HOW WE FALL APART

Books by Katie Zhao

The Dragon Warrior

The Fallen Hero

How We Fall Apart

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For those who aspire to greatness,
no matter the personal cost

In inceptum finis est.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Please note that this book contains depictions of abuse, self-harm, violence, parental neglect, panic attacks, drug use, mental illness, an inappropriate student/teacher relationship, racism, and suicidal thoughts. I understand these themes may be triggering and would suggest proceeding with caution.

MY MOTHER ONCE TOLD ME

My mother once told me I had to get into a top university, or die trying.

You have to be the best, Nancy. Remember: my sacrifices for you. Remember: everything we toiled for in this strange and foreign country.

You cannot let it be for nothing.

I thought Mama was joking. Immigrant mothers often made impossible requests of their high-achieving children.

Like: practice piano every day until you're good enough to play at Carnegie Hall. Like: take tennis lessons under the best coach and become the national champion.

They had achieved miracles, and so they asked us to do the same.

My mother once told me to take the most advanced courses. Earn the highest grades. Become the best.

Or else.

Back then, I did not understand what Mama was asking for, what granting her wishes would cost me. Then, I did not know a debt of life could only be repaid with life. With blood.

And so I promised, and so I vowed. For family. For everything we sacrificed.

I would die trying.

CONFESSION ONE

J.R. is so perfect, it pisses me off. I wouldn't mind if she disappeared. Permanently. —Anon

*****

It was easy stepping into her skin. Wearing it as well as she did was another matter.

Jamie Ruan. A name—a legend—to which nobody could ever live up. In the eleven years I was friends with her, I'd known Jamie to have no weaknesses.

Everyone feared her. Everyone wanted to be her. Of course they did. She was top of the elite junior class at Richard Sinclair Preparatory School, or Sinclair Prep for short. Class president. Captain of the girls' volleyball team. All that in addition to being wealthy, beautiful, ambitious, and smart.

I could match Jamie's ambition and intelligence. Slip into her skin and pretend I was her. But I could only wish, like so

many other girls, to be as effortlessly perfect as her. That the stars would align for me as obediently as they did for her.

Because in the end, I was no Jamie Ruan.

Jamie could get away with anything, do away with anyone. Could ruin your life with a single whisper to her wealthy, influential father.

There was Pam Jensen, who got the solo in choir over Jamie during sophomore year. Jamie bullied her into leaving before she could sing it. The year before, Karen Outa made varsity volleyball instead of Jamie, but mysteriously had to switch schools before the season started. Countless more in middle and elementary and Chinese school, names and faces we'd long since buried like ghosts in our memories.

Tonight, I'd hoped that for once, maybe Jamie wouldn't be the center of attention. Tonight, in Sinclair Prep's century-old auditorium, over a hundred pairs of eyes were trained on the brightly lit stage. Trained on me, and the students sitting behind me.

Principal Bates was taking his time getting the sound system and projector set up. But in the lull, the whispers rose up and surrounded me. Everyone wondering the same thing.

"Where *is* Jamie?" Two seats to my left, Louisa Wu huffed to Kiara William. "I haven't seen her since AP World, and she hasn't even read any of my texts."

"Maybe she fell asleep. You know how stressed she's been," murmured Kiara. Louisa and Kiara were Jamie's latest hangers-on-slash-BFFs.

"This is Jamie Ruan we're talking about," piped up Isabel

Lim, who sat right behind Kiara. "I don't think she *ever* sleeps. Maybe Jamie's too ashamed. I wouldn't show up to give a speech in front of all the parents either if everyone knew my father was an embezzling, low-life, no-good crook—"

"Students, please!" Principal Bates turned around with a glare, raising a finger to his lips. The whispers quieted, but didn't stop. Here at Sinclair Prep, the whispers never stopped. That was why some students liked to theorize that these archaic halls were haunted, inhabited and troubled by ghosts.

My cell phone buzzed in the sliver of space between the waistband of my skirt and my skin. Students weren't supposed to have electronics on stage. This meant, of course, everyone around me texted subtly in their laps.

Once Bates turned back around, I slid my phone out.

Krystal: *Nancy! Best of luck with the speech* ☺
Akil: *Break a leg bro*
Alexander: 👍
Nancy: *Thx guys. Just wondering why Jamie didn't show up to give the speech herself*
Krystal: *It isn't like her to not show up for a chance to show off . . .*
Nancy: *Yeah I'm worried. Remember how earlier she asked us to meet her at Bethesda fountain cuz she wanted to tell us something, and she didn't come to that either? It's really not like her*
Alexander: *Maybe Jamie needed a day off. I mean we've all been cramming for AP tests this entire month, plus*

the girls' volleyball team won states. I wouldn't blame her if she sleeps until graduation lol

Akil: *Or maybe Jamie's dead. Like on top of her dad being an embezzler, he's a murderer too*

I shuddered at Akil's text. All the whispers traveling around me, and these auditorium lights creaking above like phantoms, and now this talk of death. It was enough to spook anyone.

Nancy: *Omg don't even joke about that.*

Alexander: *Mr. Ruan's been in jail for months tho. There's no way he could do anything to Jamie.*

Akil: *Ask Louisa Wu, maybe she knows. Isn't she BFFs w/ Jamie now?*

Nancy: *Louisa doesn't know either, heard her saying that.*

"Nancy!" The principal waved me over, an invitation to join him at the podium.

I stood and took a deep breath, shaking my head to clear my thoughts. *Focus. Concentrate. Nothing matters except this speech.* I tried desperately to channel Jamie's powerful aura as I left my seat and stepped up to the podium in her place.

"Welcome," Principal Bates announced, "to the ninety-second Junior Honors Night of Richard Sinclair Preparatory School, the preeminent private high school in the United States, home to a centuries-old tradition of the very highest academic excellence. Here at Sinclair Prep, our students strive

to uphold our values of earning a merit-based education, celebrating our differences, and together exploring the achievements of mankind. I am proud to introduce this evening's student speaker—distinguished honor student Nancy Luo."

Polite applause followed the principal's introduction. Per tradition, the privilege of speaking at honors night went to the top-ranked student of the grade. For our class, that had always been Jamie. But tonight, Jamie wasn't here, which meant that responsibility fell to me.

Principal Bates passed me the microphone and PowerPoint clicker with a tight-lipped smile. Behind me, the giant projector screen flashed with the opening slide of the presentation Jamie had painstakingly prepared for this night.

WE'VE MADE IT, CLASS OF 2023! read the title slide. Below it, the subtitle of Sinclair Prep's motto: *In inceptum finis est.*

And below that, our junior class photo, which had been taken in the fall. The deadened eyes and glazed smiles of my classmates stared back at me from the slide.

When she'd originally emailed her PowerPoint to Bates weeks ago, the principal had forwarded it to me, so I'd taken a look at it before tonight and had an idea of what to say. Still, it was impossible not to be nervous speaking in front of *this* audience. The families here were among the wealthiest and most powerful in the country: CEOs, film directors, political leaders. Their kids would go on to run the country five, ten years from now.

Located at West Ninety-Sixth Street and Broadway on the

Upper West Side, Sinclair Prep was a three-story, gray-bricked elite high school that ranked number one in every area imaginable: university entrance rates, debate championships, number of alumni who went on to become U.S. presidents.

Whispers, loud, from the students sitting behind me. Whispers, from the walls, from everywhere. Saying I didn't belong up here, didn't deserve to give this speech. After all, I was a lucky scholarship student attending this elite high school. The daughter of two immigrants who'd fought tooth and nail to make it to the States, only to spend years struggling to make ends meet.

Tendrils of my long, straight black hair clung to my neck. A bead of sweat trailed beneath the gray collar of my black, long-sleeved shirt, down the black skirt that came down to my knees. I wore this uniform every day to class, but now it felt uncomfortably hot and stiff.

Jamie would ignore the whispers, if she even heard them. She would own the floor.

So I envisioned myself as Jamie: top of the class, confident, unbreakable. I envisioned the look of envy that would've replaced her usual smugness if she could see me now, taking *her* coveted place. The nerves melted away. The whispers quieted.

Like I'd practiced in front of my bedroom mirror, I slid Jamie's confident, perfect smile onto my face. "Good evening. It's been a long journey to this night."

Three years, to be exact. Three years of exhausting work and misery. Of clawing our way to the top academic ranks at America's top private high school.

We'd worn ourselves to the bone to make it to this night. Sacrificed hobbies. Neglected personal health. All for the chance to call ourselves the nation's top students. All for the chance to have everything.

I clicked through to the next slide. SINCLAIR JUNIORS OUTRANKED 97% OF THE NATION IN STANDARDIZED TESTING! "This year, our academic achievements . . . ," I started, then faltered. What was the point of me getting up here to regurgitate a bunch of statistics? All this information was no doubt already on the school website.

Silence permeated the auditorium. Principal Bates turned toward me with a nervous look.

Whispers, louder. Whispers, urging, in my head. *Tell them how you really feel.*

"Junior year hasn't been easy," I blurted out. I didn't know exactly where this speech was going now. But I held the microphone. I controlled this moment. "Over the course of the year, we've . . . said goodbye to several classmates."

Faces swam before my vision, replacing the actual audience. So many classmates who'd succumbed to the pressure. Left with their heads hanging in shame. I didn't know whether Sinclair had created their depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses, or if this place and the competition exacerbated it in anyone without the iron will and drive to cut it here. Jamie hadn't put *that* information in her presentation.

My fingers gripped the microphone so tightly that my knuckles turned white. I wouldn't let that happen to me. Wouldn't disappoint Mama, who'd struggled balancing odd jobs for

years so I could stand on the stage tonight. Wouldn't disappoint myself.

"The accomplishments we celebrate tonight represent all of us juniors. We've worked hard. We've earned our places on this stage. And as we finish out the school year and apply to colleges, we'll continue excelling into senior year." I clicked the button to move to the next slide, which was about our class's extracurricular achievements. "Besides academics—"

A collective gasp from the crowd drowned out my voice. And the whispers, the whispers grew to a crescendo.

"What—what is the meaning of this?" roared Principal Bates.

My heart thudded when I looked—really looked—at the slide. I remembered this slide to show the picture of our varsity debate team holding a first-place trophy from the state championship a couple of weeks ago. I remembered sitting in the center when that photo was taken—me, secretary of the debate team, worn to the bone from juggling extracurriculars and academics, but still managing a painful smile. A smile full of relief that I'd ended the debate season with awards to pad my résumé.

Now, instead of showing the varsity debate team, this slide showed a scanned photo of a pink page. It appeared to have been torn out of a notebook.

On it was an alarming message scrawled in bold red ink.

The whispers grew louder. The noise reached me as though from a distance, my mind at a time and place far from this auditorium.

These hands, picking up that blood-red pen.

These hands, carving those sentences, as if doing so would tattoo them into my own skin. Hissing each word, like a promise of revenge.

Splitting myself open to bleed an oath onto the page:

I WILL END YOU, JAMIE RUAN.
MARK MY WORDS.