. The noon sun warming my skin. And, behind me, my best friend Ritika is still talking to her friends.

Half an hour later, Ritika and I are sitting in an All You Can Eat, eating all that we can.

Spring rolls and prawn toasts soggy with grease, various meats indistinguishable from each other, crunchy stir-fried vegetables doused in a glossy sauce. The food isn't actually that good, but I'm enjoying it, anyway, just being in this dimly lit and mostly empty restaurant with Ritika. An ancient fan slowly spins its arthritic joints, blowing warm air in our faces. Our hands get stickier as we wipe our orange mouths on paper napkins and laugh about nothing, about this giddy feeling that rises in us like bubbles in a champagne glass, this feeling called *end-of-exams*.

But we've promised that we aren't going to talk about them. We're done with those. No use realising now that we've made a mistake on question 3b or whatever. I'm never going to think about maths again.

So we're talking about the summer. The Summer: capital T, capital S. The one big summer of our lives, between school and uni.

"We'd better start booking stuff for our trip soon," Ritika says, spearing a piece of broccoli with her fork. "It's all getting super expensive already."

I groan. I've only *just* finished worrying about exams, and now Ritika is bringing up another thing to stress

about. "You know my mum says I have to get a job first before I can think about going on holiday with you."

"Right." Ritika points the broccoli at me. "So get a job."

"Is it really that easy?"

"Elsie. It's not going to get any easier if you keep putting it off."

"You sound like my mum."

We make faces at each other. Ritika eats the broccoli. "Why don't you try that comic shop?"

"Yeah, I've been thinking about it. But I don't know… The guys who work there don't seem that friendly to me? Like, I've never had a bad interaction with them, but I've also never had a *good* one, either. I've seen them chat with other customers but they never talk to me. Which kind of puts me off the idea of working there."

"But you've still been thinking about it."

"Yeah, I guess. I might head over there after this. I've got a copy of my CV with me. It was so hard to write! I didn't really have anything to put on it. Anyway, I'm not a hundred per cent sure I'll actually hand it over."

"You do *love* your comics."

"Only *Eden Recoiling*, really." I can't help but smile because I really, really do love *Eden Recoiling*.

"I haven't read a lot of other things. But I want to use this summer as an opportunity to read more."

Ritika grins. "I bet they have a staff discount."

"Oh! I didn't even think of that."

"How are you smart enough to get into Cambridge, but too stupid to even realise that staff discounts are a thing? It's not fair." Ritika flicks my arm with a finger.

"Ow." I flick her back. "Hey, what's Jake doing this summer? Are you sure you don't want him to come with us on this trip? Doesn't he feel left out?"

"Um," Ritika says. "About that…"

The 'Staff Only' door opens with a distractingly noisy yawn, yielding an old Chinese man with a duster, humming something almost familiar. The woman behind the counter, probably his wife, barely looks up at him, too absorbed in an episode of a K-drama playing on her tablet. I know it's a K-drama because Ritika knows it's a K-drama. She recognised it instantly from the sounds of the actors' voices and the background music. Apparently it's a really tragic romance.

I watch the old man as he walks with shuffling steps, dusting the framed watercolours of lakes and mountains. Vistas of tourist spots in China, I think. Places I've never been.

I find myself staring at this man – his wrinkled forehead, his sagging face, his scrawny arms in that short-sleeved white button-down – and suddenly I'm overwhelmed. Like eating something you don't expect to be so spicy, and it's fine at first, positively bland, but then it sets your mouth on fire, singes your tongue, licks its flame all the way down into your stomach.

My throat hurts.

I feel a gentle touch on my arm. "Hey." Ritika's voice is soft. "You OK?"

I blink and turn back to her, hoping she can't see the wet shine of my eyes. But she's looking at the old man too.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Your mum's back today, right?"

"Yeah."

Her gaze shifts back to me, and she squeezes my arm, so I assume she has noticed my tears. "How are you feeling about seeing your grandma again? It's been a while since you saw her, right?"

"Yeah. Eight years. I don't know. I've been too busy with exams to really process any of it… But apparently I'm now crying at the sight of random old Chinese men, so yay?"

I fold my paper napkin this way and that, searching for a relatively grease-free patch to dab at my eyes.

"Here." Ritika pulls out a tissue from a packet in her bag and hands it to me. "It's OK. Better than bottling things up, which – if you want my honest opinion – you have a tendency to do."

"Do I?"

"Yeah, you really do."

I dry my eyes with the tissue. "I have no idea why I'm crying. It's not like I've even seen my grandfather since I was ten. I do remember him, just a little, but it's very

foggy. I didn't really feel anything when my mum told me he'd passed away. Which sounds awful. I mean, I was sad for my mum. But other than that…"

"Look, we just finished school *forever*. It's all right to be a bit emotional."

I give her a weak smile. "If you say so. Anyway I think I'll get some ice cream. That'll make everything better."

The freezer in the corner has three big vats of basic flavours – that trio of white, brown and pink that evokes a childlike excitement in me every time – and fruit ice lollies individually wrapped in clear plastic. I bring a scoop of strawberry ice cream back to our table. Ritika frowns at me when she sees it.

"You don't *like* strawberry ice cream."

"I don't? Are you sure?"

I put a generous spoonful of it into my mouth and grimace.

Ritika is right. I hate it. Cheap strawberry ice cream tastes like a child's crayon drawing of a strawberry with no actual fruit involved.

I continue eating it, anyway. It's something to focus on, the task of vanquishing this horrible ice cream.

Ritika rolls her eyes at me and reaches across the table to pat my shoulder. "You can just cry, you know. You don't have to be so weird about it."

"Shh. Let me enjoy my disgusting ice cream in peace."

Ritika chomps on a delightfully noisy prawn cracker

for a while. “Hey, do you ever wonder why your family hasn’t been back to Hong Kong in such a long time?”

It is a long time. When my grandfather’s illness took a turn for the worse, my mum went over there at last, the first time in eight years, and stayed for the funeral. She’s back today, and she’s brought my grandmother to stay with us for the summer because she doesn’t want her to be alone right now. But I haven’t been to Hong Kong since primary school, and all this time I’ve spent away from it seems more pronounced now.

“It is pretty weird. We used to go every year when I was younger.”

“Yeah, you know me and my fam go to India, like, every other year at least.”

“I used to ask my mum about it, but she always just gave such non-answers.”

After a while, I kind of got used to it. Mum’s strained face whenever I asked. Dad’s placid smile. *Not this year. Maybe next year.*

Ritika sniffs the air. “Smells like family drama to me.”

The old man has moved on to watering the potted plants that line the sill of the front window. He carries on humming. And I think, fuzzily, about how my dead grandfather used to sing to me.

We leave the restaurant, squinting in the fierce light of the afternoon sun. Ritika tells me she's catching a bus home. "Get a job," she says. "Also, movie tomorrow?"

"You don't wanna hang out with your boyfriend?" I tease. "You barely spent any time together while we were revising for exams."

Ritika waves her hand dismissively. "You and I are going to be tragically torn apart in three months. I'll have plenty of time to hang out with Jake."

After her bus arrives, I start walking to the comic shop. As I'm crossing Hythe Bridge back into central Oxford, I pause, looking over the blue railing down into the green stream below.

Crossing the bridge always unearths shards of memory, like an archaeologist digging up bits of pottery, but the memories get a little more washed out every time. Maybe the bits of pottery were vividly painted in the beginning, but now they're faded, smudged, their colours and lines fainter and fainter.

My ex-boyfriend rarely held my hand in public. Sometimes, when we were crossing this bridge, he would reach out, his fingers loosely curled round mine, only for the length of the bridge, and stupidly I held on to every moment of that more fiercely than he ever held on to me. Hard to believe now that something as simple as handholding could've made me so happy.

I still see him everywhere. Every blond-haired white boy is him.

The buzzing of my phone stops me from getting too lost in my thoughts. I assume it's just another message from my mum – I've had a few of those already today. But, when I take out my phone, I see it's not her at all.

For the past few months, there have only been two things making my heart race. The first thing was bad. Every time I opened an exam paper, I'd be terrified that it would turn out to be incomprehensible, filled with questions I was unprepared for: I had missed an entire topic in my revision; I had been taught the wrong syllabus; I had forgotten every single thing I'd ever learned. All frequent occurrences in my exam-season nightmares.

The second thing is happening right now, and it's good. Extremely good.

It's a message from Ada.

> Hey babe, congrats on finishing your last exam! I love you so much and I'm so proud of you. It's nearly 10 a.m. here and I've just woken up after barely any sleep – I stayed up late writing you a fic to mark this momentous occasion! I really hope you like it.

There's a link, followed by a series of orange hearts – Ada's preferred heart emoji colour. Her preferred colour full stop.

I'm desperate to read the fanfic that she's written for me, but not standing in the middle of the street, especially not on this bridge. I want to savour it. Get home, hole up in

my room, lie on my bed and linger over every word on my phone. Then I'll read it again on my laptop, where I can easily copy and paste all my favourite parts into a comment and tell Ada in all caps how much I hate her for ruining my life with her brilliant writing when what I really mean is *I love you, I love you, I love you*.

But I think about what else is waiting for me at home.

I know I'll have to see how sad my mum is, and I don't ever want that, but especially not right now. I've just finished my exams, and I want to be *happy*.

I'm definitely going to swing by the comic shop first.

Before I do that, though, I let myself revel in the giddy rush that Ada's message has given me.

omg i can't believe you wrote me something! thank you, i'm so grateful! i'm just going to buy the may issue of ER and then i'm going to head home and try to read your fic as soon as i can!

Ahh yay! The June issue of ER is out so soon too! You need to catch up!

You nervous about seeing your grandma?

yeah... i just don't remember much about her, so it's weird to think about having her stay with us for months. i don't know what to expect! i feel like it's gonna be so awkward

Maybe you'll really get along! You never know. Maybe she'll be as cool as my g-ma!

oh, i hope so. tell your g-ma i said hi! anyway talk later when i'm home! i can't wait to read your fic!

I pocket my phone, and when I start walking again I have to try actively not to skip. Exams are over, the sun is shining, and Ada has written me a fic.

It feels like summer at last.