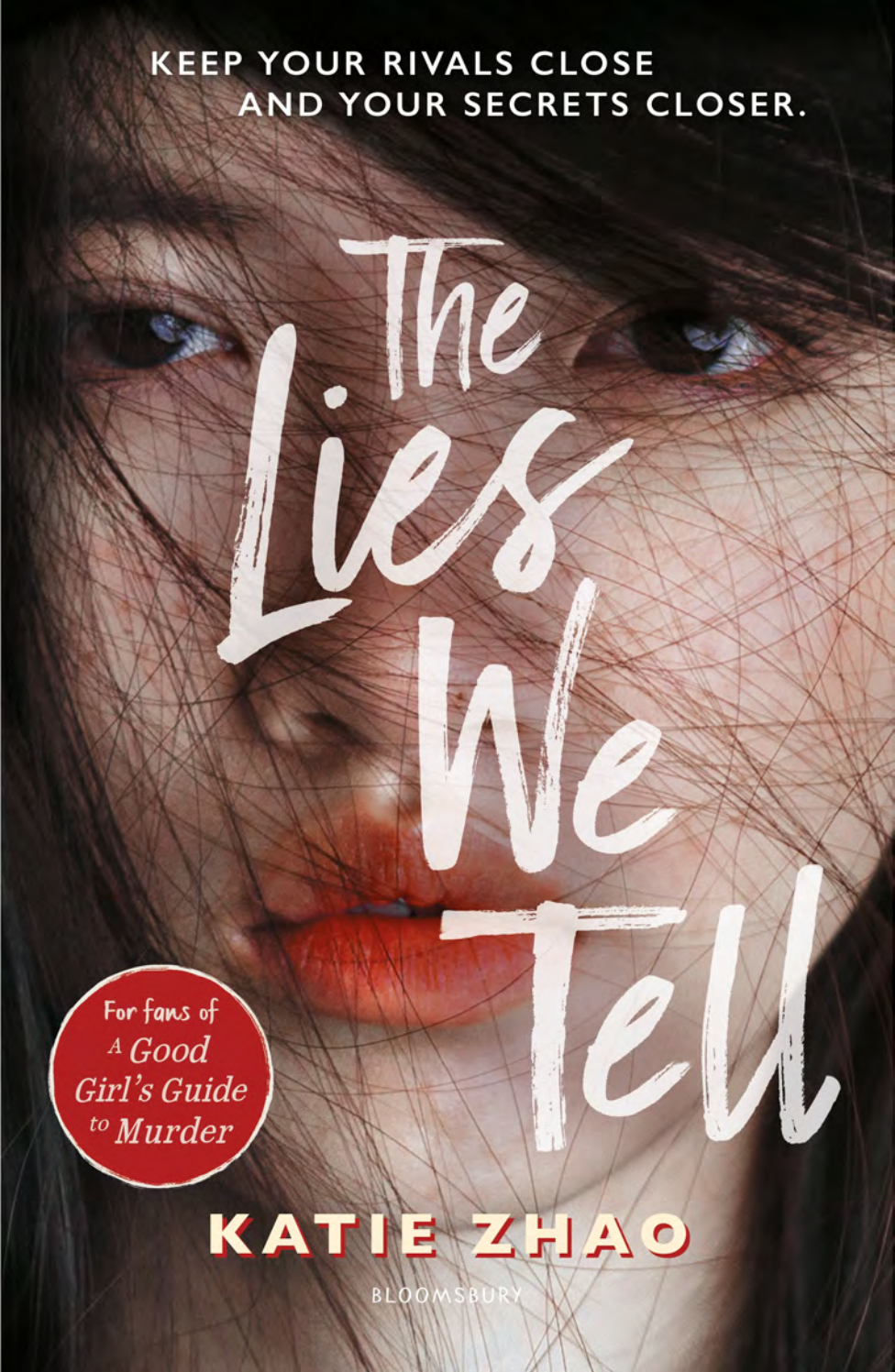

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The Lies We Tell

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How We Fall Apart
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The Lies We Tell

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For the Asian girls we failed

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February 14, 2015

IN HER PRECIOUS LAST MOMENTS, she felt so very isolated. There was someone there with her, and yet, she had never been more alone.

She was certain this couldn't be happening to her. Yet all the sensations were so very, very real. Until this moment, she'd never known it could be possible to exist beyond the point of terror like this.

"My sweet little doll," he said, and his breath was hot and suffocating on her skin. It was a chilly fall night, but her body was coated with sweat. The woods around her were silent and still, as though the trees themselves were simply standing by, watching the unspeakable happen to her. Help, she knew, would not be coming. Not for her.

"You'll be mine forever."

The man was hissing more words, but she couldn't register them.

Spots danced in her vision, obscuring the trees, matching the stars in the clearing above her. They say your life flashes before your eyes when you're about to die, and for her, it was the

smiling faces of Mama and Baba that swam in her mind. Mama and Baba had immigrated to this country—for her. They had endured every hardship in their path—for her. Mama and Baba had given her the world. How could a stranger snatch it away? She was filled with regret not for herself, but for her family.

Her senses were dulled. She was slow, too slow to react, too slow to save herself. She was neither here nor there, suspended precariously somewhere in between. And then pain, cold—and down she spiraled into darkness.

Chapter One

I SAT INSIDE THE NOISY and busy Beijing airport, listening to the announcer state flight changes over the intercom. I held the last of my grandmother's dòu shā bāo in my hand. The egg yolk–glazed red bean bun had long since cooled from Nai Nai's oven but would still be delicious and full of flavor. Through the window I could see that my airplane had already arrived. Just half an hour left until boarding, and then departure.

Outside, the city turned grayer as evening fell until Beijing was a glittering mass of lights beyond the airport. A city that sprawled and stretched on for miles in every direction, Beijing was the place Ma and Ba had grown up, where generations of my family had been born and raised. It might have been my home, but now was my second home across the ocean. A breath-taking city in a beautiful country that I hadn't visited since I was a tiny girl.

Because *home* home was the red-bricked house surrounded by a white picket fence back in Michigan, where my parents and I lived.

This had been my last—and freest—summer vacation before I became a college student, and I'd spent it visiting relatives. Three months was over too soon, and I was headed back to the States to start my new life as a college freshman just days from now. All that remained of my whirlwind summer in Beijing were my memories, photographs, and my grandmother's red bean buns. The memories I'd made with my distant family were already beginning to fade. I desperately tried to hold on to them, but it was like cupping water in my palm. Too difficult to hold on to, too easy to slip away.

My attention shifted back to the gate attendant, who called for passengers to begin boarding. I waited for the third boarding zone and joined the line right behind a tall, lanky guy who was tapping his foot impatiently. There seemed to be some kind of holdup, and we were standing for a while—long enough for my stomach to start growling again.

I'd been planning to save this last red bean bun for the actual plane ride, but as I waited and stared, I couldn't hold off any longer. Slowly I unwrapped the plastic wrapping. I closed my eyes and opened my mouth to take a bite, preparing to savor this one.

Then something—an elbow—careened into my arm and knocked the sweet treat from my hands and onto the airport floor. My eyes popped open in shock. "No," I groaned. My last red bean bun, lying on the dirty floor. Wasted, just like that. As the daughter of two bakers, I felt as though I'd committed a sin—or maybe that the person who'd caused me to drop the bun was at fault.

The guy who'd bumped into me apologized in Mandarin, and then turned around.

The boy was around my age, maybe slightly older. He had unruly jet-black hair and dark, piercing black eyes. He was tall, even compared to me, and at five-eight I was one of the tallest people I knew. It annoyed me that he had an air of academic handsomeness about him: good looks without trying, and eyes that saw past the person in front of him, as though he spent his time worrying more what was happening between the pages of a book than in real life. I knew that expression well—it was the same one I saw every time I looked in the mirror. The guy had at least half a foot on me and a scowl on his face.

I wouldn't let myself be intimidated, though. He'd knocked my food out of my hand. I hadn't done anything wrong here. That was the last bun my grandmother had made for me, and it would be years before I'd have the chance to come visit Beijing and eat her delicious cooking again.

My annoyance grew. I longed to yell all of this at the boy, but he was just a stranger. I'd never see him again once we got off this flight. There was no point, and besides, I'd been taught to never make a scene. Plus, if I unleashed that, I'd no doubt receive a one-way ticket to getting escorted off the premises by airport security.

So instead I rolled my eyes and looked away, pointedly not accepting the guy's apology.

"Rude," I heard him mutter.

"It's ruder to cause someone to drop their last red bean bun," I said under my breath.

"What was that?"

Don't snap back, I thought. And then, a moment later, a realization struck me—he'd spoken in English, and he'd understood *my* English. Oops. Already there were a few people around us who were studying us with great interest, as though waiting for the tension to break out into a fight. Making a spectacle of myself was the last thing I wanted to do in my last moments in Beijing, so with a great effort, I turned away and pretended to be very interested in the airplanes outside the window.

Eventually the line moved us down the gangway and onto the plane. As luck would have it (eye roll) the boy took his seat just one row forward and across the aisle from me. We weren't sitting close enough for it to seriously bug me, but we were just close enough that every time I glanced in his direction, I was reminded again of my poor last red bean bun.

There was a more immediate problem, though, in the form of my seat neighbor being a preteen boy who wouldn't stop bouncing his legs up and down and cursing every few minutes as he played on his Nintendo Switch.

This was shaping up to be the longest, most torturous flight ever. I put on my headphones and scrolled through Apple Podcasts, pausing on my favorite true crime podcast, *Unsolved Murders*. I pressed play on the latest episode upload and closed my eyes. The host's soothing voice filled my ear and I drifted off to sleep.

I could have only been asleep for an hour or so when I woke up with a jolt, my neck in a painfully cramped position.

"Die, monsters!" yelled the kid next to me.

There was no way I would be going back to sleep.

Yawning and stretching, I turned my head and saw that across the aisle, the boy had picked up a book. I couldn't see the cover or even if the book was in Chinese or English, but I could tell it was a thick volume. It was a sharp reminder that I still hadn't finished all of my assigned summer reading for my first college courses. Maybe this guy was a college student, too. Not that it mattered one way or another.

I fished my copy of Homer's *The Iliad* out of my bag and buried my nose into it. It had been assigned to me for my Great Books class, a classics course that every honors student had to take as part of the program. In high school I'd been a model student, a reputation I intended to keep up at university. I'd read a handful of pages earlier in the summer, but the Wikipedia summary of the ancient Greek epic had made it sound more exciting than it was.

If other students were getting their reading done now, then I would, too. The boy likely had no idea that we were currently in competition, but I wouldn't be outdone. For the duration of the first flight, I immersed myself in *The Iliad* and the siege of the city of Troy, breaking my concentration only to eat a tasteless midflight meal. Annoying as it was, there was a one-hour stop in Toronto. By the time it was time to board my second flight, I was already sick of traveling, but at least there was only a little over an hour left of the twenty-hour travel day. The guy from the other flight was on this flight,

too, but I pretended not to notice him, and he pretended not to notice me.

The rest of the way home, though, I couldn't help but wonder who that boy was.