# ALL THAT'S LEFT UNSAID

TRACEY LIEN


ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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For my parents

# Chapter 1

The circumstances of Denny Tran's death were so violent that most people in Cabramatta were too spooked to attend his funeral. At least that's how it seemed to his big sister, Ky. The funeral hall had been all but empty—her dead seventeen-year-old brother lay in the glossy closed casket; her parents and a few relatives kneeled next to a blown-up photo of a grinning Denny; and a Buddhist monk chanted prayers in exchange for lunch.

The only non-family in attendance were Denny's high school teachers, who huddled together big-eyed and confused by the lack of seating and eulogies. At the wake, they stood in the doorway to her family's narrow townhouse, still holding the flowers and signed cards they'd brought to the funeral (no one had told them that Vietnamese families take cash), and waved at Ky like they were getting a waiter's attention.

"Hi, Ky!" Mr. Dickson said in a voice that was too cheerful for the occasion, his mouth stretched wide in what appeared to be an effort to correctly pronounce her name. He'd always called her Kai, even though she'd corrected him in year eight when she sat in his math class four times a week. "*Keeee,*" she'd said, her voice small, "like a key that unlocks a door." Maybe it

was amnesia, but every time he read the class roster, she became Kai again, and after a third correction, she gave up. Kee. Kai. Whatever.

"Hey," Ky said, rushing to clear a spot on the coffee table for the flowers.

She could feel the teachers' eyes scan her parents' living room, identifying everything that was familiar to them (Panasonic television, years-old McDonald's Happy Meal toys on top of the VCR, Ky's framed university degree, photos of Denny winning Highest Academic Achievement four years in a row), and everything that was unfamiliar (the ancestral altar that featured black-and-white photos of her unsmiling dead grandparents, a bright red calendar hanging above the television reminding them that 1996 was the year of the rat, a doorway full of shoes). The other teachers, whom Ky recognized as Ms. Faulkner and Ms. Buck, continued to study the room, smiling at Ky's younger cousins, one of whom grimaced in response.

"Are your parents around?" Mr. Dickson asked.

"Mum's in the kitchen."

Her mother had stayed up the night before hand-rolling more than a hundred buns for the wake. Ky helped stamp the tops of the buns with a spot of red food coloring but expressed skepticism about her family needing to prepare so much food. Because even though she'd been away from Cabramatta for four years, she knew how this town worked: If a family suffered a "good" death—the kind that happened to old people, the kind that everyone was prepared for—the Asians in town showed up with family members in tow, gifting envelopes stuffed with cash. But if it was a "bad" death—the kind caused by terrible luck,

where children or gangs or heroin were involved—everyone was suddenly too busy, was out of town, or hadn't heard the news. Her own parents had pulled a similar move on friends and acquaintances before, claiming that they were tied up with work when really they were superstitious about bad luck rubbing off with proximity.

"This is different," her mother had said after Ky questioned who would eat all the food they were making. She refused to look Ky in the eye when she spoke. She refused to acknowledge that Denny had suffered a bad death, the worst kind, a nightmare that stole her words and silenced her family. She refused to stop moving, as though afraid the truth would catch up to her if she slowed for even a moment.

Ky had made a show of dropping the stamp onto the kitchen counter. "*How* is this different?" she said, trying to draw her mother's eyes back to her, trying to get someone—anyone—in the family to look her straight in the face and talk about her brother.

"Because he is my son!" her mother said, slamming the dough back onto the counter so hard it looked like her body was ready to collapse into itself.

Ky had restrained herself from saying more. She'd bitten her tongue as thoughts tumbled through her head. Of neighbors not showing up to the funeral. Of her parents' coworkers—who usually demanded wedding invitations from people they hardly knew—conveniently being too busy to swing by to pay their respects. Of their playing games of mah-jongg with one another, eating boiled peanuts while gossiping about the good boy, the smart boy, the painfully unlucky boy who was in the

wrong place at the wrong time. She saw them shaking their heads as they spoke of how the world wasn't what it used to be, how ruthless people had become, how indiscriminate luck was in a town like Cabramatta, in a country as confounding as Australia. And it made her angry. Ky alternated between clenching her jaw and grinding her teeth when she thought of what people might be saying about her brother, because what the hell did they know? Bad luck was meaningless, defeatist. Bad luck was throwing your hands up before you'd even tried—it was a footnote, something that happened to *other* people. Bad luck made Ky want to loosen her strained jaw and scream at her absent neighbors. But she knew that even if she tried, no noise would come out. She could only ever fantasize; she could never really be heard.

People would come, Ky's mother said again, her thick hands pushing and grabbing and twisting the dough as though her love for her children was measured by her sweat and exertion—how much food she made, how springy the buns were once steamed. They would come for her son, she repeated, and it would be embarrassing not to have enough food at the wake, and the family couldn't afford to be embarrassed anymore.

Ky wanted her mother to be right. Denny deserved a crowd. More than a crowd, he deserved the presence of every person he would have met had his life not ended so soon. In the days leading up to the funeral, Ky caught herself daydreaming about hundreds, no, thousands of strangers making pilgrimages to Cabramatta for her brother. In her imagination, they crowded into her parents' driveway, spilled out onto the sidewalk, filled the neighboring streets, and shouted about how badly they

wished they'd known him. But even though the daydreams were her own creation, she kept losing control of them, her mind allowing Minnie, whom she hadn't seen in years, not since they'd had the worst fight of her life, to appear and shift the focus to Ky. Collectively, the imagined pilgrims would turn on Ky, demanding to know where she'd been, why she wasn't there for Denny in the end, how she could be so selfish as to abandon her baby brother like that. Fantasy Ky would freeze, her daydream tongue getting fat and useless in her parched daydream mouth, until she forced herself to snap out of it.

Back in the living room, Mr. Dickson stared at Ky, expecting her to show him to the kitchen. Ky stared back—she usually knew what she was meant to do, what was socially appropriate, but she was slow to act. Sometimes she felt like she was watching TV instead of occupying her own body. And right now the thought of having to translate Mr. Dickson's condolences to her parents—not to mention the awkward, stilted conversation that would follow—made her want to excuse herself and make a run for it, out of the house, down the street, in any direction, breaking the sound barrier, eventually escaping her own skin.

"They're busy right now," Ky said, not exactly lying. Her mother remained in a cooking frenzy. The last time she saw her father, about thirty minutes earlier, he was in his funerary black slacks and white shirt—barely discernible from his regular work clothes as a bank teller—lying straight on Denny's single mattress. "Plus, their English isn't great."

"I would still like to—"

"Here, have some food," Ky said. "Mum spent ages making these, so she'd be happy if you ate it."

She piled buns and noodles onto paper plates for the teachers, her armpits growing sweaty enough that she could feel them squeak under her white button-down, her rimless eyeglasses sliding down the broad bridge of her nose. Her family rarely hosted guests, and white guests other than the Avon lady were the rarest of all. Ky could remember only one other occasion when a white person had visited: When he was eight, Denny had befriended a freckly orange-haired boy who once came over to play G.I. Joes. Ky's mother, suspicious of white people—convinced that they might steal—made him stay outside the house. Denny and his friend played in the doorway, with Denny sitting inside, the white boy sitting outside. Ky, who was thirteen at the time, told her mother that she was pretty sure this wasn't normal, and that even though she herself had no white friends, she was willing to vouch that Freckles wasn't a thief.

"They don't seem to mind," her mother said, poking her head from the kitchen to watch the two boys go to war with their figurines.

But Freckles must have told his mother, and she must have minded, because he never came by again.

Minnie, who back then was over at Ky's house every day after school, had said that Ky's mother was onto something. "White people *are* thieves," she said between blowing huge bubbles of grape-flavored Hubba Bubba gum. "Captain Cook! Christopher Columbus! The *French*! White peeps are OG thieves to the max, man."

"What are you talking about?" Ky said.

Minnie theatrically smacked her own forehead, rolling her

eyes as far back as they'd go. "God, Ky, they've stolen your faculties, too."

"My what?"

"Your mum's not crazy, man . . ."—Minnie cocked a finger gun at Ky—"she's smart."

While it irritated Ky that Minnie always seemed to take her mother's side, she secretly appreciated how normal her friend made her feel. When Ky later recounted stories of her parents to her white friends in university, they made no attempts to reassure her that her family was like every other refugee family, that their values and actions were typical of immigrants from Vietnam. Instead, they observed that her mother sounded paranoid, that she might benefit from talking to a therapist. And whenever Ky brushed up against their judgment, she was reminded that the act of sharing her family's stories was a kind of betrayal, a way of setting her parents up to fail in the eyes of outsiders, a way of inviting such outsiders—who had no grasp of what her parents had been through or how deep their love was for their children or that Viets just did things differently—to laugh *at,* and not *with,* her. During those times, Ky missed Minnie most.

"So, how long are you back?" Mr. Dickson said, twisting a clump of noodles with his plastic fork like it was spaghetti. His eyes moved between Ky's face and the TV screen behind her, where a news anchor showed a graphic of the growing hole in the ozone layer.

"I'm sorry?" Ky said, snapping back to the room.

"They were talking about how bad that hole was in the eighties," Mr. Dickson said, angling his chin at the screen.

"Can't believe we've made it to the nineties and they still haven't figured it out."

Ky turned to the screen, where the news anchor had cut to coverage of the impending bushfire season.

"Uh," she said, straightening her back because she didn't know what else to do. "Right."

"Anyway, I was saying," Mr. Dickson said after clearing his throat of noodles and returning his attention to Ky, "how long are you back?"

Ky was surprised that he knew that she no longer lived in Sydney. But of course Denny had told his teachers; he'd been wide-eyed about her move to Melbourne for university, about her internship with the *Herald Sun,* her first printed bylines. He'd even asked if he could live with her, just for a bit, so that he could know what life was like outside of Cabramatta. She'd said they could talk about it on her next trip home. She hadn't expected that trip to be for his funeral.

"I took a week off, but work said I could take more if I need it."

"I'm sure your parents are glad to have you back," said Ms. Buck. Her hair was still as strawberry blond as Ky remembered, but her freckles appeared to have joined forces over the years, forming large islands of light brown on her otherwise milky skin. "I just can't imagine going through this tragedy. It's just . . . so devastating. I'm sure it means a lot to them to have you home."

Ms. Faulkner nodded, but her lips remained firmly pressed together, her eyes bloodshot, tears pooling at the edges.

Ky suddenly felt self-conscious about the dryness of her

own eyes. She hadn't cried during the funeral. Neither had her parents.

*You know what they're thinking, right?* said a voice in Ky's head. There was something about being back in Cabramatta that brought Minnie into Ky's every thought, every conversation. She couldn't remember a Cabramatta without Minnie, and her friend's voice always appeared when she least expected it. *They reckon you don't care.*

That's not true, Ky thought.

*Yeah, it is. They think you're a stoic Asian with no feelings and you're drawing on your Confucius values.*

What are you even—

*You know, the one where Con-fu-cius say, crying is for bay-bee.*

Ky desperately wanted to explain to the teachers that just because her family didn't cry didn't mean they didn't care. In fact, there were so many signs that they cared, so many ways to tell that they hurt—the fog that had appeared and refused to leave her mother's eyes since she learned that Denny had died; her father's silence, not because he didn't want to speak, but because he clearly couldn't find the words anymore; the clenched jaw and endless sweating and dead-end fantasies and imagined conversations with friends who weren't even here. The Tran family cared. They'd just been hollowed out.

*No one asked.*

What?

*You know, Ky, you don't have to explain shit to these teachers. They didn't ask, and it's none of their business.*

But—

*Just stop it.*

"So what comes next?" Mr. Dickson said, still mindlessly twisting his fork.

"I don't know if there's anything else after the wake," Ky said, finally returning to the real world, responding to real questions.

"Have you . . ." he said, glancing at Ms. Faulkner and Ms. Buck before returning to his noodles, "heard anything else? About what happened?"

Ky noticed Ms. Buck shifting her weight to her other foot; Ms. Faulkner chewed her bottom lip as she looked down at her own plate of noodles. None of the teachers met Ky's eyes.

The facts, which Ky had gotten secondhand from her parents, were patchy, and recalling them made her skin turn cold as she continued to sweat. From her mother, she'd learned that Denny had gone to Lucky 8, a banquet-style seafood restaurant, after attending the traditional December year-twelve formal. It was the first and only time Ky's parents had allowed Denny out with friends at night—a reward for doing so well in school—and it came only after months of begging, with assurances from Denny's best friend, Eddie Ho, that they just wanted an excuse to prolong an evening of formal wear. Denny had even roped in Ky to help him make his case.

"Come on, Mum," Ky had told her mother over the phone weeks before the formal. "It's Lucky 8. People get married there. Plus, *I* got to go to an after-party when I had my formal."

"You did?"

Ky paused, thought about whether she'd actually told her mother about the party she'd attended all those years ago.

"Yes," she said, crossing her fingers. "It'll be fine! He's

basically an adult, he's a good kid who's never ever gotten into trouble, and it's Lucky 8!"

"But Cabramatta is not like when you lived here," her mother said in Vietnamese. "It's changed. The people are different from what you remember, it's—"

"Stop stressing so much and just let him go. You're gonna stunt his growth if you keep smothering him."

From her father, Ky learned that the formal itself went off without a hitch. Denny won the title "Most Likely to Succeed," which came with a sash that he tucked into the breast pocket of a borrowed suit. He used a disposable camera to take photos with friends, with the teachers of Cabramatta High, of the crusty and over-fried dinner served at the RSL club. And then they walked to Lucky 8, a restaurant known for having a wedding singer perform even when there wasn't a wedding; a restaurant that had six tanks filled with live fish and lobsters and king crabs; a restaurant reserved for celebration and hope and new beginnings.

What happened next, according to both her mother *and* her father, was bad luck. It wasn't the glib kind of bad luck that accompanies a stubbed toe or stolen hubcaps, but the kind of bad luck that shimmies across rooftops looking for a family to curse, for a child to steal. Ky had asked her parents what the police had told them, but instead of sharing what else they knew, they simply shook their heads, their eyes swollen and red, their lips forming the words *Bad luck, bad luck*. Ky had wanted to yell at them then, too, but when she opened her mouth—silence.

"I don't know," Ky said, finally locking eyes with Mr.

Dickson. "We haven't heard anything from the police since the incident."

"Well," Mr. Dickson said, pausing the twirling of his plastic fork, "if there's anything we can do, any way we can help, just say the word."

*Jack shit,* Minnie said in Ky's head.

"Thanks," Ky said, speaking over the imagined voice that continued in the background.

Mr. Dickson nodded while chewing. Ms. Buck rested a hand on Ky's shoulder; it took everything for Ky to not squirm away. Ms. Faulkner looked like she was about to cry.

Inaudible to anyone but Ky, Minnie continued: *But I tell you what— Ky, as a Good Big Sister, will do more than jack shit! She will take matters into her own hands, won't you, Ky? She will redeem herself for failing her brother! She will step up for the first time in her pathetic do-good, rule-following gimp of a life! Because those dipstick cops won't do shit! Because they'll just write us off as troubled FOBs with FOB troubles! Because if we can't speak up when one of our own is beaten to death, then what the fuck is wrong with us? Because, because, because!*

When Ky's parents called to tell her that Denny had been stomped to death in Lucky 8, she didn't answer because she wasn't home. When they tried her at work, she didn't answer because she was on deadline—she had been assigned a human-interest story on a couple living in their car who had just won the lottery. When her parents left a message with the newspaper's front desk, Ky never got it because Becca Smith, the receptionist, said she couldn't understand them through their thick accents.

"I think a Chinese man called for you," she said. "He gave

me a number, but honestly, it was hard to understand him, so I didn't write it down."

"Oh, thanks." Ky looked around, hoping that someone else was listening in on the conversation, someone who could validate her feelings, assure her that, yes, the encounter, like so many of Ky's previous interactions with Becca Smith, was objectively off-putting, and that Ky's response—to feel unsteady, as though someone had kicked the back of her office chair—was not only normal but appropriate, more than appropriate, maybe even too generous. She didn't catch anyone's eye. It was just between her and the perpetually sunny receptionist. "I guess I'll check my Rolodex for Chinese Man and call him back."

"Great! I'll leave you to it!" Becca Smith said, tapping her acrylic nails on Ky's cubicle divider, her smile stiff, as though she had detected but not fully processed Ky's sarcasm.

Ky didn't immediately listen to the voice messages her parents left on any of her phones. It would be something dumb, because it always was: Denny wanted to go on a school camp—was that safe? Denny wanted to drop physics in year eleven—would he still be able to become a doctor without it? Denny needed to travel for a debating tournament—was that legitimate? Did teenagers lie about these things so they could do drugs instead?

When it came to Denny, who was five years younger than Ky, it was as if her parents had lost the ability to parent, forgotten that they'd done it once before, panicked at the prospect of having to do it again. The Trans clung to the old country and the belief that boys were more valuable than girls. After all, boys carried on the family name and were traditionally the breadwinners. Even the best of girls eventually married and joined someone else's

family. Ky also suspected that, with Denny, her family felt they had a fresh start. Denny was born in Australia, after the family had settled in Cabramatta. Ky was their trial-and-error baby, brought from Vietnam, toilet-trained in a Malaysian refugee camp, and sent to English as a Second Language classes from kindergarten through year two. Her parents doubted whether Ky would succeed, feeling she was too much like them. Denny represented an untainted opportunity, one where they wouldn't have to make compromises. Which, she understood, was why they were so precious with him, so unable to make decisions without worrying that they were jeopardizing their only son's future.

Ky had resented Denny when he was first born, but she remembered the moment her heart thawed: Denny, still wearing a nappy, squatted beside a six-year-old Ky as she colored in the flags of all the countries participating in the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. Ky had warned Denny not to touch her colored pencils or to put his sticky fingers on her worksheet. So Denny planted himself beside her, elbows on knees, chubby chin in his hands. He watched her quietly, the scratch of pencil on paper the only sound in the family living room, when all of a sudden she heard the sloppy wet sound of a juicy fart. When Ky whipped her head from her worksheet, Denny's mouth was a circle, his eyes enormous. Before she could accuse him of being a big dumb baby who pooped in his pants, the toddler said, in the same cadence as the people they'd seen in Ajax Spray 'n' Wipe commercials, "Oh no!" And something inside Ky—the walls that she had erected to keep her from liking the baby brother that her parents loved so much more—collapsed. She laughed

and laughed, and she couldn't stop, and her stomach muscles hurt from it, and she was gasping for air. And then Denny started rolling on the floor laughing, too, and the rolling made his butt squish into the wet poop, which made the scent radiate from his nappy, which made Ky gag, but she couldn't stop laughing, and she swore it smelled so bad she could taste it, but she couldn't close her mouth because she had to keep laughing.

Back in her Melbourne apartment, after she'd picked up a pizza and a six-pack of Tooheys New because she wanted to train herself to be like her colleagues, who didn't flush beet red after two sips, she played all the voice messages.

In the first three, her father, who spoke to her only in Vietnamese, said to call him back as soon as possible, that this was urgent. In the fourth, he said something had happened to Denny. In the fifth, that Denny had been killed, that they were organizing the funeral, that she had to fly back as soon as possible. His voice never broke; she never heard tears. She rewound the tape, replayed the messages from the start so many times that the words became meaningless. She wondered whether she even understood Vietnamese anymore—whether she was so rusty that she had simply misheard, that by *killed,* her father actually meant "graduated early because he was that smart, and why couldn't you have been as smart as your little brother?" She considered a scenario where her brother was being bullied at school. Maybe her parents were worried, and she was being called home to stand up for him, to slap or smack his bullies, to demand that the school protect its brightest student.

"How do you *not* get the shit kicked out of you, man?" Ky had asked Denny a year earlier when he took home first place again

across all subjects except PE. Ky was home for a weekend to celebrate Tết. Their mother had put them to work scrubbing and squeegeeing the ground-floor windows so that their townhouse would be sparkling for the Lunar New Year.

"I don't think people get beat up for being nerds these days," he'd said.

"Yeah, right."

"Well, *you* didn't get beaten up when you were in school."

"That was different," Ky said as she picked dried bug spatter off the windowpane.

"How?"

*Minnie,* Ky had wanted to say. In year two, when a group of white girls had pulled back the corners of their eyes every time they passed Ky, Minnie had threatened to shave the ringleader's head. For a whole month, every time they saw the blondies at the canteen or during assembly, Minnie would pantomime head shaving. Once she even mimed shaving her eyebrows, which made the lead blondie cry. That was Minnie at eight. By the time they reached high school, Minnie was a walking DO NOT DISTURB sign that shielded Ky from having her hair pulled, her ankles tripped, her seat spat on.

"I dunno," Ky said. "I guess I just stayed out of people's way."

"Same," said Denny, removing his rimless eyeglasses from his nose. He'd picked out a pair similar to Ky's because he'd heard her say that rimless eyeglasses were sophisticated and made people look more mature. Ky thought they made him look like a child tax accountant. He held his glasses by the temples and tried squeegeeing them. "I just don't rub it in."

"What do you mean?"

"Like . . ."—Denny raised his eyeglasses to the light, made a face upon seeing that they were now even dirtier than before—"there are other nerds that get beaten up, but it's not because they're nerds. It's because they go out of their way to make everyone else feel dumb."

Ky felt a phantom shove against her back. She knew Denny wasn't calling her out—it wasn't in his nature—but he might as well have been.

"That's very mature of you," Ky said, swallowing hard. "Also . . ."—she cocked her head at Denny's grimy glasses—"that's gross."

"I know, I thought maybe the squeegee would work—"

In her Melbourne apartment, Ky hugged her phone's answering machine to her chest, no longer questioning her comprehension of Vietnamese. She called her father, peppered him with questions: What happened? How did it happen? Who was with him? What did they know? Her father had told her to just come home—they could talk about it later. She sat for a while as the cheese on her pizza congealed. When it resembled a Frisbee more than food, she threw it out and was struck with the urge to clean. She fished through her laundry basket for dirty underwear, filled her bathroom sink with water and Cold Power, and submerged her clothes, shaking her hands under the surface to create bubbles. She took off her own rimless glasses—the ones she bought because she thought they made her look mature, worthy of being taken seriously—and rubbed them with alcohol wipes. She needed to shower, too. As she stood naked in the tub, water pounding her back, she was overcome by a need to scrub the tub. She squatted down low, sponge in hand, rubbing creamy

globs of tile cleaner into the bathtub and tiled walls, then used her arms as an extension of the showerhead: the water hit her shoulders, ran down her arms, and dribbled off her fingers in the directions she pointed.

Her mother had taught her to clean the air of germs using a steam bath of vinegar. She had never explained the specifics, though, so Ky poured a liter of vinegar into her teakettle, turned on the stove, and waited for it to boil. As her apartment took on the aroma of sweaty feet, she simultaneously felt she couldn't breathe and like she was being turned inside out. There was so much that she wanted to say—to Denny, to her parents, to anyone who would listen. Apologies, explanations, painful observations that she knew revealed volumes of truth. The words in her head rushed to arrange themselves, colliding and falling in a panic, and in her desperate attempt to speak, she found that all her body would permit her to do was gasp. Each time she opened her mouth, air, then not enough air, over and over again, until the room fell dark and everything went quiet, and it was just her, alone, hiccupping through cries that didn't sound like her own, blanketed by steamy, sour air.