



Woodhall Press
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ASK THE GIRL

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w o o d h a l l p r e s s

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*To my mom, who taught me how to
forgive and love.*

PROLOGUE

Katy

THE EARTHY AROMA of decay nestles in her nose. She spits out a mouthful of soil. Her teeth are gritty and she grinds her jaw as she digs in the dirt with a stick. Digging deep so the message will remain until next time. The stick breaks.

“Damn!” She throws the stick. Her companion, a black dog with a white star patch, sniffs the air then growls.

Katy stops. “Coyote, are they here?”

The dog whines, stands, and begins to pace. The leaves whisper as a cool breeze passes through. High-pitched screeches and the click of gnashing teeth echo in the distance.

Coyote barks.

Katy’s heart drops in her chest. She doesn’t have much time. She claws at the ground; her nail tears off and blood mixes with the dirt, but she does not stop.

Coyote barks and barks and barks. Katy digs and digs and digs.

She needs to finish. She needs to make sure the message remains so that it will be here for her next time. So she will find it and remember.

Coyote barks. Katy digs. The wind howls. It whips around her. The loose dirt stings her face and eyes. Tears stream down and she chokes back a sob.

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Time freezes into silence. Nothing moves.

The wind stops.

Coyote stops barking.

Katy stops digging and looks up.

A loud thump shakes the ground, followed by a low watery growl. The smell of rotten eggs linger.

“Come, Coyote!” Katy’s foot slips in the loose soil as she pulls herself up and runs. Coyote bolts ahead.

The creature chases her and the dog.

It flies over her message but does not disturb the soil.

Ask the girl.

CHAPTER 1

Lila

I WAS TOLD every person experiences three deaths.

The first is when the body stops working.

The second is when you're sent to your grave.

The third is in the future, when the last person who remembers you dies, and speaks your name no more.

My father has died twice but still lives on in my heart. But this doesn't comfort me.

I pressed my forehead against the cold glass as I stared out the car window. Trees and buildings whizzed by, sending a wave of nausea through my body. I inhaled deeply, pushing it back along with a deep ache of loss. No more late-night movies. No more corny jokes about how I'm not allowed to date. No more childhood home as the car pulled onward to our new lives in Missouri with my aunt and uncle.

A furry black blur dashed out from behind a billboard sign. "Mom, watch out!"

The car lurched as Mom and Rose jumped from my outburst. "Lila, what is it?"

I waited for the thump, but instead only heard the steady rhythm of tires on pavement. I whirled around, expecting to find a flattened animal out the back window—but nothing. “Didn’t you see it?”

“See what?” Rose asked, peeking out the back.

“I think it was a cat or dog?”

“I don’t see anything.” Rose turned back around. Her head was shaking as she nestled her earbuds into her ears. She thinks I’m making things up, again. I know she thinks I’m being the dramatic, unreliable older sister. The sister she can’t count on, who stirs up trouble and starts fires. But I didn’t start the fire. No one believes me that I didn’t do it. I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. I tried to explain that to Mom and Rose, but they didn’t believe me. But it’s been that way ever since I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. When people know, they treat you differently, even your family.

“Whatever it was, I missed it,” Mom said. Her eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. “Lila, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She thought I made it up too.

“Sure?”

“Mom, I’m fine,” I said.

Mom held up her hands. “Okay, okay.”
The car went silent.

Rose turned up her music, blocking me out. Mom gripped the steering wheel so tight her knuckles were white as sun-bleached driftwood. She mumbled to herself, sighed, and clicked on the car’s blinker. It ticked loudly, announcing our descent onto the Parkville exit.

The car turned down Main Street, lined with old Western-style brick buildings. Ancient homes perched on the bluffs and cliffs above the town. On the other side, a muddy, choppy river flowed a few hundred feet from the road.

ASK THE GIRL

“This place hasn’t changed much,” Mom said.

Rose squirmed in the front seat as she stared wide-eyed out her window, her phone held up as always, recording a video. “I can’t wait to do my documentary. I found out that this town has a ghost!”

“Well, there’s a lot of history in this town. That’s for sure.” Mom drove the car slowly up Main Street. “Too much history,” she mumbled. Mom caught her reflection in the rearview mirror and fixed her hair frantically. She had the same blonde hair as I did, but her eyes were a brighter green.

Aunt Theresa and Uncle John are nice but a little different. They’re complete opposites—my aunt, a true Midwest lady who hugs, kisses everyone, and makes the best baked goods ever; my uncle, a rough, tattooed, bald biker who tells long stories about his good old days. We only saw them once a year, which was enough for me. Now I have to figure out how to live with them.

We drove through downtown Parkville and entered a subdivision of colonial-type homes sitting high on steep hills above the road. Tall oaks and maple trees shaded the street and sidewalk where families in shorts and T-shirts walked their dogs, rode bikes, and pushed baby strollers. Eventually the houses became fewer and Mom turned onto a small gravel road with a sign that read, “Cooper’s Inn.” The road wound up, and our small car groaned as it climbed the steep hillside. The trees closed in around the driveway but soon opened up to a grand three-story Victorian home with a broad wraparound porch and four spiraling pillars, much like Juliet’s tower.

“Wow!” Rose was gazing out of her window. The house rested on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River, rolling hills, bluffs, and some of the town. “I always love the view here.”

My aunt waited at the back door with a warm smile and waved as we pulled up. Her long dark hair sprinkled with gray blew into her face when she stepped outside. She wiped her hands on an apron dotted with flour and dough before tucking her hair behind her ears. Mom and Rose went to greet her, but I walked to the back of the car to get my bags to avoid the hugs and pinched cheeks. A flash of bright light appeared out of the corner of my eye. Near the forest, small globes of light floated around the trees. I squinted to get a closer look.

“Yoo-hoo, Liiilaaa!” My aunt walked toward me, arms wide open. My heart dropped and my chest tightened, bubbling up against the urge to scream or cry uncontrollably, but I knew I had to get this part over. So I closed my eyes and let my aunt drown me in her arms.

It will be fine, Lila.

Relax.

Breathe.