

ABSENT



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BY KATIE WILLIAMS



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PROLOGUE

“WHEN YOU DIE,” LUCAS HAYES ONCE TOLD ME, “IT’S LIKE every wound your body has ever had—every skinned knee, paper cut, pimple—opens up and says *See? I told you so.*” Lucas had held Brooke Lee as she’d jittered and bucked, rolled and foamed, and—yeah—died, so I figured he knew what he was talking about.

My best friend, Usha Das, took a different view. “Dying isn’t pain,” she said. “It’s nothing. That’s scary now, but you won’t feel scared when you’re nothing. You’ll feel nothing when you’re nothing.”

The biblicals in their cafeteria prayer circle all agreed that dying was being folded in the arms of Our Father, all woolly beard, thick bathrobe, and water vapor. The burners, on the other hand, hated their fathers, who bothered them all the time. Or didn’t bother them enough. They sucked on their cigarettes and said that dying was like blowing out smoke. Then they’d watch their smoke rise and twist and disappear over the heads of the shampoo-shiny ponies and

gym-wet testos, who didn't need to think about death because they could just smile pretty at the grim reaper and watch him float the other way, couldn't they?

People were talking a lot about death that year, my senior year, because Brooke Lee had died right there in the girls' bathroom across from the gym. I didn't pay attention to most of it. My classmates were no more than what Usha and I had named them—biblicals, well-rounders, testos, and the rest—and they were always babbling on about one thing or another. But after I died, they started talking about *my* death and then I had no choice but to listen.



I: MARCH GRIEF GROUP MEETING

AT THE MARCH GRIEF GROUP MEETING, MY FORMER CLASSMATES steer their chairs in lazy circles, bumping the armrests against one side of the table, then the other. Posters stare down at them, pouting teen models labeled with pretend afflictions: *Anorexia! Gonorrhea! Steroids! Depression!* On the table, a row of Kleenex boxes issues its scratchy white blossoms. How many tears would it take to soak this supply? How many nose blows? How many muffled sobs? They should advertise on the side of the box: *Good for the average break-up, fourteen sad movies, or the death of a small dog.* Not that anyone here is crying over the death of a small dog. Or the death of a teenage girl. Though I suppose the dog has a better chance of earning a few tears.

We dead kids sit on the floor in the corner of the room: one, two, three. On my left, Evan holds his skinny body upright, like it's a posture contest. On my right, Brooke slumps so far forward that she manages to display the fraying lace of both bra in the front and underwear in the back. I sit between them, knees pulled to chin, the buckles of my boots clinking around my ankles when I shift, like

Marley's chains. The three of us never would have sat together when we were alive.

At least I fold up easily in my soft-skin clothes—old jeans and a velvety jacket from one of Usha's vintage scrounges. She's convinced me to like about used clothes what most people hate: the other bodies that have unstiffened their elbows and knees, stretched out their pockets, salted them with sweat, only to toss the clothes out at the precise moment when they are really ready to be worn. Even the rubber band that holds my hair in a twist at the edge of my vision was scooped off a teacher's desk.

"They'll talk about you now, Paige. You'll see," Brooke whispers.

"Like I care what they say." And I don't. Care. They had one of these grief group meetings after Brooke's death back in September. Now they've added my death to the agenda. Two birds, one stone. Two dead girls, one conference room. I'm only here because Evan kept pestering me to come.

"If you're lucky, maybe they'll say you were friendly and free-spirited." Brooke puts sarcastic emphasis on the words the group has just used to describe her.

"Those were nice things to say," Evan tells her.

"They were nice ways of saying slut," Brooke replies.

Friendly and *free-spirited*—those aren't words my former classmates will use to describe me. My words probably live in the *S* section of the alphabet: *sarcastic*, *smart-mouthed*, *slouchy*.

Usha stares at the fake wood of the conference table. She's wearing her mechanic's jumpsuit, the one with the *Orville* nametag on it. I was the one who'd pulled that jumpsuit from the two-dollar bin at the Salvation Army, but I let her have it because she'd held it up to herself and twirled. I wasn't the twirling type of girl, but Usha was. Or at least she used to be. Since my death, she's been the

tabletop-staring type of girl. I wish I could tell her that I'm okay. I wish I could tell her that I miss her.

I catalog the other faces around the table. Next to Usha perches the gaggingly beautiful Kelsey Pope, who tears out a strip of notebook paper and begins to fold it into an origami flower. By the end of the meeting, that flower is going to be tucked behind her petal of an ear; you can bet on it. I'm surprised to see Kelsey here because it's not like we were friends. Maybe she wants people to think she is deep. Maybe she wrote a poem about it. At the foot of the table, shaggy-haired Wes Nolan fingers something in his pocket, obviously something forbidden—a lighter, a little bag of pot, a folding knife. Everyone knows he's only here to get out of class.

All in all, fifteen of my former classmates have gathered for one final chance to memorialize Brooke and me. Fifteen out of the 632 students at Paul Revere High School. What percentage is that? I start to do the math in my head, but stop because I already know the number will be pathetically low.

And then there are the people who didn't bother to come at all.

Lucas Hayes, for example.

Not that I expected him to.

"Paige Wheeler." Mrs. Morello, the guidance counselor, stretches my name until it's completely out of shape. She wears a blue sweater as if we were little kids for whom red means anger, pink means love, and blue means sadness. "Who would like to share a memory about Paige?"

Nothing.

Not a word.

Not that I care.

I close my eyes, and the silence becomes a noise rushing under everything, like a TV set to static in the other room. If I listen

carefully, I can almost hear another sound, one *beneath* the silence. My name. It's as if a dozen people are whispering it in a string: *Paige, Paige, Paige, Paige*.

"Right here," I almost say. "I'm right here."

Mrs. Morello clears her throat, but this prompts no one to speak. We're closing in on a minute now. People always call for a minute of silence, but really a minute is a long time when you're—scuffling, whispering, fidgeting—alive. And a minute is forever when you're shaking on the bathroom floor or standing on the lip of a roof, the miniature world arranged so carefully below you. You feel like you could live in that minute forever, like it would stretch its bounds for you, its sixty tick-ticks, and hold your entire life.

But a minute always ends.

"I didn't know her much."

I look around to see who has finally spoken before realizing that the voice is coming from the end of the table. Wes Nolan.

Everyone glares at Wes like he's just farted or belched or whooped with joy, and I know they're thinking—because I'm thinking it, too—*What are you even doing here, Wes Nolan?* Wes leans back in his chair, grinning his cantilevered grin like he enjoys making a target of himself.

"But I wish I'd known her better," he adds.

I look to Usha, hoping that she'll say something about me. Usha knows me better than anyone. We've been best friends since seventh grade, when the cafeteria tables somehow squared up without us. After a week sitting alone at a table meant for twenty, I noticed this chubby Indian girl brown-bagging it in front of her locker. We weren't supposed to have food outside of the cafeteria, but when the hall monitor paused to tell the girl so, she looked at him with such a determined grin—the kind of grin kids pull for the camera, more

teeth than smile—that he unpaused without saying a word. Then she swung her grin to me; I might have walked the other way, too, except just then she reached into her sack and came up with an apple slice. Maybe that's the memory Usha will share, how in seventh grade we crunched apple slices, and how every day for five years after that, the two of us ate lunch cross-legged on the floor in front of our lockers.

But no. Usha doesn't say anything. She just stares at her tabletop.

Kelsey Pope speaks up instead, her hazel eyes shiny as tumbled stones, her cheek piercing winking in the UV light. "I can't help but think we could have been friends, Paige and I." She tucks the origami flower behind her ear.

I make a noise too sharp to be a laugh. Evan and Brooke look over. "Friends with Kelsey Pope?" I say. "Not hardly. Not ever."

"It's just so tragic," Kelsey continues, and the others nod sagely at this wisdom. "I can't imagine ever feeling sad enough to . . . oh. Nothing. Never mind." Kelsey bites on her lip, a pouty pink stopper for her sentence.

Suddenly, the silence becomes *still*. People stop spinning the chairs. Their eyes connect and disconnect across the table. "I told you," a girl I don't know whispers to her friend. I turn to the dead kids. Evan's expression has gone flatter than usual. Brooke rakes her fingers through her ponytail.

"Sad enough to what?" I ask, just as Wes says, "Never mind what?"

Kelsey unstoppers her mouth. "I shouldn't say anything." She sucks in her lips, pooches them out again. "Up on the roof, she . . ."

Kelsey trails off. Usha has finally raised her eyes from the tabletop and fixed them on Kelsey with a ferocious glare. Before Kelsey can say another word, Usha pushes her chair away from the table with a screech and marches out of the room. We all look after her.

“Oh, no,” someone breathes.

“Sad enough to what?” I repeat, my voice too loud in my own ears. “Up on the roof, I what?”

“I think maybe she’s saying—” Evan begins, but Mrs. Morello talks over him. “Everyone. Please. The official cause of death was *an accidental fall*.” She says it like she’s reading off a script.

“Of course it was an accident,” I say. “What else would it have been?”

The bell rings a wordless answer to my question, and everyone rises, hoisting backpacks, fishing for cell phones, and wandering out. Mrs. Morello hurries after them, waving a half-signed attendance sheet. In a matter of seconds, the room is empty.

Empty but for us dead kids.

Evan, Brooke, and I look at each other across the detritus of the meeting—shredded tissues, the origami flower, a forgotten pen.

“Sad enough to jump,” I say. “That’s it, isn’t it? She was saying I killed myself.”

I wait for them to deny it. They don’t. Evan reaches out to touch my arm, never mind that we can’t touch each other. But I don’t want comfort, his or anyone’s. I take a step back.

“I wouldn’t do that,” I say. “Even if I were sad enough to think of it, I wouldn’t be so . . .”

“So what?” Evan asks.

“So weak.”

Evan drops his hand to his side. My eyes follow its trajectory, and I picture a girl standing on the edge of a roof. I picture her stepping off, one foot and then the next, and then an empty space where she had been. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. I feel like I’m falling now, the sick swoop of gravity in my throat and gut. My eyes land on Usha’s empty chair, thrust out farther than the others.

“Usha thinks I jumped,” I say. “Did you see her face?”

“Paige,” Evan murmurs.

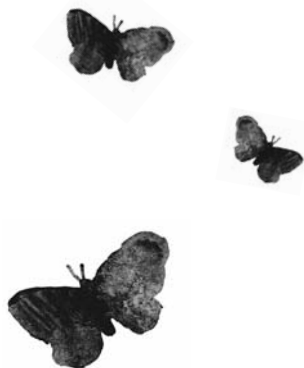
“It doesn’t matter what Morello tells them about accidents. They’ll all keep saying it. It’ll go around the whole school. Everyone will hear it.” *Lucas will hear it*, a mean little corner of my mind whispers. “Oh, God. Do you think it’ll get back to my parents?”

“No,” Evan says immediately. “No way. It’s just kids gossiping.”

“But what if it does? It could. As long as they think . . . they all think . . .,” I sputter out.

“I thought you didn’t care what they think,” Brooke says quietly.

I pick Brooke’s words up and pull them to myself like flat sheets of armor. “You’re right. I don’t care at all.”



2: THE BURNERS' CIRCLE

"I'M NOT EVEN THE SUICIDE TYPE," I SAY.

"The suicide type?" Evan raises an eyebrow.

"You know. Black-haired girls with blond roots and notebooks full of poems with the word *crepuscular* in them. Or guys who wear all beige and won't talk unless it's about their Japanese sword collection, and then they won't stop talking."

"I don't know," Brooke says. "You kinda look like the type to me." She stares pointedly at my feet.

"What? They're just boots! I like all the buckles."

"I think maybe there isn't a suicide type," Evan says.

We've gathered to the side of the hallway, clear of the students rushing from this class to that. Brooke stands at the drinking fountain, her hand pressed to the spigot. A testo from the wrestling team lumbers up and pushes the button, making the water arc straight through Brooke's palm, unimpeded, into the steel drain. This is not to say that Brooke is translucent. In fact—tight-jeaned, liquid-eyelined,

licorice-whip of a ponytail—she appears solid as anything. But the water pierces her hand all the same. The testo bends to drink, taking only a sip before he backs away with a grimace.

Brooke cackles. “Look! My hand makes the water taste funny.”

Evan shakes his head. “Don’t start trouble.”

But all Brooke wants to do is start trouble, just as much as Evan wants to prevent it, just as much as I don’t care what either of them does.

“He’s the third one in a row who wouldn’t drink.” Brooke turns to the bustling hallway and cries like a barker, “Water here! Get your fresh water!”

“It’s just a rumor,” Evan tells me. “They’ll get tired of it once someone starts a new rumor.”

“But even if they stop gossiping about it, they’ll still think it,” I say. “That’s how I’ll be remembered: Paige the Jumper. Paige the Suicide Case.”

“Look on the bright side,” Brooke says. “Eventually they’ll all graduate.”

“I was going to graduate, go to college.” I sigh. “Maybe no one told the schools that I died. Maybe they’ll still send the letters. Maybe they’re holding a spot for me somewhere.”

“Where did you apply?” Evan asks.

“Oregon State, Washington State, USC.”

Brooke has stopped with her drinking fountain and is staring at me strangely. When I meet her gaze, her eyes flit away. Maybe I shouldn’t talk about colleges in front of Brooke. Even if she hadn’t died, she probably wouldn’t have applied anywhere. According to the gossip, her interests were in activities other than the academic. What happens to a girl like Brooke after high school?

"They're all on the other side of the country," Evan notes.

"I wanted to go somewhere else. Leave Michigan. Leave here. And now," I gesture at our surroundings, "here I am."

"Here we are," Brooke echoes.

"It's not so bad." Evan turns and looks at the hall, the flow and burble of students rushing by us. "I mean, it could be worse. We have classes and the library and people all around us."

I open my mouth to say something sarcastic about the meager joys of still having *high school*, but then Evan adds, "We have each other." And I decide to shut up because until Brooke arrived in September, Evan was here alone. For how long, he won't say.

"You get used to it," Evan says, like he can read my mind. "You're already getting used to it."

Brooke raises an eyebrow. "Settle in for the world's longest detention."

It's the same thing I'd told myself: that I was getting used to it, coming to terms, or whatever nonsense phrase Mrs. Morello might use for it. But suddenly I feel . . . what? Unsettled. Unfinished. Restless. A restless ghost. Why? Because of some stupid rumor? The phrase "accidental fall" spoken in Mrs. Morello's emphatic tone repeats in my head. I feel it all over again, the giddy dread of my foot stepping back and finding no ground under it.

The bell rings, interrupting my thoughts.

"Come to Fisk's class with me," Evan urges.

"No thanks."

"Then I'll go with you."

I raise my eyebrows. "You? Skip class?" Evan considers it his sworn duty to attend each and every class period, even though his name doesn't appear on any roster. Brooke, on the other hand, brags

that she hasn't attended a full class since she was alive. The best part of being dead, she claims.

Evan shrugs, his shoulders rising and falling in precise intervals. "They're playing dodgeball in the gym. Maybe we can see someone lose a tooth again."

"You looked like you were gonna puke last time that happened."

"Well, this time I'll close my eyes and think of the tooth fairy."

"Go to class, Evan," I say. "I'm immune to your attempts at cheer-upped-ness."

Evan looks skeptical. "You sure?"

"Allergic, in fact." I take a step backward. "If it makes you happy, I'll go to class, too."

"Why anyone would willingly go to class," Brooke mutters.

"I think they're dissecting frogs today in junior bio," I say.

"And *that* cheers you up?" Evan asks.

"I find it therapeutic." The school is lousy with ghost frogs, chloroformed for dissection. Beige, green, leopard-spotted, they gather in the corners of the basement, croaking softly, blinking their marbled eyes, and hopping through the cinder-block walls.

"If you're sure," Evan says, clearly relieved to have gotten out of dodgeball.

"Sure I'm sure. Maybe we can find the new frogs tonight. We can say to them, 'You must have been so sad, frog.'" I imitate Kelsey's tremulous voice. "'What friends we might have been.'"

I've lied to Evan. I have no intention of attending a class where I've already been marked permanently, irrevocably, absent. As soon as he turns the corner, I head out to the student parking lot, telling myself I'm just looking for some fresh air (air that I can't even breathe), telling myself I'm just looking for the sun (sun hidden

behind spring storm clouds), telling myself I'm not (definitely not) looking for Lucas Hayes.

On my way to the burners' circle, I balance atop the cement stoppers that line the lot. Just after my death—three weeks ago now—I couldn't have balanced like this, couldn't even have walked down the school hall without sinking through the tiles, down to the basement where finally the earth would've stopped my fall with its sediments, its fossils, its underground rivers, and—deep below—its glowing, churning core.

I spent the first week after my death stuck on the packed-dirt floor of the school basement, surrounded by an army of croaking ghost frogs. I sat in their midst, sometimes crying, sometimes rocking, sometimes staring vacantly at the skinny freckled boy who would sit across from me speaking, in patient tones, words that I couldn't stand to hear. Then one day, for no good reason, I felt like I could bear to see the world again. But when I tried to mount the first step of the stairs, my foot sank straight through it, back down to the dirt, where I suppose I now belong.

It took Evan nearly forever to teach me how to suspend myself just millimeters above the school floor (or a set of stairs or the seat of a chair) so that I could approximate the postures of life. *Hovering*, he calls it. Even now, if I don't use a tiny corner of my mind to hold myself just so, I will sink until I hit the earth, however far below that might be. Now, only weeks later, I can hover pretty easily. It was easy once I figured out it wasn't so different from the ways in which life requires you to hold yourself just so.

I've become so adept at hovering that I can, with concentration, jump from one cement stopper to the next, which I do all the way to the adjacent soccer field. I tread out across the field, as close to the burners' circle as I can get. The circle is just a cluster of trees earning

their leaves back in patches, a spotty effect like a Boy Scout sash only half-filled with badges.

Lucas Hayes was in Boy Scouts when he was little. He told me when we met among those trees on the day before I died. He could still list off all the badges he'd earned, he said. "Prove it," I said, and so he had, from American Heritage to Wilderness Survival. As he spoke, he assembled my physics project, twisting the strands of wire into the cardboard box. He gave one of the wires a new twist with the name of each badge.

"You're *still* a Boy Scout." I nudged him with my shoulder, the tree bark rasping against the back of my jacket. The snow was still on the ground, except in the burners' circle, where the tree branches held it off of us, as if this place were set aside for us, preserved.

"Careful." He lifted the box. "There's an egg in here, you know."

"Yes, I know. It's *my* project you hijacked. Besides, you're doing it all wrong." He hadn't been, but I could twist the wires just as well as he could.

He handed the project back to me with his flashbulb smile.

"See? Like this," I said.

"For the record, I'm not a Scout anymore. I dropped out in sixth grade."

"Well, maybe you're not a Scout, but you're still Scout-like. Admit it, you still have that sash."

"It was a vest, actually, and really, I'm not as good as all that."

"Why? Because you have a secret—" I bit down on my sentence.

I'd almost said *girlfriend*, which I was not. Not at all. We'd agreed on that from the start. Who needed the looks in the hallway? Not to mention the gossip. Besides, it was no big deal. He was just a stupid testo.

A stupid testo who happened to be good at kissing.

Fortunately, Lucas didn't seem to have heard my slip. "Come on," I babbled for cover. "You're captain of the whatever team."

"You know it's basketball," he said. "And baseball in the spring."

"You get good grades," I continued, "probably mostly by smiling at the teachers. Yeah, that's the smile I mean. And on top of it all, you're the school hero. You practically saved a girl's life."

Lucas's smile shut off. "Don't say that."

"Why not?"

"Because I *didn't* save her."

And it was true. Lucas had called for help when he found her, but by the time they'd gotten there, Brooke Lee was dead. An overdose. Cocaine.

"Sorry," I murmured. And I was.

"How about you?" Lucas said, his smile back, though at half wattage. "Were you a Girl Scout?"

"Nope. Not me. I'm not much for dressing identically and earning badges."

"That reminds me. I forgot to mention one other thing I earned a badge for." He leaned close, the cloud of his breath puffing against my face. I should have earned a badge for not wincing at Lucas's pick-up lines.

"A kissing badge, huh? How'd you practice your skill? On the troop leader or the other little boys?" I inquired of his puckered-up face.

"You're sick, Paige Wheeler."

"The sickest," I said happily.

"I like that about you."

"Yeah, right."

"I do." He paused, looking suddenly serious. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind that you messed up my physics project?"