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Author Bio

Keri D. James was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She entertained her teachers at a young age with Young Adult Thrillers that included a cliffhanger at the end of every chapter (or so she thought!). She tested her hand at the YA Romance genre in high school, but ultimately found a safe place in her passion for poetry. While poetry became her craft of choice for many years, it wasn't until her world went askew after she came out as a lesbian that she decided to write a YA LGBT novel, *Echoes of Blue*. Over time, the novel evolved from a romance to the transformation of the main character as she processed the grief after her father's death. After losing her own parents, she wanted to help others as they went through the ever-changing grief process.



More information about her works, as well as her blog, can be found at <http://www.keridjames.com>

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Echoes of Blue – Synopsis

Since the sudden death of seventeen-year-old KENDRA LACHEN'S father earlier this year, she's purely surviving. She's plagued by nightmares of the events leading to her father's death, which bleed into her waking hours. Losing her father left a scar on each member of her family but affected her mother, PATRICE, the most. Whenever Kendra comes home, she is greeted by her emotionally checked-out mother watching reruns on the couch. Flashes of her mother's anger and resentment over Kendra's part in her father's death also find their way through. Kendra feels stuck in limbo, taking one day at a time, but not finding much joy in life.

On the first day of her senior year, she meets a new classmate, BREE, and is immediately intrigued. She doesn't know what it is, but she feels different around her—happier, lighter, and maybe even hopeful. When Kendra learns Bree is gay, it challenges her to abandon the status quo and explore her feelings. They strike up a quick friendship, and Bree's flirtatious comments and open-minded perspective on life propels their relationship forward.

After a few honest, unexpected conversations with Bree, Kendra runs straight into the arms of her boyfriend, TYLER. Sticking to her pattern of escaping her feelings, she aggressively initiates sex with Tyler, but he can sense something's wrong and stops her. Confused, Kendra takes a break from their relationship to sort through her emotions.

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As Kendra and Bree's relationship develops, Bree invites Kendra to her performance at Café Electric. Her last song is a confession that she's falling for Kendra. Afterward, Bree and Kendra have a candid conversation at Griffith Park, where they climb an oak tree and share their first kiss. This moment changes everything for Kendra—the pieces fall into place: her feelings for Bree are romantic, and if she wants to be with her, things need to change.

Kendra ends her relationship with Tyler. Although she didn't have romantic feelings for him, she considered him to be one of her best friends, so losing him is jolting. It also feels like she's losing a piece of her father because of how he loved Tyler and her relationship with him.

When Kendra reveals her feelings for Bree to JODIE, her best friend doesn't react well. Kendra returns to the scene of the crime (that damn tree that started all of this) and takes her anger out on it. Bree witnesses the event and talks Kendra down from her anger, and their relationship deepens.

These events lead Kendra on a journey of self-discovery, where she steps into her power and learns how to embrace change instead of constantly running from it.

She is confronted with this truth when Bree meets Kendra's mother, forcing Kendra to tell Bree about her father's death and the effect it had on her family. Saying it out loud floods Kendra with painful memories and emotions. When Kendra realizes it's the first anniversary of her father's death, she makes a devastating confession to Bree: she was the one who told the doctors to stop CPR, which has left her feeling responsible for his death. The one long beep of the machine confirming his death has haunted her ever since.

Bree tries to convince Kendra her father's death isn't her fault, and he wouldn't want her to hold on to the guilt. This conversation leads Kendra to confront her mother, asking if her mom blames her for her dad's death. Her mother reveals that Kendra has it wrong—her mother blames herself for his death for being the one who distracted him before the car crash. She would never blame Kendra for asking the doctors to stop CPR, and she even helps Kendra remember that the doctor was the one who called it—not her. This revelation allows Kendra's guilt to fade, but her grief does not.

This becomes apparent before the opening night of the school musical. While she's thrilled her relationship with her mother has evolved over the last few months, culminating in her mom attending the musical, Kendra is heartbroken that the one person she wishes was there isn't. She expected to feel her dad's absence at anniversaries and birthdays, but not in the happy moments, too. The sadness blindsides her, but she performs her best.

Knowing how affected Kendra is by this, Bree suggests Kendra visit her father's grave and talk to him. At first, Kendra resists this suggestion but ultimately decides Bree's suggestion may be a way forward, a path to healing.

After the last performance of the musical, Kendra takes Bree to the cemetery where Kendra's father is buried, wanting her to "meet" her father and be a part of the moment with her. When she arrives at the cemetery, even though everything inside of Kendra is telling her to run, it becomes a defining moment. Instead of falling back on old habits, she faces the fear head-on. The grief can no longer control her if she embraces it.

Kendra speaks to his gravestone as if he were there, admitting how hard it's been without him. He was her cheerleader, the one she'd go to for everything. She doesn't know how her life will be if he isn't there

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to talk with her and hold her. That's when the truth dawns on Kendra—her dad was “it” for her, but so is Bree. Her father brought Bree into her life exactly when Kendra needed her. Everything comes full circle for Kendra: her dad was the lighthouse in the storm and Bree is the harbor—they both guided her home.

Echoes of Blue – Sample Chapters

Chapter 8

The night of Bree's performance arrived, and my nervousness was off the charts.

I contemplated asking someone to go with me so I wouldn't be alone, but no one knew about Bree. Tyler was out of the running—I wasn't looking to make the night completely uncomfortable. Jodie would probably enjoy the show; she was that artsy type who would like a coffeehouse performance. However, despite her being my only real viable option, I hesitated.

I wasn't ready for her to know about Bree. It was one thing, keeping Bree and these feelings to myself—it was another letting others know. That would make it real, and things would need to change... I wasn't ready for change.

With a heavy sigh, I shook my head to silence the thoughts crawling through my brain. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I fretted with my hair and huffed when it didn't cooperate with me. Staring at my reflection, I had to laugh. “What the hell are you doing? You *never* care about your hair looking this good!”

Shit, I was becoming one of those girls who cared about impressing the person she liked. With Tyler, I made a minimal effort from our very first date to this day. I figured if he didn't like what he saw, then fuck him—he could go elsewhere. I wasn't here to impress—I was here to be me. While this mentality worked when I saw Tyler, it wasn't working with Bree. I wanted to look... pretty. When she saw me, I wanted her face to light up and her breath to catch in her throat, even if only for a second.

God, I'm pathetic. The pitiful expression on my face made me sigh and give into my new reality—I cared what she thought. I reached into the drawer to pull out my straightening iron. Many minutes passed before I settled on pulling the sides of my hair up and letting the rest flow down onto my shoulders.

I straightened my low-cut, baby blue blouse before putting on a crescent moon necklace with a blue sapphire hanging from it. My dad gave me this necklace the night I turned sixteen and became one of my favorites. I hadn't worn it in a while, but amid my nervousness, I wanted him close.

I glanced down at my watch and drew in a deep breath.

It was time.

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Walking into the coffeehouse, the sounds of a piano greeted me. A glance to the front revealed a blonde-haired girl about my age playing, her melancholy voice echoing in the small space.

My eyes darted around the coffeehouse to pinpoint Bree to wish her luck, but she was nowhere to be found.

I eyed the counter, knowing I should purchase a coffee or pastry, but with all the butterflies swarming in my stomach, there was no way I'd be able to keep anything down. Instead, I slid into a booth, pushing my back against the sidewall. Stretching my legs out over the seat, I then crossed them at the ankles.

I look pathetic taking up a four-person booth. Fuck me, I should have brought Jodie. Forget about bringing Jodie... she's my best friend. Why am I holding this back from her? Why am I so afraid?

The applause from the crowd jolted me out of my thoughts. This wasn't the time for these thoughts; I needed to pull it together. I joined the audience in clapping as the girl made her way down into the audience.

An employee hurried onto the stage. "Thank you, Josephine! That was beautiful. Next up, we have one of your favorites—Bree Crystal!"

The audience applauded her arrival, and a few whistles rang throughout the room.

Bree emerged and ran onto the stage, doing a mock curtsy for the audience. Where did she come from? Were the people whistling her friends? I thought I was the only one she'd invited... Maybe I was stupid to think that; maybe I was one of many.

She grabbed her guitar from its stand and raised the strap over her shoulder. The guitar settled in front of her as she stepped up to the mic. Making eye contact with the audience, she smiled that charming smile of hers. "Hello, everyone! Thanks for coming out to hear me and my fellow musicians. Hopefully, I won't suck."

"Never!" an audience member yelled.

Bree raised an eyebrow and cocked her head in a *yeah, right* fashion. "My sister is biased. Please excuse her. Let's get started with this fun, little ditty—one I like to sing in the shower. None of you get any ideas out there. *I'm* the only one who can imagine you naked."

The audience chuckled.

"Here we go." She played a fun, upbeat number—it was catchy and appeared to be a crowd favorite, judging by the bobbing heads. Her voice differed from what I remembered—it took on a playful tone, scooping now and then, and inviting the audience to have fun with her.

My foot bounced to the beat as an image filled my head with choreography that would be perfect for the song. It took me a moment to realize I wasn't fighting it, and as soon as I realized it, I pressed my

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other foot on top of the bouncing one. I couldn't believe that her music pulled me in enough to get lost in it.

Instead, I focused on the way the stage light illuminated her hair, and I wished I'd brought my camera. She was dressed differently than her normal school look. While she usually wore t-shirts and jeans, tonight she wore tight black pants and a sexy, dark green shirt that drew attention to her breasts. She also had on green eyeshadow that caused her eyes to shine. Frankly, she looked hot, and I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

The song ended, and I applauded with everyone else, throwing in a whistle.

When the applause died down, she picked at her guitar strings. "I call this next one *Starlit Tears*."

She stuck with minor chords, giving the song a somber mood. Her voice changed, much like how I remembered her—rich and haunting with a touch of sexy. It was crazy how much her voice captivated me. My body sat up straighter and leaned in to listen closely to the lyrics. I could tell she didn't just write this one to write it—someone had broken her heart. Her eyes remained closed, her facial features twitching as a sad determination crossed her face.

Watching her brokenness, I longed to put the pieces back together to ease her pain. The walls I'd erected around my heart slowly crumbled... and the crazy thing was, she was doing this with no effort. All she had to do was sing and steadily, her voice removed each brick.

As Bree's voice grew soft, her eyes opened, and the pain was unmistakable; for the first time since I'd known her, there was no life there. Her eyes wandered the crowd, and I inhaled sharply when they found me and remained on me. Her look spoke volumes—she was opening up and letting me see. I didn't even notice that she'd brought the song to a close until she looked away.

Wow... okay... wow. That was intense. I drew in a deep breath and steadied my racing heart.

Bree chuckled to break the silence. "Depressing, I know," she said, taking a sip from a glass of water resting on a stool and smiled as she set it down. "To make it up to you, I have a new one that's much more hopeful. I wrote this song within the last day or so. Even though it's raw and new, I think it's time to debut it, as my inspiration is here tonight. It's called *The Girl with the Blue Eyes... and Blue Eyes?*" Her intense eyes fell on me, and a smile unlike any of the others formed on her lips. "This one's for you."

My heart suddenly pounded against my chest, and my eyes widened. *Holy shit*. My lip quivered as I wrapped my arms over my chest, gripping the sides of my body to control the trembling that coursed through it.

As Bree started singing, her voice took on an even softer tone than normal, which forced me to listen carefully. Goosebumps emerged all over my arms with each line. She had me entranced, and all I could do was listen as my heart soared.

*I think you could be
The one that gets me over
I think you could be
The girl I could fall for*

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*I think this could be
Scary, amazing, and freeing
I think this could be
How love is supposed to be*

***And I find myself falling
For the girl with the blue eyes
And I see myself trying
To convince the girl with the blue eyes
To take a chance
On me***

*I think you could be
The one that teaches me
I think you could be
The one that'll help me believe*

*I think this could be
The beginning of beauty untold
I think this could be
What I want to unfold*

***And I find myself falling
For the girl with the blue eyes
And I see myself trying
To convince the girl with the blue eyes
To take a chance
On me***

*Oh please, Blue Eyes
Take a chance on me*

Tears formed in the corner of my eyes and I tried my hardest not to let them roll past my eyelids. Warmth consumed my upper body, a heat that refused to diminish. As I ran my hand over the center of my chest and tried to catch my breath, I marveled over how Bree made me feel something I'd never felt before. She'd done it—God help me—she'd done it. With her voice, her words, and her music, she'd broken past my defenses.

And as her eyes captured mine, there was no going back.

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Chapter 12

Could this day feel any longer? What I would give for a nap right now. But there was no time for sleep—not even for rest—because our first day of auditions for the musical had arrived. It was going to be another long day, added onto a previously long night.

And as I sat in the theater watching each classmate audition, my role in this felt like a distant memory of who I once was. And I was desperately trying to capture myself once more, hoping something would eventually stick.

We were auditioning for the lead role of Allyson. Each person had to act out a scene and then do sixty seconds of dancing to their music of choice. This gave me a chance to see who our strong dancers were. After they completed their audition, Mrs. Schwartz asked me to give them a few steps to mirror and gauge how well they handled choreography. Each time my body moved, it felt like a spark igniting at my feet only to fizzle out just as quickly.

Jodie's audition was next. As we sat next to each other in the theater, I opened my mouth to tell her about the weekend, but the words got caught in my throat.

Then, I felt her leg bouncing up and down, which was not like her.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Bloody fantastic," she said as she scrolled down her phone.

I peered over her shoulder to find her on Parker's Facebook profile, scrolling through every photo linked to his profile. Both of my eyebrows shot up. "Why are you—?"

"Oh my God, why are you looking over here?" Jodie asked, shutting off her phone and running a hand through her hair.

"Jodes, you're stalking Parker's Facebook. What's that about?"

She swallowed, looking straight ahead. "Nothing."

"You know you can tell me."

Her eyes remained forward. Just as Jodie's lips parted, Mrs. Schwartz called to her.

Shoving her phone into her backpack, Jodie stood up and hurried onto the stage. As she performed her scene, I grinned—she was the best actress so far. However, when it came time for her dancing portion, she was a disaster. She was offbeat to the music. Her legs did things I didn't know legs could do—and not in a good way. I hid my mouth behind my hand so she could not see me cringing. It was when she had to mirror the choreography that I lost all hope.

"Five, six, seven, eight!" I yelled.

"Eight what?" Jodie asked, her forehead creasing.

I gaped at her. "Like the number. I'm giving you the count to help you start on the right beat."

"Isn't the right beat when the music starts?"

Oh, sweet Jesus. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second.

"Just... do your best to imitate what I showed you," I said with a smile.

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"Okay," she said.

Brow furrowed, Jodie kicked her leg out and bounced around a little in what we could construe as dancing... on another planet.

When she finished, I gave her a tight smile. "Thank you, Jodie." While she was the best actress of the bunch, teaching her how to dance would be my burden. I'd known this wouldn't be her strongest asset, but I didn't realize it'd be this ridiculous.

When the auditions finally finished, I discussed our options with Mrs. Schwartz and William for a while. Jodie hovered near the back of the theater, trying to look natural, but her constant pacing gave her away. Once I broke away from them, she jogged over, putting her arm around my shoulders.

"What did you guys decide?" Jodie asked.

"I'm not telling you."

"Aw, come on. You can tell me. I don't bite." Barely missing a beat, she wiggled her eyebrows. "Unless you want me to. Do you want me to? I'm willing to negotiate the terms of our agreement."

I shoved her away, picking up my backpack and swinging it onto my shoulders. "Jodie, I hate to tell you, but I don't think you could satisfy me."

Jodie's jaw dropped further than I imagined it could go. "Blimey, you didn't just go there. I have more bloody skills than you'd be able to handle."

"Oh, honey, did I damage your fragile self-esteem?" I asked. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and led her out of the theater.

"You can't damage this fortress," Jodie grumbled, walking with a heavy step as we exited through the double doors out into the quad. She sighed. "Although my dancing skills could've ruined it for me. I've got noodles for legs."

That's a perfectly accurate description.

"And one day, you'll find out why that is an asset," I said.

"A bloody messy asset."

"Trust me, it shows your flexibility. With the right training, you could turn those noodle legs into something magical." *At least, I hope so.*

"And let me guess: you're the one with the skills to train me?" she asked.

"Well... yes."

"You're way too into this." Jodie sighed.

"Well... yes," I said with a grin, squeezing her shoulder as we turned the corner to head to the parking lot.

My grin fell, and I came to a sudden halt, a whisper escaping, "Tyler."

"Huh?" Jodie followed my gaze and then waved her arms. "Tyler! Come here!"

"Shit. Jodie, stop," I said.

She looked at me like I was nuts and waved at him again. "Are you crazy? I think we need to tell him about my glorious audition."

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"Jodie!" I barked.

"What?" she asked with wide eyes.

I didn't answer her as my eyes remained on Tyler. His expression was stone cold, and his eyes held an emptiness I'd never seen before. Even from that distance, I could see his jaw clenching as if he were trying to decide whether to walk over. As we stared at one another, his eyes narrowed. He wouldn't come over when Jodie called him, but despite his anger and hurt, his hesitancy made me wonder if he was waiting to see if I'd motion him over instead.

My heart sank, eyes dropping as I exhaled, turning back to Jodie. Her expression as she watched Tyler wasn't exactly any better; she could tell something was wrong. Her eyes followed someone, so I allowed myself to look again. Tyler's back was to us as he walked away, his basketball shorts hanging loose.

I exhaled shakily and decided I needed to sit down. This wasn't the type of thing I could handle on only three hours of sleep. I walked over and sat down on the curb at the edge of the parking lot, cradling my head in my hands.

Jodie threw her backpack down on the asphalt and sat beside me. "What the hell was that?" she asked.

I mumbled through my hands, "That was Tyler."

"Uh yeah, smartass, I know that. What the hell was that chill between the two of you?"

Raising my head, I turned my weary eyes toward her. "That is what you would call the moment after the breakup."

"Are you serious?" Jodie asked.

After I nodded, she paused for a moment; I could see the gears turning in her brain as she tried to figure everything out without asking too many questions. But being Jodie, she couldn't help herself.

"Did he break up with you?" she asked in a rush. "Did he sleep with someone else? Okay, what bitch do I have to bloody smack around like a piñata?"

"There's no bitch to smack around. He didn't cheat on me. I broke up with him."

She studied me, running her hand over her head. "Okay, I'm obviously missing something. What haven't you told me? What led to this?"

"I'm not in love with him, Jodes."

"Valid reason for leaving, but that's not what I meant. You've never been in love with him, Kendra."

"How did you know that?"

Jodie smiled a little. "You're talking to your best friend here. I'm supposed to know what's going on inside of you, even if you don't share it with me. It's my job. So yes, I've known for a long time you don't love him... *but* you stayed with him. So again, I ask: what led to this?" Her gaze remained on me as she waited for an answer.

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Silent for a long time, I pondered whether to answer with the truth. I didn't know how Jodie would react to Bree. She could march in the next pride parade or she could shove me away—I honestly wasn't sure. However, she was my best friend. If I couldn't tell her, who could I tell?

"If there's a bitch to smack around, it's me," I said, my hands shaking. "I'm falling for someone else."

Since I was telling a half-truth, I didn't jump for joy when Jodie grinned.

"You? Falling for someone? Wow. Who's the lucky guy?" she asked.

"Don't freak out." I cringed.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, when someone says that, it makes the person freak out. Just spill. Who is it?"

With my heart pounding in my ears, I said it as quickly as I could, "Her name is Bree. I don't know if you know her, but she's amazing and I think I'm falling for her. You'd love her—well, you wouldn't love her like I love her, because you don't swing that way. I think. I could be wrong. You always joke about jumping into bed with me, so you never know. And if you are, that's cool. Just saying. Oh, dear God, shut the fuck up, Kendra." I gulped down the enormous lump in my throat, looking off at the parking lot.

I felt like I was sitting on pins and needles throughout the silence that followed. Aware of the sounds of nearby classmates laughing and conversing, I strained to hear any noise out of Jodie.

Her accent fell away when she finally said, "Uh, well, first, I'm not gay. In case there was any confusion."

I rolled my eyes, even though I still refused to look at her. "No, there's no confusion; I'm just an idiot who couldn't shut the hell up."

"Okay. Uh, then good," Jodie said. She paused, and I wondered if that was all she was going to say on the matter. I wasn't sure if I could handle that. Just as I was about to open my big mouth again, she continued, "Um, I think I know this Bree. She's in my Government and Politics class. Reddish hair? Is that her?"

"That's Bree," I said with a smile on my lips as I envisioned her auburn hair blowing in the wind.

"She can be a little spitfire in class," Jodie said.

My smile grew wider. "That's one thing I love about her."

A long time passed before she spoke again. "You love her?"

I turned my eyes back to her, biting my lower lip. "Well, not yet, but I think I'm heading that way."

"And you're sure you couldn't try being with a guy other than Tyler? I mean, it might be Tyler that's the problem," Jodie said, her tone bordering on desperate.

"What the hell does it matter whether I'm with a guy or a girl? It shouldn't fucking matter."

"It's just—it's so much easier, Kendra."

It was obvious she was trying to assure me of something she was so sure of herself, even though she didn't have a clue what I was going through.

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I laughed bitterly. With my lack of sleep, I was too tired for this conversation, and maybe that's why I didn't keep my mouth shut.

"Easier, huh?" I asked. "What's so easy about turning off every instinct that says this is wrong because everyone else says it's right? What's so easy about denying everything inside yourself because it's easier for people to watch you with the *appropriate* gender? What's so easy about fucking your boyfriend just so you can escape your shitty life?" Tears streamed down my face as rage boiled to the surface. "You call that fucking easy?"

"Kendra—" Jodie started.

I cut her off with a wave of my hand, anger darting out of my eyes. "No. I don't want to hear you try to justify the ignorance coming out of your mouth right now." Standing up, I swung my backpack over my shoulder and stormed off to my car only to stop and face her. "Dammit Jodie, couldn't you tell I needed you right then? That I needed you to support me? Why couldn't you just—you know what? No. I'm not doing this right now."

"Kendra!"

But I'd already turned around and was running to my car. I quickly hopped in and revved the engine. Driving out of the parking lot, I only allowed a single glance at my best friend standing somewhere in the middle of it, helpless as she watched me leave.

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Chapter 13

I suppose it wasn't the brightest idea to walk through Griffith Park at night. A small voice in my head reminded me murderers, stalkers, and freaks could lurk in the shadows. The occasional rustling of leaves nearby, as if someone or something were walking on them, or the hoot of an owl amongst the steady song of crickets set me on edge. However, I continued deeper into the darkness. Every fiber of my being told me I was insane and reckless, but I honestly didn't give a fuck.

I was on a mission. Twigs cracked under my feet, startling me as an owl hooted above my head. I studied each tree I passed until I found what I was looking for—the oak Bree and I had climbed together.

I inched my fingers along its bark. A smile played at the tips of my mouth as I recalled the tender kisses and the steady hands that kept me from falling. I longed for the solid security Bree provided that night—she made it all seem so easy. Thinking about her was like floating on a cloud, but as Jodie's desperate eyes flashed through my mind, it pulled me down to reality.

I scratched at my arms over my sweater even though I wasn't itching—all the emotions coursing through me bubbled to the surface of my skin. I let out a frustrated cry, resting my forehead against the

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tree. Closing my eyes, I tried to shut out Jodie's words running through my brain, but they kept coming. The way she dismissed how I felt and insulted me by suggesting I could be *fixed* by being with another guy. The judgments kept coming, both real and imagined, like the rush of rapids down a waterfall.

This was the path I'd chosen.

I'd choose it even if she weren't beside me.

This path would be my salvation and my hell... and this was only the beginning.

My chest tightened, and my heart raced, boiling over until it was too much to handle. I furiously kicked at the tree, yelling and pleading. My words didn't even make sense, a primal language unleashed.

As my voice grew hoarse and the fight in me vanished, I collapsed against the tree and slid down to my knees. I pressed the side of my face against it to cool my feverish skin. Just as quickly as the anger came, it left. The bark felt solid and steady, like a place to drop my defenses, as my body deflated, and tears cascaded down my cheeks. They slipped between the indentations of the bark, becoming one with the tree.

A sob escaped my throat as all I could feel was pure, raw emotion. Desperation replaced the fear that had just run through my veins.

Why does so much shit always happen to me? Why does life have to be so fucking hard? All I want is to be with her. For everything to be easy. Is that too much to ask?

An ache pulsed within every muscle in my body. I became uncomfortable in my own skin, scratching at my arms again, which only made the prickling worse. I ripped the sweater away from my body as if its fabric burned my skin—it felt like such a poor substitute for the acceptance I yearned for.

I was so fucking naïve to believe Jodie would understand... that even if Tyler rejected me, Jodie would never. Love would win out, right? What a fucking load of shit.

A sudden chill dashed through my body. Trying to massage away the goosebumps on my arms, I cursed under my breath, wishing I hadn't ripped my sweater a moment ago.

I looked up at the tree's height and felt a wave of determination. I pulled myself off the ground, and with a newfound resolve, grabbed hold of the trunk and placed my foot against the bark. As soon as I placed weight on the lifted foot, I slipped. A bolt of searing pain shot through my leg as I fell hard on my bent ankle. "Shit!" I hopped around on one foot before bending over to massage my throbbing ankle.

That is the last straw. I don't care if I take all night—I'm going to climb that fucking tree.

I tried again and again, ignoring my ankle screaming out in protest each time it hit the ground. I must have been at it for a full ten minutes, cursing with each fall.

After what felt like the hundredth time, a frustrated laugh escaped my throat as I put all my weight on my bad foot and kicked the tree with my other foot. I took a few steps back, a guttural yell piercing the still evening air as I threw my arms back in defeat. "What the *FUCK* is so fucking *HARD* about climbing a fucking *TREE*?!"

"Maybe it's because you're yelling at it?"

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I jumped, shrieking, and grabbing my ripped-up sweater before turning toward the voice behind me. A wave of relief washed over me when I spotted Bree leaning against a tree nearby. Despite the worried creases on her face, her eyebrow raised as she nodded toward the sweater in my hands.

"Really? Death by sweater?" Bree asked.

I blinked a few times before looking down at the sweater. Sure enough, my hands gripped it like I planned on wrapping it around someone's neck. Shaking my head, I dropped it at my feet.

I wanted to say something sarcastic and considered closing myself off from her, but as I searched her eyes, the compassion there broke down my protective barriers. I sighed, gingerly limping toward her, and bit my lip to conceal the excruciating pain I felt with each step.

Bree stood up straight as I approached her, watching me cautiously. Once I reached her, I threw my arms around her shoulders, collapsing against her. A surprised gasp escaped as the force of my body pushed her back against the tree. Her feet slipped out from under her and since I refused to let go, we both slid to the ground. I buried my face in the nape of her neck, unable to hold back the explosion.

Time seemed to stand still in the brisk night air. Eventually, my sobs slowed to the occasional lone tear and snuffle. I adjusted my head on Bree's shoulder, feeling the strength of her jaw against my forehead.

"I told Jodie," I said.

Her jaw clenched. "I'm guessing it didn't go well?"

"No. I told her I broke up with Tyler."

She swallowed. "You—what?"

"It wouldn't be right—pursuing this... us... I needed to end it," I said. A flash of him pushing me away entered my mind.

"Wow," she said. "You are no Josephine."

Despite my current state, a warmth permeated my chest. She'd said many things to me since we'd met, but that was the best one. Swallowing, my mind returned to Jodie's reaction and fear pushed out any remaining warmth.

"I—I couldn't tell her without telling her about..." I started.

"Me?"

"And me."

She didn't ask me anything more and held me close, her arms providing safety and strength in their gentle, firm hold. Most of all, they granted a structure—a framework for my heart to rest in. She allowed me to remain curled up between her legs for who knew how long. Occasionally, she'd kiss my forehead, but it was like she knew I couldn't handle much more.

I sighed, focusing on a few freckles clustered on her upper chest. I brought my hand up and gently ran my fingers over her soft skin. The repetition of this movement calmed the lingering storm inside until all that remained was a quiet, persistent fear. As it swelled, I wished I could have the volcano back.

I took in a shaky breath. "Bree?"

Press/Media Kit

"Yes?"

I tried to hold back the fear that was showing itself through the clenching of my jaw and the tears dropping. "Does it ever get any easier?"

She took a deep breath, bringing her hand to my hair and brushing it back behind my ear. "With time."

I waited for her to expand on that thought when I realized it wasn't coming. *How much time? Days? Weeks? Months? Years?* The desperate thought jumped around inside my brain as my body tensed. Bree shifted against me, and it took me a moment to realize my fingers had moved down to grip the top of her shirt. Warmth spread across my cheeks as I released it. "I'm sorry, I—"

"It's okay," Bree said, chuckling. "I just thought you were taking things to the next level. You know you could simply slide your hand up under my shirt; you don't need to rip it off. Unless you want your poor sweater to have a friend to lie next to."

The heat expanded to my ears, and I buried into her neck once again. "You saw that? How long were you standing there?"

"I wasn't. I was up there."

I raised my head to find her pointing up to the limbs of the tree we were sitting against. I cringed and retreated to her neck.

"Besides... that's not our tree. This one is," Bree said.

My head raised; the color drained from my face. "You mean, I—I—"

"Have a horrible sense of direction? Yes." Bree grinned.

"Oh, God."

"Yeeeeees. It was a beautiful, *beautiful* sight." She wiggled her eyebrows.

"You were up there the whole time, weren't you? You saw and heard everything?"

"*Everything.*" She loved this way too much.

"Remind me to have a mental breakdown in the privacy of my bedroom next time," I said, placing my head in my hands.

Her hands gently pulled mine away from my face, and her fingertips lifted my chin. I didn't want her to see the embarrassment flushed on my cheeks and tried to look away, but a squeeze of my chin jerked my eyes back. There was such an intensity radiating from her that drew me in. Embarrassment and fear weren't strong enough to drag me away—Bree was stronger. My struggle for control surrendered and I could no longer hold her at bay. I let her in.

Bree's eyes searched mine for a moment, reading every emotion. Her brow set into a resolute line.

"Remember how I said you don't have to hide from me?" she asked. "There's nothing you can do that will scare me away."

"What if I pick my nose? I mean, really, who could stick around while that's happening?"

"Kendra..." Her voice pleaded with me to not joke around.

Press/Media Kit

"Please, Bree," I said, my throat making a noise as I choked back a knot. "Please, don't make me. I can't take much more."

"Then tonight, we'll just be." Bree pulled me back into the comfort of her arms.

Those few words relaxed me—so much that the knot slipped back down from where it came, and the tears stopped. I could just be, and it was okay. Nothing more had to be released; nothing less had to be hidden and pushed down. What an amazing gift she was giving me, letting me be exactly who I was at that moment.

Minutes passed, maybe even hours. The darkness loomed over our heads, then the risk of sunrise. The world threatened to intrude upon our time, as I understood it always would from that moment forward. Neither of us wanted to leave the security of each other's arms, our tree, or our safe place.

We couldn't hide forever—both of us knew that—but we could take solace in the calm before the storm.

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Chapter 18

My brow furrowed as I thought about my last run-in with Tyler. I laid on the grass at the overlook, studying the clouds overhead as if they had the answers to all my questions.

"I guess I wish it could be different, you know?" I asked.

While I would have loved for a higher power to speak to me, it surprised me when I didn't hear a response from the person beside me. I turned my gaze to Bree's still form, her arms behind her head and her legs crossed at the ankles. From her silence, I'd assumed she'd fallen asleep, but her eyes were open as she stared at the clouds. She bit her lower lip as if she were holding something back.

"Bree?"

Her eyes glazed over before turning to me. "Huh?"

"I asked you a question."

"Oh. I'm sorry," she said. For the first time, there was something I'd never seen before with Bree—a forced smile teetering on the edge of a grimace. "What did you ask?"

That smile disturbed me. One thing I appreciated about Bree was how genuine she was; I never questioned her honesty. However, with that one smile, it felt like she was pretending to be fine when she wasn't. And I wasn't okay with that.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

I brought my elbow up to rest against the grass, leaning into it. "You're just... something's off. Please tell me what you're thinking."

Press/Media Kit

I worried my request may sound like a demand based on tone alone, a defensive wall creeping into place. Bree held so much power in this. I'd turned my heart over to her, yet she could easily withdraw if she weren't sure this was what she wanted. The more I revealed to her my fears and pain, the more my insecurity rose. Getting hurt terrified me—that after all was said and done, opening myself up might be for nothing.

Bree sighed as she lifted herself to face me.

The frown on her face made me even more anxious. *Did I do something wrong? She was fine when we laid down. Shit.*

"I guess—I don't know—I wonder why it matters to you? I mean, after everything," Bree said, her face scrunching up as she let out an exasperated sigh. It felt like she wanted to take the words back, but her lips set into a thin line, letting them sit there.

I stared at her. "Why it matters to me? Seriously? What the fuck?"

She frowned, and a flash of annoyance entered her eyes. She shook her head with a wave of her hand. "I just don't get it, Kendra. You don't love Tyler—he's just a friend. It's not like this is some long-lost love you're having to let go of to be with me. If he were your first love or something, then maybe I'd understand your focus on him, but he's not."

I stared at her like she had a screw loose. "Because he's one of my best friends. Haven't you been listening to anything I said?"

"Of course, I have been listening. Jesus." She gave me an annoyed look before sitting up, her back rigid.

Her reaction to my defensiveness was a stark departure from Tyler's hurt, puppy-dog eyes, causing my body to go into fight-or-flight mode.

"Then why is it so hard to understand he's my *best friend* and I wish I could still talk to him?" I asked. Anger welled up in my chest, threatening to overwhelm me. Unconsciously, my fingers tugged on the grass beneath me, tearing the blades apart.

Bree let out a grunt, her arm flying out to her side. "Because you have *me!* You can talk to *me!*"

Her body slumped forward, and she looked off into the distance. The anger left just as quickly as it came. All that remained was an unnerving quiet. As the seconds passed, her breathing slowed. But I didn't trust myself to speak. My anger had yet to dissipate—unfortunately, I couldn't let things go as easily as she could. So, I just sat there, tearing apart more grass.

Bree's eyes found their way back to me, but instead of being full of life, they looked empty and tired. She whispered, "I mean, why am I not enough, Kendra?"

My heart dropped to my stomach. There was no reason for her to think she wasn't enough because she was. A part of me desperately wanted to pull her into my arms and reassure her... but another part was easier to fall back on—like an old friend—even if it was unhealthy and destructive.

And with a sinking ache in my gut, I couldn't reach out for her like I longed to. What kind of girlfriend—or whatever the hell I was—wouldn't reassure her? I was messed up in the fucking head.

Press/Media Kit

I drew in a deep breath and answered her the only way I knew how. Defensively.

“There’s something wrong here if you even have to ask me that,” I said, standing up and throwing my backpack over my shoulders.

“Kendra—” Bree started, quickly standing.

I raised my hand to stop her. “I should go.”

Bree’s eyes pleaded with me, her arms wrapping around herself tightly. She shifted back and forth on her feet.

I hesitated, unable to leave her like this. When I touched her arm, the coolness was such a striking contrast against my heated skin that I removed my hand. “I’ll talk to you soon. I’m sorry.”

I shifted my backpack, turned away from Bree, and walked toward the parking lot. I had no intention of looking back—I didn’t want to see her expression. As I picked up the pace, it became clear she wouldn’t stop me. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want her to. However, I think she knew there was no point—something had slipped into place over my heart and I needed to remove it alone.

As I got inside my car, I gasped for air. Once my breathing returned to normal, something unsettling washed over me: we’d had our first fight.

The knowledge slowly ruminated in the pit of my stomach. And as it churned, I felt sick.

* * *

At lunch, I plopped down on the cement and rested my back against the wall. Cringing at the tightness in my shoulders, I stretched my neck. The night before, I’d picked up my cell phone multiple times throughout the night. I’d written a text to Bree asking for forgiveness and then just as quickly erased it. I even dialed her number a few times, but before I could press send, I’d shut off the screen. My stubbornness won out, and the night ended with no kind of reconciliation.

I moped in my room, running the argument over in my head. I lost track of what really happened and what was my idea of how things went. That was a problem with me—when I fought with someone, I’d replay it so much in my head that the actual events would become exaggerated.

As I rubbed my eyes, someone sat down beside me. From the bump against my shoulder, I knew it couldn’t be Bree. I pulled my hand away to find Jodie.

“What the hell happened to you? You look like shit,” Jodie said.

I chuckled. “Why thank you, ass. You look stunning as usual.”

“Well, of course. I work hard to look this brill.” Jodie waved her arms around herself. “So once more, I ask, what the hell happened to you?”

I dismissed her with a wave of my hand and then took a bite of my sandwich. It tasted like chalk, my stomach still in knots. “Oh, you know, domestic disturbance.”

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Jodie raised her eyebrow. “So soon? I thought you would be in the honeymoon phase—all cute and disgusting, making me want to alternate between puking and running off to find a hunk of burning love.”

“She just doesn’t get it,” I said.

“Get what?”

“You know.” I waved my hand and took another bite.

Jodie rolled her eyes. “Really? How much sleep did you get? Because if you slept, you’d know I’m not a fucking mind reader and that ‘she just doesn’t get it’ doesn’t tell me a bloody thing.”

“Oh. Oops.” I shoved the sandwich into my mouth.

Jodie huffed, smacking me on the arm. “Bleeding hell! Tell me what the fuck happened!”

“Oh.” *I guess I need more words.* “She doesn’t get why I miss Tyler.”

I recognized the look that only a best friend could give as Jodie stared at me for a good minute—the look that said I was the biggest idiot on the planet. I grew uncomfortable, so I lifted my sandwich to her. “It’s ham. You want a bite?”

She smacked my hand away. “Seriously, Kendra. You’re a fucking prat.”

My eyes glazed over. She was probably using one of her British slang terms on me. “I’m not sure what that means, but I’m inclined to think it’s not good. So... phooey on you.”

“Phooey?”

“Shut up,” I said, aware I was losing this argument. In my current state, there was no way in hell I was ever going to win and we both knew it. I chewed on another bite until I grew tired of her staring. “She’s the one who got mad at me first!”

“Gee, I wonder why,” Jodie said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Don’t judge me.”

Jodie rolled her eyes and dropped her arms to her sides. “Kendra. For fuck’s sake, why are you talking to Bree about Tyler? Have you lost a few brain cells?” As my mouth opened, she held up a hand to stop me. “Don’t answer that. Anyone who says ‘phooey on you’ cannot be trusted to answer such a question. So, I will answer it for you.” She took in a deep breath and then said rather loudly, “YOU SHOULDN’T BE TALKING TO HER ABOUT TYLER. Okay? Glad we got that settled.” She removed the contents of her lunch bag.

I frowned as I watched her arrange her lunch. *She must think this conversation is over.* “But Jodes—”

Her hand once again silenced me. “Nope. Don’t.”

“But—” I said.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Jodie replied, taking a bite of her sandwich before raising her eyes to me. When she did, she laughed so hard she almost choked on her food. Once she swallowed, she wiped away the tears at the corner of her eyes. “You should see your face. I wish I had a mirror.”

“Jodie!”

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“Oh. My. God. You are special today. I should record this moment.” Jodie evaluated me before sighing. She placed her sandwich down, looking me straight in the eyes. “Okay, Kendra. Why do you feel the need to tell Bree you’re missing Tyler? Seriously.”

Is this a trick question? Well, I’ve already humiliated myself enough that a bit more couldn’t hurt. “Because he’s one of my best friends. I wasn’t in love with him, you know, so it’s not like she should be jealous of him or anything. He’s just a friend, and it’s hard losing one of your best friends. I should be able to share that with her.”

“Whether you should be able to, and whether you *should*, are two entirely different things,” she said.

“Umm.”

Jodie chuckled. “Your expression tells me that went right over your sleep-deprived head.”

“How did you know I didn’t get any sleep?” I asked.

Jodie’s eyes widened as she laughed. “We already went over this, pea-brain.”

“Hey!”

Laughing again, it took Jodie a moment to regain her composure. “Okay. You think that in a relationship you should be able to tell a person everything. However, sometimes you need to hold back what you’re thinking and feeling because it could upset the other person. Especially if it’s not something that you *need* to share. Here, she already knows how you feel about Tyler and what happened. You shared it with her, and she took it well, right?”

“Yeah, she was really cool about it,” I said.

“See? So, she was cool and that should be it, right?” Jodie asked. “But it’s not, because you keep talking about it. How would you feel if she’d been in a relationship with somebody and all she did was talk about that person?”

My eyes wandered away from Jodie, focusing on a random object in the distance. I remembered Bree telling me about Josephine and how much Josephine had hurt her in the past. However, I couldn’t recall any other time where she’d mentioned her. How would I have reacted if she kept talking about Josephine? I probably would’ve assumed there was still something there deep down, some type of love. Well... shit, fuck, banana peppers.

“You’re getting it now, aren’t you?” Jodie asked.

I frowned as I looked at my friend. “Unfortunately, yes. You ass.”

Jodie laughed. “Why am I an ass?”

“Because you’re right. And people who are right but not me are asses by default.”

Jodie grinned and kicked my leg. “Now you’re sounding more like the Kendra I know.”

“I just wanted to talk to her. That’s all,” I said, running a hand through my hair.

“I know, but if you’re going to talk about your ex-boyfriend and your issues with him, do it with me. Don’t do it with the chick you’re into. She’s the last person you should talk to about that shit. You’re trying to start a relationship with her—not talk her out of it.”

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I sighed. “Jodes, you’d think I’d know these things after having been in a relationship before, but dude, it’s so different. It really is. I guess because I treated Tyler more like a friend than a lover. The dynamic is different, and I feel like I’m figuring it out for the first time.”

“That’s probably true. You always were a little deficient in the relationship department,” Jodie said.

“Gee, thanks.”

“Anytime.” Jodie touched my arm, letting her hand linger. “Though, Ken... come to me if you need to talk about Tyler. We’ll figure things out and then you can get back to that falling-in-love-with-a-chick thing you’ve got going on.”

Jodie was normally all fun and games, but there were moments when I could talk to her about anything.

So, with a deep breath, I told her everything I felt regarding Tyler. As I listened to her responses, some confusion and frustration faded away. She wasn’t emotionally invested in me or my relationship with Tyler, and that made her the perfect person to talk to. She was right—I’d fucked up by talking to Bree so much about it, and I needed to make it right.

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Chapter 23

As we approached my house, Bree placed a hand on my arm to stop me, her eyes darting between me and the door. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you?”

“No, I’ll be okay,” I said. “I need some time with my mom.”

Bree’s mouth pressed into a thin line as she shifted her weight, her hand sliding down to my hand to lead me over to the porch swing. Once we sat down, she rested her hand on my thigh. “Kendra? Why didn’t you tell me last night how important today was?”

I tapped my foot against the ground. “Because I didn’t remember.”

Bree’s eyebrows arched. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” I said, lowering my head.

“Did you wake up and realize what day it was?”

My foot would fall off soon if I kept tapping. “Um, no. Tyler came to the house and more or less reminded me.”

“Tyler?” Her fingers on my thigh twitched at the mention of him.

I raised my eyes, placing my hand over hers. “Hey. It wasn’t like that. He wanted to be there for me as a friend.”

“Really? Huh. I’m kind of impressed.”

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"I'm just glad somebody was there when I found out, because I, uh, kind of blacked out." The guilt was thick in my voice because I knew how that was going to go over.

She stared at me. "What?"

"Not a full blackout," I said. "Just more... I wasn't really there. He helped pull me out of it."

Bree's face fell as she gazed at the street. Each time she was insecure about what she meant to me, I wondered what Josephine did to her. With how she struggled, there had to be more to the story than she let on. It went beyond not feeling loved to not feeling worthy of love.

I clasped her chin between my fingers, bringing her eyes back to me. "Don't go there, Bree. It's just you for me."

Bree's eyes became watery. "It's just you for me, too."

She sighed and pulled me over so that my back rested against her chest. Her arm draped over my shoulder with her hand grazing my collarbone. That one action left goosebumps all over my skin.

"I missed you today," Bree said.

"I missed you, too," I said. "I didn't know how much I needed you until I saw you."

"Jodie knew what she was doing."

"Yes, and because of that, I will never live it down."

"She's a good friend to you," Bree said. "After she found out about us, she started talking to me. She was uncomfortable at first, like she was trying to figure out what in the world you saw in me." Bree laughed. "God, the look on her face—"

"I can imagine."

"I think she was picturing us kissing and couldn't quite comprehend it. Thankfully, it didn't harm my fragile self-esteem."

I grinned as I envisioned Bree's raised eyebrow and Jodie being out of her element. As I imagined their conversation, it made me flashback to when my dad and Jodie would try to out-banter one another. Jodie would be completely thrown off when he'd one-up her, stammering until she found a good comeback. I could see the big grin on his face and the mischievous twinkle in his eyes like it was only yesterday.

My eyes glazed over as I became lost in thought.

"I killed my dad," I said. My eyes widened. *Did I just say that out loud? Fuck!*

Every muscle in Bree's body tensed as her fingers stopped tracing the outline of my collarbone. After one too many excruciating seconds, she cleared her throat and asked, "What?"

A huge lump formed in my throat during the silence and I tried to swallow it down. My eyes darted across the yard to the street. Looking directly at Bree terrified me. I didn't want to see what was there—I was positive with that one line, I'd changed the way she looked at me.

My voice came out small. "I think I killed my dad."

Bree's jaw clenched against the side of my head. After a few more painful seconds, she took a deep breath. "Why do you say that?"

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I bit the inside of my cheeks, tears forming. The headlights of a car pulled into a garage across the street and a woman got out to unload groceries from her trunk. How I longed to be doing something as mundane as that right now. I wanted to take back my confession and return to the memory of Jodie and my dad.

My cheeks were sore from the clenching, but I still couldn't speak. My head was swimming in memories—memories I tried so hard to lock away. I didn't want to go there, and yet, the memories didn't seem to give a shit about what I wanted.

"Because—" I paused, my voice quiet. "I'm the one who told them to stop. If I had just... maybe he'd still be here."

"Stop what?"

"Performing CPR," I choked out. The memories were not finished with me. Tears slowly seeped out of my eyes and down my cheeks. "After the car accident, there was so much blood... God, so much. He was choking on his blood in the hospital." The memory of his eyes bulging and the look of sheer terror on his face consumed me. My voice betrayed my efforts at being strong. "We sat him up and he stopped choking, but he looked so scared. His fear worsened when the doctor talked about getting him to an O.R. right away. The look in his eyes... it was like he wanted to stop fighting, but it scared him." I smiled a little. "He was being strong for me. He didn't want to leave me."

While Bree's body was still stiff, she resumed running her fingertips along my collarbone and kissed the side of my head. "Of course, he didn't. You were his girl."

"Yes, I was. But sometimes, the daughter has to be strong for her parents. Especially since Mom wasn't at the hospital yet, I had to be the strong one." Sniffing, I hastily wiped away my tears. I wasn't sure if I could continue with the flashes from that night still coming. "I, uh... I held his hand and told him it was okay to let go. That we would be okay. We'd take care of each other." I closed my eyes at the memory of his frantic eyes. "He looked so heartbroken, Bree. That I was saying such a thing to him. But I knew deep down, it's what he needed. He needed *me* to make it okay."

"Oh, sweetheart," Bree said, holding me even tighter against her.

"I made it okay," I said. Although the memories threatened to consume me, sharing them was holding the threat at bay. It was crazy, the amount of power this guilt held over me—the fear that it was because of me we lost him. I always wondered if it could have been different if I'd made another choice. Maybe we wouldn't be alone if I had.

Maybe it was my fault.

I swallowed hard, pushing the thoughts away and returning to the story. "I think it helped. He wasn't scared anymore and got peaceful. He closed his eyes and slipped into unconsciousness. That was the last conversation I had with my dad."

Biting my lower lip, I played with Bree's jeans between my fingers, and said, "I didn't know it was going to be the last. I thought maybe I helped calm him and he'd be okay. But suddenly, the machines started screaming. Beeping everywhere. Doctors running in. Nurses pushing me out. They started CPR."

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There was no stopping the tears or how my voice cracked beneath the words. “But I knew... I *knew* I had to watch the clock when they started. My aunt’s a nurse and she used to tell me how after six to seven minutes of CPR, brain damage occurs. She also mentioned how after fifteen minutes, brain damage would be substantial.”

I shook my head, and continued, “I knew my dad wouldn’t want that. *I knew*. As fifteen minutes approached, I was a fucking train wreck. I prayed and wishing for the CPR to work before that time arrived. God, *please* let it work. But fifteen minutes hit, and they were still going. I panicked, yelling, ‘It’s been too long! Stop!’ They looked at me, then each other, and stopped. And then—” I held a hand up in the air, suspended above us. “That one. Long. Beep. The one that echoes in my head to this day. The one that said, ‘You did it, Kendra. You killed your dad.’”

I could hear the beep so distinctly in my head—even a year later, it was clear as day.

“The worst part, though,” I said, “was when they shut off the machine. The silence, Bree. This sound of doctors who stopped trying. The sound of doing nothing. The sound of... death.”

As I uttered the words, it felt like I was back there, and it was happening all over again. The memory finally overwhelmed me. The sobs crushed my chest as I released the demons. Bree tried to hold me together, shushing me and telling me it was okay, that she had me.

We remained like that for what felt like an eternity. Finally, the last sob left my chest, and some weight lifted from my shoulders. Silent tears fell down my cheeks, but at least I was gaining control over myself.

“It’s not your fault,” Bree said as she ran her hand through my hair. “It’s not your fault.”

“No, it is. I made the choice. I made them stop,” I said. “What if I’d waited? They could have made the call and then I wouldn’t have all this fucking guilt.”

Bree squeezed me tightly, her lips against my ear. “And what if CPR worked after twenty minutes and he was brain-dead? Or what if he was severely brain-damaged and unable to live the way he wanted to live?”

“At least I’d still have my dad,” I whispered, my eyes glazing over as I stared straight ahead.

“It’s not what he would have wanted. You know that. That’s why you had them stop.”

My lower lip trembled as more memories flooded in. “But when I told my mom, she—she—”

Bree released her hold on me and made me turn my body around so she could look into my eyes. Her hands grasped both of my shoulders. “Kendra, it’s not your fault.”

I tried to turn away, but she gently shook me to make me return to her.

“It’s *not* your fault. Your dad loved you. Would he want you holding on to this guilt? Is this what he’d want for you?” Bree asked. Her eyes pierced into the core of me. It was both comforting and jarring for her to see everything. All my insecurities, fears, and ugliness laid before her, and once again, she wasn’t running away.

She was right. My dad wouldn’t want this for me. He wouldn’t want me to hold on to this guilt or deny myself happiness. No matter what my mom thought... He’d want me to live my life to its full

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potential. In some weird way, when I looked into Bree's eyes, I saw him there. It was as if the words were coming from him and she was channeling him. And maybe that was what made me feel so desperate to hold on.

"I don't want to let him go," I said.

"Oh, baby, you don't have to let him go. You have him here—" Bree placed a hand over my heart. "And here." She finished by placing the same hand against the side of my head. "He isn't going anywhere as long as you keep him alive there."

I wanted to believe her, but I was struggling. "I guess I feel like if I stop telling myself it's my fault and how I could have done something differently... it's like I've stopped fighting for him. Like how I stopped fighting for him in that emergency room, and I never want to feel that way again. He *is* worth fighting for."

Bree caressed her thumb over my cheek, wiping away the tears seeping out of the corner of my eyelids. "Fight for the memories. The good ones. Fight to remember the way he made you feel. That's what he'd want you to fight for. To keep *him* alive—not the memory of his death."

My eyes wandered past her shoulder. "But it's all I can remember."

"Someday, that will shift. You'll want to remember *him* more than how he left you."

My brow furrowed as I looked at her. "I want to remember him, and fight for that."

"And you will. I know you will," Bree said, glancing over her shoulder and nodding towards the house. "And fight for your family."

"I don't blame my mom for the way things are, you know," I said. "She did her best. She's *doing* her best."

"I know."

"Thank you," I said. "I have told no one about that night. Jodie and Tyler knew something messed me up, but they thought it was just him dying. They didn't know there was more. I think there's always been this guilt and fear over whether I did the right thing, and it's been crushing me." I exhaled slowly. "God, it's good to get it out."

Bree took my face in her hands. "Thank you for trusting me. I'm always here to listen and help you through it."

"I'd have it no other way." I closed my eyes, leaning my face against her hand.

That was when I felt her lips on mine, her hands tenderly cupping my face. I got lost in the acceptance and love she was providing, a safe place where even my greatest regret didn't change the way she loved me.

Placing a kiss against my forehead, Bree pulled me back into her arms, offering me a place to be. Taking in a deep, cleansing breath, I knew I couldn't have found someone more perfect for me. She got me. She truly got me. And she made me feel like I was good enough, even if that person was broken and jaded. When I was in her arms, I knew I'd be okay, but this was the first time I felt like it was okay *not* to be okay. To be a little broken. I didn't think that because of her, I'd somehow be put back together and

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made whole. It was kind of the opposite. I believed that because of her, I'd find the strength to put myself back together. She'd feed into that strength and build me up until I saw what she saw in me.

I was ready to find my way.

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Chapter 30

I stood at the bedroom door, my hand on the doorknob, wanting to crack it open to listen to the conversation going on downstairs. But despite every fiber of my being saying otherwise, I released the doorknob and returned to my homework.

Without thinking about what I was doing, I chewed on my pen cap, leaving bite indentations. When I saw the damage, I cringed and grabbed a new pen. I doodled in my notebook, then got pissed off at the drawing, ripping it apart. The crumbled pieces littered the floor—just another thing in my life that needed to be cleaned up.

I tried everything to get my mind off the conversation. If Phillip could get my mom to a place of tolerance, I'd settle for it. Anything other than the sick-to-her-stomach look I'd received ever since she found out.

My phone vibrated on the nightstand. When I swiped it open, I found a text from Bree asking if I could do dinner with her parents on Thursday night. Just like that, freaking out about my mom transitioned into freaking out about meeting Bree's parents. Thursday night was only a couple of nights away. *Fuck, that's soon.* Against my better judgment, I agreed to dinner.

When the door creaked open, I threw my phone aside, eyeing Phillip as he entered.

"How'd it go?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Well... first, it's really weird to see Mom giving a shit again."

"Phillip, tell me..."

He sat on the floor in front of me. "I think it went as well as could've been expected. She's just sad. She'll work through it, eventually."

"What'd she say?" I asked.

"She feels like she's lost her daughter. Or what was left of you before this news," Phillip said. As I opened my mouth, he held up his hand. "Let me continue. She's lost the daughter who would marry a nice, young man and produce kids for her to spoil. She's lost the daughter who wouldn't have to deal with discrimination, injustice, and hate."

It took a moment for me to respond, as I decided not to linger on the part about losing me even before I came out to her. That was a can of worms I'd never told Phillip about—it was enough that Mom knew about... I shook my head, focusing on the present.

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“I mean... it’s 2019,” I said. “How bad can it be? We live in different times than even five years ago.”

“Do we?” he asked.

Flashes of the many news stories on our television or my phone came to me. A president who acted like the LGBT community didn’t exist. A government that continued to steal their rights—my rights. Protests, including hateful signs and hateful eyes, just waiting for something to trigger their need for violence. Maybe it wasn’t all that different.

“It’s scary, Ken,” Phillip said. “She worries about you—about your life, being discriminated against, even possibly getting hurt. There are people out there we can’t protect you from. People that want nothing more than to hurt you. It scares the crap out of her, and I can’t say I blame her—it worries me, too.”

Even if he was okay with it and still loved me, fear was front and center at this moment. Maybe it’d always be there, somewhere in the back of their minds. Hell, maybe it should be.

A chill traveled down the length of my spine.

“I try not to think about it. I know you’re right—I may never be safe again,” I said, my forehead creasing. “But then again, was I ever safe in the first place? They could bash me for having a girlfriend. Or they could rape me for being a woman. Or they could shoot me for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Phil, there’s always going to be the possibility of me getting hurt. I can’t allow myself to live in that kind of fear, or else I’m no longer living.”

Phillip studied me, and then a small smile formed. “You sure you’re seventeen? Jesus, you’re wise beyond your years.”

“Some things make us grow up quicker than we’d like,” I said.

“That’s true.” Phillip reached over to squeeze my foot. “Hang in there. Mom will get there. I think deep down she gets you can still have kids or get married. I just think the fear of something happening to you—after everything with Dad—that’s what scares her most.”

“That makes sense.” I nudged my foot against Phillip’s. “Thanks. I knew I could count on you.”

“What are big brothers for?” Phillip asked as he stood up. “Call me if you need to talk.”

“Thanks, Phil,” I said, standing and pulling him in for a hug.

Phillip released me, glancing over his shoulder at the door. “Good luck. I’ll let myself out.”

After I heard the front door close, I sat on my bed, gathering courage before heading downstairs. I peered into the living room where my mom sat on the couch, a pensive look on her face.

“I’m glad the talk with Phillip went well,” I said.

My mom tilted her head, studying me for a moment before saying, “I love you, Kendra—you know that, right?”

It took everything I had not to run over and wrap my arms around her.

“I love you, too, Mom,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be okay,” she said.

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“Okay.”

After a moment of silence, I turned to go upstairs, but as my foot landed on the first step, I paused. My chest tightened as I battled whether to say the words. I didn’t want to, but I had to know.

“Mom? Do you still blame me?”

There was a pause.

“Blame you?” she asked.

I stared straight ahead, my voice barely a whisper. “For what I did.”

“No, you can’t help who you are—if you’re gay, you’re gay.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Not for that.”

“Then what are you talking about, Kendra?” she asked.

Drawing in a deep breath, I shuddered. *Is she going to make me say it aloud?* I backed off the first step and turned to her, my lip quivering. “Do you still blame me... for what happened to Dad?”

Her eyes widened. “Kendra—”

“Because I understand if you do. Bree says it’s not my fault, but—but I’m the one who told them to stop. I’m the one who killed him,” I said. My eyes darted around frantically, unable to keep them on my mom’s changing expression, my words rushing out. “What if I hadn’t told them to stop? What if the CPR worked just a few seconds later? And he was still here, and *we* weren’t the ghosts pretending to live in this house? What if—”

My mom rushed over and grabbed me by the shoulders. “Kendra, stop it! Why are you saying these things?”

A tear slid down my cheek as my breath shuddered. “Because I know you think it’s my fault, that you’ve been mad at me all these months. And I deserve your anger, Mom—I deserve whatever you throw at me—”

“No,” she said, shaking me by the shoulders. “Look at me.”

I whimpered and shook my head, my eyes on the floor.

“Look at me,” she demanded.

Terrified of what I’d see, I hesitated, glancing at the couch, then the front door, and finally leveling my eyes on my mother. It surprised me what I found there.

Her face was scrunched up with tears falling down her cheeks, her eyes begging me.

“It was *not* your fault, sweet Babygirl,” my mom said.

“But I told them—” I started.

“No,” she said with another shake of my shoulders. “They were going to stop, anyway.”

I stared at her. “What do you mean?”

My mom closed her eyes briefly before answering me. “After the nurses told me about your dad, I talked to the doctor. He said that their resuscitation attempts were a hope and a prayer—that they’d tried long enough, but with the internal bleeding your dad had...” She swallowed, her voice wavering. “It—it wasn’t possible.”

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“But I told them to stop,” I said.

She shook her head. “They were stopping anyway, sweetheart.”

“But—but they looked at me first and then—”

“They may have looked at you when you said it but did the nurses then look at the doctor? Think, sweetheart,” she said, rubbing my shoulders with her hands.

I closed my eyes, allowing myself to slip back into that memory. The way I watched the clock. My aunt’s words echoing in my mind. My screams to stop. How they looked at me, concern etched on their faces... but did they...? The memory shifted as I remembered, in the blurriness from those tears, the nurses turning away and looking to the lead doctor, asking if they should continue.

What did he say?

My forehead scrunched as I searched through the memory. That’s when the doctor’s eyes landed on me, a grimace across his face as he shook his head. “*No, the damage is too extensive. Call time of death.*”

And then everything went black.

I opened my eyes, my lip trembling. “Mommy?”

She studied my face and then nodded, weaving her hand through my hair.

“That’s right, sweetheart,” she said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

It wasn’t my fault...

A sob wracked my body as I crumbled into my mother’s arms.

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Chapter 35

I looked at Jodie. *Has she been talking since we sat down for lunch?* “Huh?”

“I guess we’re not talking today,” Jodie said.

“I’m sorry. I’m not good company right now,” I said, picking at the crust of my sandwich and pulling it away from the spongy center.

“That much was obvious by the lack of talking and eating.”

I frowned, setting my sandwich down. “Yeah, my stomach hasn’t been feeling too good the last few days.” And man, how long those days had been. After getting used to Bree being in my everyday life, having her gone made me off-kilter.

Jodie’s eyes remained on me as she took a bite. I knew the question was coming before she even asked. “So, are you ever going to tell me what happened?”

“No.”

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She nodded as she took another bite, the gears turning in her eyes. Allowing her imagination to run wild was probably not the best idea, but honesty wasn't my friend lately.

"Is it about Bree?" she asked.

I sighed, placing a hand against my warm forehead. *Can a broken heart cause a fever?* "What part of 'I will not tell you what happened' made little sense to you?"

Jodie pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow, her eyes flashing a warning. "I'm going to let that cheekiness slide since you're going through something right now, but let's try not to alienate your best friend, hm?"

My jaw clenched. *She has a point.*

Jodie looked off to the other side of the quad and said, "Speak of the devil."

My gaze followed hers and found Bree sitting on the grass close by... with Kris, the friend who was into her. My eyes flicked over to the rest of the group at their normal table and back again to Kris and Bree.

"What the fuck?" I asked.

"Oh, bleeding hell," Jodie said.

"What?" I glanced at Jodie. "What is it?"

"Um, maybe you should keep your eyes on me."

"What does that mean?"

I shook my head when she didn't respond and turned to assess Bree and Kris. Although I vaguely heard Jodie object, I was a woman on a mission—I needed to know.

And I wasn't ready for what I saw.

Bree was smiling. Maybe a little too much. But that wasn't enough reason to freak out. The blush spreading across her cheeks, however, made me pause. For maybe a little too long. Long enough to assume.

She never blushed unless she was with me.

That was when I saw it. Kris' fingers intertwined with Bree's. In my head, the assumption became fact.

My stomach dropped. Kris looked longingly at my girlfriend, her thumb tracing over the top of Bree's hand. What used to be an image that comforted me now made me sick—instead of picturing our hands, all I could see was theirs.

While this evidence was damning enough, it didn't seal the deal until I forced myself to look at Bree.

Yep. She was smiling. And still blushing.

Everything that used to be mine.

Used to be.

Fuck.

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I think I heard Jodie say something in the background. She may have even grabbed my wrist to stop me. I may have shoved her off.

Without knowing how I got there or how fast it happened, I towered over Bree and Kris. Huffing. Panting, maybe? Either way, it wasn't attractive in the slightest.

"What the fuck, Bree?" I asked.

Bree's hand shot out of Kris's and she tucked it under her butt. "Excuse me?"

"So, this is how it goes, huh? Real fucking classy," I said.

Bree's eyes widened, her blush deepening. She glanced at Kris, apologizing under her breath as she stood up. She grabbed my hand and yanked it as she led us away from most of our classmates' eyes.

"Wouldn't want them to know you moved on that quickly, would we?" I asked.

Once we'd gotten far enough away from everyone, Bree dropped my hand and spun around. Her face was beet red and livid. "What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

"I should ask you that," I said. "Jesus. It's only been a few days and you're already with Kris?" I crossed my arms over my chest, glaring at her. If Kris had been anyone else, I probably would've kept my big mouth shut and remained with Jodie, but because it was Kris, the betrayal felt larger and my fuse was shorter.

"With Kris? Jesus, Kendra! Do you think I would do that? Is that what you think of me?"

I frowned as a part of me wavered. *How is this getting turned around on me? She's the one in the wrong—not me.*

"Well, how do you explain you two holding hands?" I asked.

Bree's eyebrows arched. "Wow. That, my dear, is called being a good friend." She exhaled quickly as her nostrils flared. "Not that you deserve an explanation after that ridiculous display, but they admitted Kris' mom to the hospital last night with sepsis. It's serious. She could die. I stopped by the hospital to offer my support."

Conflict stirred in my heart as I couldn't help but identify with Kris on some level. I knew just how much that could fuck with someone.

"I—I'm sorry to hear that," I said, my thoughts venturing into dangerous territory about my dad in the hospital. I pressed a palm against my forehead. *This isn't about Kris' mom or my dad—I have to know what's going on.* "You—you were blushing."

She threw her arms. "I was blushing because she was thanking me for being such a good friend to her and it embarrassed me!"

My frown deepened. As her words started to make sense, I couldn't look her in the eye. I made a scene in front of the entire student body... for nothing. She wasn't cheating on me. *Fuck... I'm an idiot.* I stared at my feet. "I—I thought—"

"You thought wrong," Bree said. She let out another exasperated noise, kicking her foot against the ground. "Dammit, Kendra. What am I supposed to tell them now, huh? Everyone saw. Jesus."

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"I'm sorry," I said, bringing my gaze to hers. "I—I told no one about what happened between us, promise."

"Well, that would be all good and dandy if you hadn't just lost your shit on me in the quad of all places." Bree glared at me.

The longer this exchange went on and the more Bree looked at me that way, the worse I felt. I was already in the doghouse, but this was different—I'd dug myself in deep and I wasn't sure how to pull myself out.

"I'm sorry," I said, reaching for her hand.

She pulled her hand away when my fingertips grazed it, taking a step back. "No. You don't get that right now. That time I needed? I think it just got extended."

"Come on, Bree. I didn't realize," I said.

Shit. Tears slid out of my eyes. At school. *This is fucking great.*

Bree stared at the ground. When she finally looked up, her expression softened. She shook her head sadly and her voice matched it. "I know this is scary, but really, Kendra? I didn't realize you were a jealous person."

I hastily wiped the tears off my cheeks and frowned. "I didn't either. This, um, was a first." Which was true. I'd never really been jealous around Tyler when he'd talked to other girls. Even if they flirted with him. I'd smirk, knowing I had nothing to worry about. *Did I not care then because he's a guy, or am I only a jealous, crazy person now because I'm already a wreck?*

Bree watched me for a moment and then nodded. "Good to know, I guess." She looked off to the quad. "God, I don't want to go back out there."

"We, uh... we could stay here and talk?" I asked.

Bree's eyes shot back to me. "Really? Did you not just hear what I said?"

I guess not. My frown grew.

"I'll let you go," I said, stepping aside to give her room to pass and pressing my back against the wall.

Bree kept her eyes on me for a moment longer, and then resolve settled across her face as she brushed past me on her way to the quad. She walked back to her friends' table where Kris was now sitting. When Bree reached the table, she sat down next to Kris and squeezed her hand. She appeared to be apologizing. A part of me wondered if I should do the same but I couldn't find the courage to do so.

It took a while before I returned to Jodie because I was ashamed of all the eyes on me. When I finally gathered the courage, I kept my head lowered and hurried across the grass. I only looked up once I reached her and exhaled anxiously, plopping down on the ground. When I picked up my messed-up sandwich and took a bite, Jodie watched me. She was about to say something, but I held up a hand to stop her.

She didn't need to say a word. I realized what I'd done.

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* * *

When I sat down at the overlook, I pulled out my English homework and worked on the find-the-adverb game, which was proving futile with how scatterbrained I was. After the exchange with Bree in the quad, I didn't have any hope that she'd find me, and everyone else was avoiding me like the plague, so might as well get some shit done.

"Jesus, you look like shit."

I looked up, surprised to see Tyler's face. "Gee, thanks?"

"I'm just kidding," he said. "Okay, maybe not. What happened to you?" Without waiting for an invitation, he threw his hall pass to the ground and plopped down beside me. Crossing his legs at the ankles, he leaned back on his elbows.

"You mean you didn't see that?" I asked.

Tyler's forehead creased. "See what?"

Amazing. There's at least one person who didn't see me go down in a blaze of glory.

I studied him, wondering if the moment we had weeks ago was a turning point for him. He wouldn't have checked in on me before that. The possibility sent a tiny thrill through my heart because I'd love to share pieces of our lives again.

I tested my theory. "Let's just say I fucked up. In more ways than one. But is that a surprise?"

Tyler shrugged. "Not really."

"You ass," I said with a laugh.

"It's your fault for asking."

A moment of silence passed between us as I gazed out at the soccer field where the freshmen were in their P.E. class. I flashed back to the look on Bree's face when she snapped at me at lunch... and the anger when she'd found out I'd lied to her. It was hard to remember the good moments when everything led to me sitting alone on this overlook.

"I don't know, Ty," I said. "Sometimes, I feel like I'm not cut out for this relationship crap."

"Why do you say that?" Tyler asked.

"I've made a mess of everything." I gave him a look. "We both know I wasn't a good girlfriend."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Oh, please," I said. "I complained all the time. I was a taker, not a giver. And so much more."

Tyler looked at the field. "Honestly, Ken, there will always be things we think we should've done differently. I feel the same way, you know. I think that's just a part of it." He turned to me, grinning. "Aside from the whole you-like-chicks-now thing. Fairly sure we couldn't get around that hurdle."

"Shut up." I chuckled, tilting my head, and watching the wind blow his bangs off his face. "You feel the same way?"

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“Yep. I feel like I wasn’t there enough for you after your dad died. Like I expected you to just be the way you were before,” he said. “Or how I wanted too much sex.”

“On the prowl for any lucky ladies?” I asked.

Just as I thought I’d turned the conversation from weird to weirder, the lopsided grin returned. “I may or may not have had a couple of dates.”

“Really?” I threw my homework down, flopping over onto my side so I could give him my full attention. I wasn’t sure if I was happy because him finding someone meant I could let go of the guilt I felt or because we could finally talk about this stuff without it being awkward. Maybe it was a bit of both.

“Don’t act so happy,” Tyler said.

“What? I’m a girl. Tell me everything,” I said.

He grinned and faced me. “Okay, but let’s make this clear—*you* twisted my arm.”

“Of course.”

Tyler took a deep breath. “Her name is Rachel. I met her after one of my basketball games. She goes to Calumet High.” His cheeks were tinged a light shade of red. “I accidentally threw the basketball at her face.”

“What?!”

He cringed. “I know, it was horrible; I apologized to her after the game. Next I knew, she asked me out.”

My eyebrow raised. “I like her already.”

“I thought you’d like that,” he said.

I’d made the first move on him a couple of years ago. Jodie may or may not have dared me, and one does not turn down a dare from Jodie Miller. Especially when one is as stubborn as I am.

“I couldn’t say no,” Tyler said. “It kinda sucks that I only get to see her sometimes after school or on the weekends, but I like her. I think she’s worth the effort.”

I smiled. “I’m happy for you, Ty.”

“Thanks, Ken,” he said. “I guess we both get our happily-ever-afters, huh?”

I went ten minutes without thinking about how Bree wasn’t speaking to me or how I’d single-handedly ruined the best thing in my life. My happily-ever-after may have already come and gone. A tightness settled over my chest as I thought about how we left things, the uncertainty threatening to strangle the breath out of me. But as Tyler watched me with expectant eyes, I did what I was so used to doing—I smiled, afraid to tell him the truth. “We sure did.”

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Echoes of Blue – Sample Testimonials

Echoes of Blue is a beautiful and poignant coming of age story. Keri weaves a bold story of heartache, love and the intricate ties that bind us to one another. Invoking both tears and laughter, Keri takes us on this multi-layered journey into the heart of a girl as she tries to find healing from her loss, and in the process finds herself as well. Touching, lyrical and well crafted, this story dives deep, pulling you into Keri's world of redemption and self-discovery that leaves you wanting more after the pages have stopped turning.

--Jennifer Pezzano, author of *Embrace* and *Light Amongst the Shadows*

it was paced perfectly, had brilliant description and a very readable, consistent tone. not to mention that it left me feeling like it was really worth reading, like the story was really going somewhere and what i had just read was close to perfect. you ended it leaving me wanting to read more but giving me just enough to satisfy me until the next chapter. i thank you for that.

--Lynn, reader on Fictionpress

You have to write more of this, it is brilliant and I don't say that about a lot of stories. There aren't many stories about lesbians on fictionpress, that are actually so true-life, so it's nice to see something different. I love your characters and look forward to reading more.

--DANI.CRIMSON, reader on Fictionpress

this is so beautifully written. I love the descriptions of their inner feelings. The fear, passion, even when they are unsure. I think it makes it very realistic. the confusion and turmoil countered by the calmness that only the one you love can bring to you...it just makes for a wonderful story. Can't wait to see more :)

--PHOENIX6787, reader on Fictionpress