

*"I was hooked on the very first page...
gorgeous writing. Don't miss this one!"
— CARLEY FORTUNE*

HOW TO

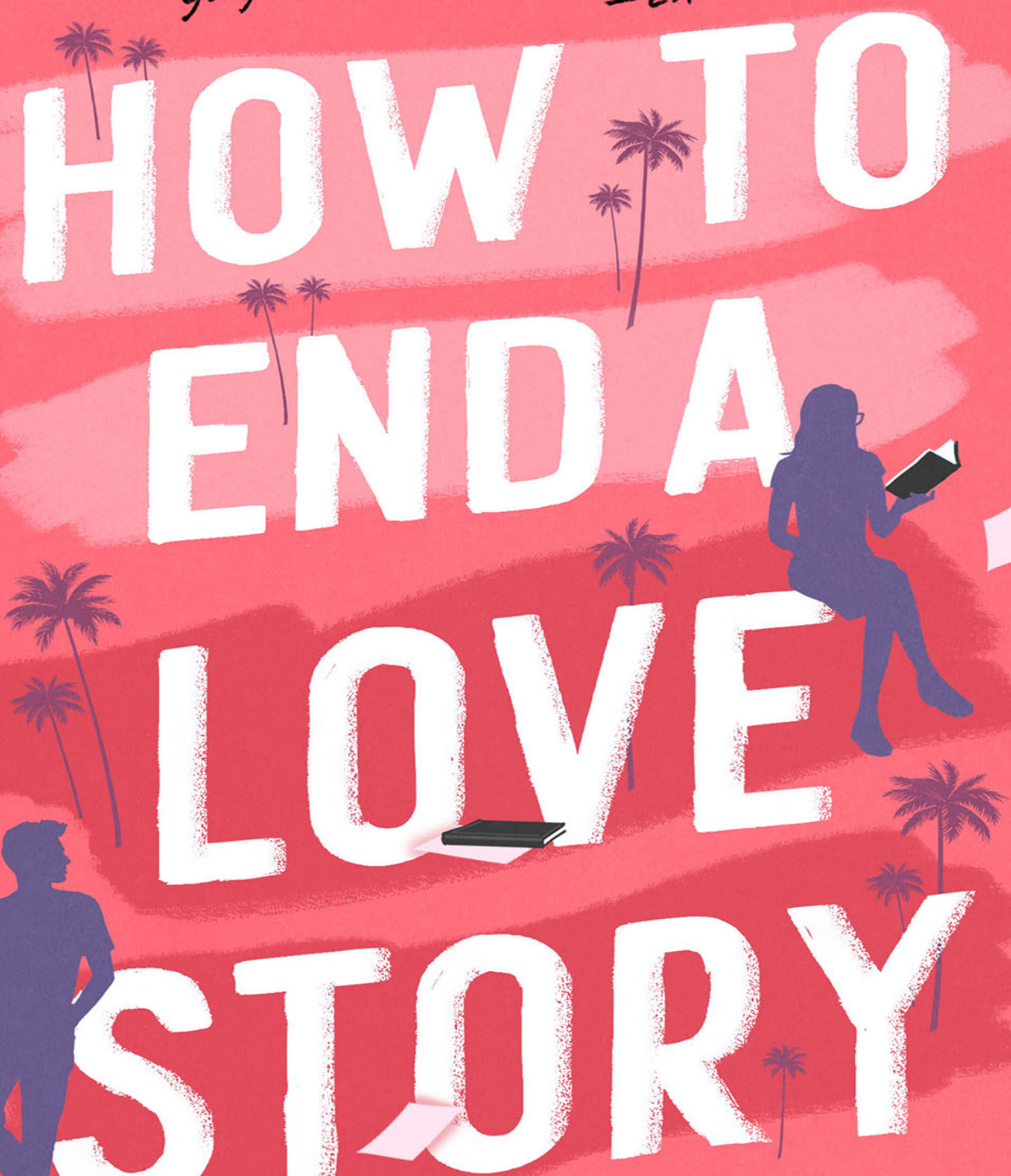
END A

LOVE

STORY

a novel

YULIN KUANG



HOW TO END A LOVE STORY

A Novel

YULIN KUANG



An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

For Zack, this is a love letter.

*And for eldest daughters of immigrant parents,
this is a love letter for you too.*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Author's Note

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One
Twenty-Two
Twenty-Three
Twenty-Four
Twenty-Five
Twenty-Six
Twenty-Seven
Twenty-Eight
Twenty-Nine
Thirty
Thirty-One
Thirty-Two
Thirty-Three
Thirty-Four
Thirty-Five

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Praise for How to End a Love Story

Copyright

About the Publisher

Author's Note

This story contains on-the-page discussions of complicated grief, suicide loss, and the death of a sibling.

One

All things considered, her little sister's funeral is a pretty boring affair.

Helen Zhang (the good one, the smart one, the *boring one*, according to Michelle, may she rest in peace) sits in the front row between her grieving parents. If Michelle were here, she would be snickering at something inappropriate, like the accidentally phallic floral arrangement draped over her closed casket. If Michelle were here, she'd be restlessly tapping her foot, anxious to sneak a cigarette in the bathroom, already plotting her escape to an afterparty. If Michelle were here—*it wouldn't be so fucking quiet*.

Helen's mother shakes with silent, rolling sobs and grips her surviving daughter's right hand so hard, Helen lost feeling in it during the pastor's welcome remarks. Her father stares at the wooden easel holding Michelle's sophomore-year photo. His gaze drifts first to the bland church window blinds (not for the first time, Helen wishes they were Catholic, for the vibes), then to the shoes of the pastor. Dad looks everywhere there isn't someone with a face to look back at him.

Helen used up all her own tears in the first forty-eight hours, shaking and crying alone in her room like some dumb wounded animal until her eyes were puffy slits, pondering existential questions too big to be captured in pathetic words. The well has dried up, and all that's left is a growing pit of resentment that threatens to swallow her whole. She hates the pastor's trite remarks trying to imbue

Michelle's short life with *meaning*, hates Mom's tears, hates Dad's lack of them, maybe she even hates *herself*, but *why*? Really, if there's anyone she *should* be mad at, it's *Michelle*—

A door in the back of the church creaks open—a late mourner—and a sudden prickling at the back of Helen's neck says: it's *him*.

Hushed whispers dash up the aisle, and even though Helen tells herself not to turn her head, not to look—Mom isn't so lost in her grief as to miss the sudden shift of attention in the room. She turns and lets out a dramatic *wail* that Helen can't help feeling embarrassed by.

Helen turns around and her eyes confirm, it's *Grant Shepard, Grant Fucking Shepard. Class president, homecoming king, lover of parties and friends and teachers and football. And killer of my sister.*

That last part seems unlikely to hold up in a court of law—there were enough eyewitnesses to suggest sixteen-year-old Michelle Zhang darted in front of eighteen-year-old Grant Shepard's SUV shortly after two a.m. last Friday (and caused a grim traffic jam on Route 22) on purpose. There were enough "key search terms" in Michelle's internet history to confirm it. And the most humiliating blow for their parents: there was enough in the toxicology report to warrant the phrase *troubled youth* in the local news coverage.

About Michelle, not Grant.

Everyone felt bad for Grant: how sad, how tragic, how *selfish* that this girl—practically a stranger, some sophomore with a suicidal itch—would do something like this, forcing a bright young man like him to have to live with accidentally killing someone for the rest of his bright, promising life.

"*You,*" Mom says, standing in the middle of the aisle, her mouth gasping for air like they're in a Greek tragedy.

Grant Shepard stands still, as if he exists just to be gasped at by grieving mothers and gawked at by middle-aged Chinese aunties and uncles.

He looks exactly the way Helen thinks of him—wearing a dark navy sweater over a crisp white button-down, as if he's on his way to a student council meeting after this to discuss grad night themes. His tie is perfectly knotted and his dark brown hair is neatly brushed

and he looks too good—too young and handsome and *alive*—to be allowed in this room.

Grant's soft brown eyes dart around the church. He knows he's made a mistake coming here, she can tell. He probably thought it'd be okay, that they would understand why he'd want to pay his respects, maybe—maybe he even thought they'd forgive him.

What a supreme amount of ego it must have taken, to imagine his presence would be wanted here.

"No," Helen's mom is saying, her lips white but forceful.

Grant's hands come up, almost placating. "I didn't mean to—"

"She wants you to leave," Helen finally says, her voice firm. "Now."

Grant's eyes land on Helen. He ducks his head in understanding. As he turns to leave, he adds a mumbling sort of "Sorry."

It's all so dramatic, Helen feels an itch to shout at his retreating back, *And don't you ever show your stupid face in here again!*

Like they're in a movie, instead of a Presbyterian church they haven't attended in over seven years.

But it doesn't seem worth it, when the Grant Shepards of the world are so unlikely to cross paths with the grieving Zhang families of the world—gasping mothers, avoiding fathers, gossiping aunties and uncles, and all—ever again.

Instead, Helen leads her mother back to the pew. As she walks down the aisle, she makes eye contact with Michelle's smiling portrait.

I bet you liked that, Helen thinks, daring her sister to respond. I bet that was your favorite part of your whole funeral.

Two

Thirteen Years Later

When the phone rings on Tuesday morning, Helen already knows it's going to be good news. Her literary agent Chelsea Pierce sends bad news in sympathetic couplets over email—*they didn't go for it; fuck 'em*—but she picks up the phone for good news.

"I hope you hate your apartment because you're going to Hollywood!"

Helen laughs and immediately feels a rush of cautious energy flood her. *Don't get too excited, the paperwork isn't signed, everything could still fall apart.*

She's grown superstitious. When she published the first book in what would become the Ivy Papers series, she told herself, *Don't get ahead of yourself, people might hate it, or worse, maybe no one will even read it.* When it became a bestseller and the *New York Times* put her on a list of voices to watch in the young adult space, she admonished herself, *It doesn't really matter, the work is still the same as it was before it made the list, and what if they don't like the second book?*

Her entire career so far could be linked from cautious mental disclaimer to disclaimer, right up to the announcement that some fancy Hollywood people are turning her books about moody prep-school teens keeping dark, academic secrets into a soapier, sexier TV show.

“What do you do about imposter syndrome?” she once asked a much more successful, senior author over a celebratory brunch.

“Well, at a certain point, it becomes unseemly,” he told her.

Six weeks later, as she opens the door to her new waterfront condo (all living expenses during prep and production paid for by the studio, plus per diem) across from the Santa Monica Pier—Helen thinks, perhaps, she’s reached *a certain point*.

The place comes furnished in expensive beiges and smells like a trendy hotel. Late-September sunshine filters through the floor-to-ceiling windows that open onto her private balcony, and it makes Helen wonder if she could become a totally different person here, the kind with morning routines and inner peace. There’s a shared common area on the top floor she can reserve for parties (Helen doesn’t know enough people in this city to throw a party, but she nods politely at the building manager anyway) and her kitchen window looks out onto the patio of her temporary neighbor, Academy Award–winner Frances McDormand.

“How very *LA*,” her East Coast friends say when she tells them.

“Who?” says her mom during their first bicoastal FaceTime.

“Frances McDormand, Mom,” Helen sighs as she unpacks the groceries. “She’s, like, an actress, you would know her. She’s in . . .”

Helen pauses, as her mind suddenly erases the entirety of Frances McDormand’s illustrious, award-winning career from existence. She was in *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, but Mom hasn’t seen that.

“I think she played the Queen in something. Oh, and she’s the mom in *Moonrise Kingdom*!”

“I don’t know her,” Mom says. “Never mind. What are you making for dinner?”

Helen dutifully recites her dinner menu—*just something easy, I still have to get more pots and pans, yes I’ll add something green, thanks, Mom*—and is treated to another forty minutes of hand-wringing over the history of earthquakes in LA County.

“If the ground opens up, I’ll jump right in so it’ll be quick and painless,” Helen says as she finishes off her tomato and egg rice bowl. “Don’t worry so much. Love you, bye!”

She searches “moving into a new apartment in LA” on Spotify and puts on someone else’s well-curated playlist over the state-of-the-art Bluetooth speaker system.

Helen has never been cool enough to be “a music person.” She prefers leaving that up to strangers on the internet who’ve experienced the same specific soundtrack-worthy moments in life —“cozy October morning in the kitchen” or “driving toward my uncertain future”—and hoping they’ll tell her exactly what songs would bring those feelings out best, like a purple scarf for green eyes.

As Stevie Nicks croons about time making her bolder and children getting older, Helen hangs her clothes up in ascending length in the walk-in closet and thinks about the times when life files itself neatly into chapters.

Travel is a way of turning the page, Helen reminds herself, reciting her therapist’s counsel. *Maybe you’ll finally be able to write something new.*

Helen mentally strikes out that *maybe* with savage determination. She hopes this chapter is a short, productive one.

When the phone rings on Wednesday, Grant already knows it’s going to be a shit conversation.

“Just take the meeting,” his TV agent Fern wheedles. “What’s the harm in taking a meeting?”

“I didn’t like the book,” he says, not untruthfully.

Prep-school teens and their sex lives aren’t exactly his *area*, and Grant was hoping to break this unemployment streak with something more exciting, like a feature (which he’s going to finish as soon as he has the time) or at least a development deal somewhere (it’s not his fault he missed pilot season because his mom hired some shady contractors who did such a bad job he had to spend the entire summer back in New Jersey undoing and redoing her floors).

“So you didn’t respond to the material—that’s nothing we haven’t gotten over before,” Fern says. “If anything, it means you’re a better

candidate than some loser who's obsessed with the books. You can see its flaws, you know how to fix it, blah, blah—"

"I went to high school with the author," he says finally.

"That's perfect—"

"No," Grant says grimly. "It's not. She didn't like me."

"Well, that's ridiculous, everyone likes you," Fern says, sounding a little maternally offended on his behalf. "Besides, she's not going to be in the meeting; it's just the showrunner and executive producers."

"I . . ." He takes a steadying breath—*exhale longer than you inhale*—and shakes his head. "I don't want to talk about this right now. There has to be something else. What about Jason's spin-off show? That was a good meeting, wasn't it?"

"They don't have the budget for a writer at your level," Fern says evenly. "And you're not taking a pay cut back down to co-producer when we've finally clawed our way up to co-EP."

Grant's IMDb profile succinctly condenses each rung of his career so far into a one-line credit—*staff writer, story editor, executive story editor, co-producer, producer, co-executive producer*. Other writers he came up with never managed to make it past that first credit, and there really aren't many lines separating *him* from *them*. Grant knows he doesn't deserve the success he's had and it's always felt that much more precarious for it.

Grant downs an Advil and massages his temples. "What about features?"

"As soon as you've got a draft of that spec for me, I'm happy to read it. In the meantime, you're a TV writer. You make money for us both as a TV writer. And this is a straight-to-series, prestige"—he scoffs here, but Fern overrules him—"very *buzzy* TV show. The studio execs all loved your materials, the showrunner's already read your sample. Are you really going to make me tell them they wasted their time?"

Grant sighs. He knows, somehow, this is a mistake, even as he says, "Fine, I'll take the meeting."

That night he spends some time googling *Helen Zhang, YA author*. Her author photo comes up first and she looks more or less the way he remembers her, except older and more expensive. Her eyes are

intelligent and assessing, her posture as straight as it was that day in the church at her sister's funeral. She's not smiling—Helen has never smiled in his memory, so that makes sense—and he can still see the stiff, serious editor-in-chief of the school paper in her, after all this time.

Their paths rarely crossed before the night that changed his life forever—Helen hung out with the nerdy, Ivy League-obsessed crowd and was not-so-secretly judgy about him and his friends on the football team and cheer squad, rolling her eyes at pep rallies and homecoming and everything that had given his life meaning when he was seventeen years old.

And afterward . . . afterward, Helen hadn't looked at him at all. She looked through him whenever they were in the same room.

Grant considers what Fern would say if he told her he couldn't take this job for "mental health reasons." He laughs to himself—Fern would probably remind him of his mortgage (he shouldn't have bought the bungalow in Silver Lake, but he'd thought *The Guys* would have at least one more season before its untimely cancellation) and dangle attractive numbers in front of him (*minus ten percent*) and tell him therapy costs money.

When he gets the call a few days later that they want to offer him the job, he's past the point of putting up a fight. Therapy *does* cost money, and if Helen Zhang has a problem with him being on the writing staff of her TV show, well.

She can take that up with his entertainment lawyer.