

Barrett



The
Dreamcatcher

SUMMARY

High school is rarely easy, especially for a tall, somewhat gangly Native American girl. Add a sprinkle of shyness, a dash of athletic prowess, an above-average IQ, and some bizarre history that places in the guardianship of her aunt. Then normal high school life is only an illusion.

Kai Tiva faces an uphill struggle until she runs into Riley Beth James, the extroverted class cutie, at the principal's office. Riley shows up for a newspaper interview, while Kai is summoned for punching out a classmate.

Riley is the attractive girl-next-door-type whom everyone likes. Though a fairly good student, an emerging choral star, and wildly popular, she knows she'll never live up to her older sister. She makes up for it with bravery, kindness, and a brash can-do attitude.

Their odd matchup is strengthened by curiosity, compassion, humor, and all the drama of typical teenage life. But their experiences go beyond the normal teen angst; theirs is compounded by a curious attraction to each other, and an emerging, insidious danger related to mysterious death of Kai's father.

Their emerging friendship is tested as they navigate this risky challenge. But the powerful bond forged between them has existed through past lives. The outcome this time will affect the next generation of Kai's people.

THE DREAMCATCHER

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BARRETT



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Dedication

My parents, Peg and Jim Magill: You taught us well in the short time you had.

Acknowledgment

My journey as a writer has crossed the paths of so many inspirational and supportive people. With each new story I have new thanks to share.

This project was begun almost five years ago for fun. A dear friend and I shared ideas about some young women with uncommon adventures in a quiet Midwestern town. We wrote and shared excerpts on a regular basis trying to escalate the drama and humor. There was never any talk about publishing, but we did invent some other scenarios. I learned so much from that project.

The intervening years did not diminish my love for these characters. With a generous nod from my talented collaborator, I set about the task of preparing the story for submission. If you are reading this, you'll have already figured out that the astute publisher at Sapphire Books Publishing accepted the story and welcomed me into the talented and skilled family. The admirable story of Sapphire's growing influence in the writing community is one of hard work and determination.

Many thanks to my supportive friends, most especially my trusted Lodge sisters for their unflagging support.

To my editor, Heather: Thanks for the mind-meld and considerable skill to find the weak spots. . It was a pleasure to work with you. Thanks as well to the entire production team for their excellent support: Lori, Shawn Marie, Peggy, Chris (PR/sales), Sallyann, and anyone I may have forgotten.

To Chris: "Thank you" sounds too simple. I'm very grateful.

To Ann McMan and Treehouse Studio: Once again, my friend, you have brilliantly provided exactly what I wanted for my cover.

I want to add a very special thank-you to Susan X. Meagher for not only teaching me about humor, but very graciously allowing me to use excerpts from *Awakenings*, the first book in her *I Found My Heart in San Francisco* series. You are a generous friend and colleague.

Most of all, to my loyal readers: Through good times and bad, it's always been FOR YOU.

Disclaimer

This novel is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real people or places is unintended. The legends and Native American references are essentially fiction based on factual details.

The author regards the Lakota Sioux Nation with the utmost respect and admiration. Accordingly, a percent of the sales will be donated to a Standing Rock and Pine Ridge charity for the care of their children.

If fiction could come true, the souls of the warriors would return to help defend the the land for future generations. Absent that, it falls to the neighbors and friends of the indigenous people to help preserve their heritage.

In the Beginning...

Pale morning light slowly crept across the velvet sapphire sky. The White Crow Nation gathered in silence to sing the dawn. A fierce wind exploded from the west blowing dust and cold, and with it came billowing dark clouds that would threaten the breaking dawn.

Distant rumbles of thunder warned of a gathering storm, but this time, it was the Black Crow nation amassing and advancing toward the sacred eastern plains to regain power.

Since the beginning of time, forces representing Dark and Light sides of the Great Sioux nation battled for control. The struggle replayed with every generation, as new leaders came to power. In modern times, the war continued with clever medicine people using every trick to manipulate and gain more power.

The tribal elder sat high above the plain and waited. A young woman approached, leading her pony. "You asked for me, Grandfather?"

"Yes, Wind Horse, it is time," he whispered and extended his hand with a bundle wrapped in deerskin. "You must take this and ride east for seven suns. It will protect you until you can pass it on to a new generation. Our people will need a strong leader to defeat the dark forces of Black Crow. This Black Obsidian amulet must remain hidden from him until then. He cannot hurt anyone without this totem."

Without words, she accepted the bundle, mounted her pony, and turned eastward into the rising sun.

Chapter One

The last bell rang as Kai Tiva opened her locker, stuffed in her math book, and grabbed her peacoat. Ending the day with one of her best subjects was a good thing; she liked math, plus it was on the main floor. The first year at Lindan High couldn't have been better.

A loud noise followed by a yelp caught her attention, and Kai turned in time to catch Zach Coho shoving Johnny Little Elk into the lockers. *Damn it. I told him to leave that kid alone last week. And the week before that.*

She dropped her peacoat and ran toward the group of kids forming a circle. Over the hooting and yelling, she could hear Zach's sarcastic voice.

"Quit whining, you half-breed midget. Nobody gives a crap what you have to say."

"Leave me alone!" Johnny cried as Zach yanked away the backpack.

"Or what, you sniveling little mama's boy? What're you gonna do about it, call squaw momma?"

Zach swung the backpack and hit him just as Kai pushed through the students standing around taunting or watching in horrified silence.

"Let go of him, you feeble little dickweed. Why don't you pick on someone your own size?" She leaned down and pulled Johnny to his feet. "Are you hurt?"

The smaller student cowered by his open locker, crying. He shook his head and swiped at the tears with his sleeve.

Zach jeered at her. "Why should I listen to you, you big ugly redskin?"

"Because the last time you did this, I told you to stop so I didn't have to hurt you." Kai took a step closer to him.

Zach Coho was easily a foot shorter than she was, and teased her about it constantly.

He laughed. "And what's the gigantor dyke gonna do about it?" He shoved her.

Kai swallowed hard and her pulse pounded in her head. She looked around at the kids watching her. Anger bloomed and her arms tensed. Like a reflex, her right arm shot out and her fist slammed into Zach's face. She felt the snap of a breaking bone. Zach's eyes were wide and bright red blood ran across his lips.

The sudden silence got her attention. Then someone jerked her by the arm down the hall.

Mrs. Klein's bombastic voice shouted orders. "Someone take Zach to the nurse's office. You come with me."

Kai tried to pull her arm free from the vice grip of the school's iron-fisted enforcer and grumbled, "Why am I the one getting in trouble?"

"Because you're the one that hit Zach." Mrs. Klein gripped her arm tighter as she picked up her pace.

"Ouch!" Kai yanked again to no avail. "But he was bullying that kid—again. It wasn't fair and nobody was trying to stop him."

"Enough," Mrs. Klein said, opening the office door and pointing to a line of plastic chairs against the far wall. "You sit there and don't move until you are told to."

"I didn't do anything wrong." Kai groaned, and then huffed once as she slouched into the familiar chair.

Mrs. Klein stood at the counter, tapping her foot as she waited for the secretary to hang up.

The principal's office door swung open and he stuck his head out. "Call the vice principal and tell him I need to talk to him now." He stomped back in his office and Kai could hear him on the phone. "Yes, Miss Pettibone, I'm sure the rat's frightening, but I am sending Mr. Hammer to the cafeteria... No, I don't

think rats are that large but you just stay in your office...No, we do not need the police. Please try to stay calm.”

“I have Mr. Hammer on line one.”

“Jack, you have to get down to the cafeteria right now. Ms. Pettibone swears there is a rat as large as a house cat in the kitchen...Of course I don’t, but she’s hysterical...Yes, call animal control if necessary.”

The school secretary carefully hung up the phone and came over to the counter.

Kai didn’t know whether to laugh or be concerned. Rats in the cafeteria? Aunt Tilley would love to hear about that story.

“Adela, Ms. Tiva will need to speak to the principal. Again. She punched Zach Coho and may have broken his nose this time.”

Kai watched as Adela lifted a hand to her prim, red-rimmed mouth. “Oh, my. Again? It’s a good thing his father is a doctor.” She adjusted her glasses and nodded firmly. “I’ll make sure she speaks to Mr. Higgenbottom immediately.”

“Thank you, Adela. I would hope this is the last time I have to come down here.” Turning around, she cast a trouty glare. “Kai, this is your final warning. This kind of behavior will not be tolerated in this school. Next time you feel compelled to act like a vigilante, I will personally see to it that you are expelled. Do I make myself clear?”

Kai met the fishy stare with a dark look of her own as she warred with telling *Der Henker* what was really on her mind. *Right, that would get me expelled for sure.*

This was definitely one of those times where it is best to have half—or more—of the conversation in your head. Why would anyone take her word for it anyway? The Great Zach Coho never did ANYTHING wrong. Stupid waste of skin! Huffing a deep sigh of resignation, she looked down at the floor. “Yes, Mrs. Klein.”

Kai heard the door open, and looked up to see Riley James, easily one of the prettiest and most popular girls in her class, breezing in. *Shit. The only things I’m missing are zip-ties and an orange jumpsuit.* Her stomach knotted and her face burned as she tried to will herself invisible.

“Hi, I’m supposed to meet someone from *The Daily Herald Gazette*?”

Adela and Mrs. Klein turned in unison. Kai caught the starstruck look on Mrs. Klein’s face before she turned and cast a final withering glare at her.

“Adela, let me know if Mr. Higgenbottom needs to speak to me further about this incident.” She turned and marched priggishly to the door. With a supercilious smile she said, “Ms. James, you look lovely today, dear.”

“Have a seat, Riley.” Adela motioned to the chair next to Kai. “Mr. Higgenbottom is on a conference call, and the reporter from *The Daily Herald Gazette* is running behind.

“Okay, No prob.” She turned around and smiled brightly at Kai. “Hey, mind if I sit here?”

Kai looked up. “Um, okay. Yeah. Sure. You can sit here. By me. It’s okay. Really.” Her face flamed red as she forced herself to stop babbling.

Riley pulled her pink hoodie off, and sat down. She pointed to Kai’s right hand, leaned over, and whispered conspiratorially, “You know everyone’s talking about the girl that totaled Zach Coho with one swing. I’ve wanted to do that for such a long time.” Glancing at the desk, she whispered, “He’s in my homeroom. O. M. G. He is the meanest kid I’ve ever met. I’ve complained so many times, but my homeroom teacher never sees it.”

“Uh...” Kai rubbed her tender knuckles, and looked up at Riley and the prettiest smile. “Um...” She sighed. “Yeah, I know. He’s a total dickweasel and deserved it.”

Riley smiled brightly and offered her hand. "I'm Riley. I've seen you around, you're in Mrs. Klein's homeroom, but I don't remember your name."

Kai looked at the offered hand, then into Riley's eyes. They were a soft, mossy green, and had a slight impish gleam to them, "Uh. I'm Kai. Kai Tiva." She tentatively shook, and said a silent prayer that she didn't sound like an idiot.

Riley's smile brightened again. "I'm guessing that punch's the reason you're down here. Bummer. You deserve a medal because that little weasel deserved it. Probably more."

Kai couldn't stop the flash of a smile before a more serious expression pushed it away. "Yeah. Nobody will believe me, though. Zach is a total plank, but he gets away with everything at this school, the same as he did in junior high."

"Don't worry too much. The fact that he got punched out by a girl is making him look pretty lame right now. I think he's a serious tool, so do most of my friends. Is your hand alright?" She took Kai's hand and ran her thumb lightly over the scraped knuckles.

Kai's stomach tightened. She licked her dry lips. "It's, um, it's okay. I'm okay. You know. It's...it's fine."

Kai saw the hallway door open and a tall blond boy walked in and set a stack of papers on the counter. "Mr. Pedersen told me to bring these down to be copied." As he turned to leave, he smiled and nodded. "Hey, Riley. 'Sup?"

Riley released Kai's hand, and looked up briefly. "Oh, hey, Brock. Nothing much." She turned back to Kai, her eyes wide. "Hey, I just remembered where I saw your name. OMG! You're the one with the highest score on the National Science Exam, totally awesome!"

Kai flushed a bright red, and looked down at her raw knuckles, flexing them, then back to Riley. "Yeah. It was luck, mostly."

"Hey, Riley, I'll see you later, okay?"

Riley gave Brock a quick nod, and turned back to face Kai. "Seriously? That test was so hard. I did okay on most of my tests, but I totally hate science and bombed, majorly." She tilted her head, and gave Kai a look. "You must be pretty smart."

Kai swallowed hard, feeling suddenly very exposed, and murmured, "Not really."

The principal's door flew open, "Adela, is that reporter—" He stopped in mid-sentence and looked blankly at Kai, then Riley, then back to Kai. He cleared his throat. "Is that reporter here yet?"

"No, Mr. Higgenbottom, he's running late, and should be here soon."

Mr. Higgenbottom looked at his watch and sighed dramatically as he adjusted his baggy pants. "Well, Ms. Tiva, I don't know exactly why you're here but I'm quite sure it could have been avoided."

Adela puffed up. "Um...Mrs. Klein reported that Ms. Tiva...well, she punched Zach Coho in the nose. May have broken it."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, groaned, and gestured to his office. "Come in so we can get started."

Kai looked forlornly at Riley then back to Mr. Higgenbottom. "Yes, sir." She stood and strode into the office as Mr. Higgenbottom followed and slammed the door solidly.



Riley cringed when the door slammed. Mr. Higgenbottom was always going on and on about his "Creatively Resolving Conflict Program," but she suspected that Kai tattooing Zach with a right jab wasn't what he had in mind. *God, I hope she doesn't get in too much trouble for teaching that punk a lesson.*

She watched the second hand on the Regulation school clock that now read 3:15. Riley wished she hadn't agreed to the stupid interview, but she was determined that her performance in the Winter Fest Concert would be even better than the one her sister—the favored child—had “starred” in last year. And if that meant singing “O Holy Night” and talking to a dumb reporter...then she'd sing “O Holy Night” and talk to the dumb reporter.

She bit her bottom lip and mentally rolled her eyes. There was never any doubt that her sister, Rebekah, was her parent's favorite. In fact, until she was ten, Riley swore they'd adopted her. Rebekah is the pretty one. Rebekah is the smart one. Rebekah has all the boyfriends. What-EVER.

“Rebekah stuffs her bra,” she mocked under her breath.

Mr. Higgenbottom's voice was getting louder. *Bummer*. Riley cringed and looked at the door and thought about the girl she just met. When she watched her walk into the office, Riley was astounded by Kai's height. She was taller than Mr. Higgenbottom. But there was something else about her, something different. She wasn't as scary as everyone made her out to be. In fact, she seemed kinda shy, but in an alternative, cool kinda way.

The volume inside the principal's office increased even more. Riley crossed and uncrossed her legs, then began tapping her fingers on the arm of the chair. It wasn't fair that the only person who stood up to Zach Coho was getting in this much trouble. She glanced at the desk and saw the secretary hang up the phone. Without another thought, she stood up. She started toward Mr. Higgenbottom's door.

“Ms. James! You can't go in there.”

“Excuse me, Adela, I don't mean to interrupt, but I just have to say something.”

“Ms. James, this does not concern you.”

“You know what? It does. It concerns me and every other student at this school who's seen the bullying that goes on, especially by Zach Coho. He taunts every kid that is smaller, handicapped, or different than he is. Today was Johnny Little Elk. Not only is he Native American, he also has trouble hearing. It's at least the second time I've seen Zach pick on him. Even the upperclassmen have commented on it.” Riley knew her voice was loud enough to be heard inside the principal's office by now.

Adela began Xeroxing the papers on the counter. “Ms. James, that's enough. It's not a matter we should be discussing.”

Riley crossed the office until she was standing in front of her desk. “It should be the topic everyone is discussing. Why should one of Johnny's classmates have to defend him when the teachers should be doing it?” Riley slapped her hand on the counter. “If it wasn't for Kai—a freshman girl—Johnny would probably be the one at the nurse's office, while Zach was off bragging to his friends.”

Adela's face paled in shock, her shoulders sagged. “I appreciate you offering your opinion, and I will make sure the principal is aware of your concerns. I think you should return to your seat now.”

Riley could feel her pulse pounding in her neck; she knew she'd said more than enough. “Alright, I'll go, I just wanted you to know what was going on.” She returned to her chair. It was embarrassing, but she felt good about speaking her mind.

The hallway door banged open, startling her from her thoughts. A skinny, bald-headed guy dropped a notebook on the floor as he tried to shove a camera back into the case. His nerdy glasses were crooked on a really long nose, and he had an oily, thin little mustache. *Oh God, that has to be Clark Kent*.

He approached Adela's desk. “Um, hello, my name is Tyrrell Burbinder from *The Daily Herald Gazette*. I'm looking for...” He fumbled with a notebook. “Riley Beth James.”

Riley groaned and wanted to slink under the chair.

“Mr. Burkbinder, we’re so pleased you could make it,” Adela said with great relief as she pointed. “This is Ms. James. Riley, this is Mr. Burkbinder from the newspaper.”

Riley stood up, grabbed her jacket, and slung her backpack over one shoulder. “Hey. Nice to meet you.”

Adela came out from behind the counter and pointed to a ledger on the counter. “The principal arranged for you to use the conference room across the hall. If you’ll just show me photo identification and sign in, I’ll get your visitor’s badge and escort you. Mr. Higgenbottom will join you both as soon as he’s available.”



Kai grimaced when Mr. Higgenbottom slammed his fist down on the metal desk. “THIS.” Slam. “MUST.” Slam. “STOP.” Slam. “Do I make myself clear?” His face was purple, and his puffy frogeyes looked like they were about pop out of his head.

Kai nodded.

“No, Ms. Tiva. I want to hear you to say it out loud.”

She set her jaw and stared at him. His comb-over was standing up like Snookie’s poof, it kind of looked like a hairy door to his brain. *Serves him right.* A big part of her wanted to just get up and walk out, but that would get her expelled for sure. *I don’t want to get expelled, Aunt Tilley will totally freak on me.* She sighed.

“I’m waiting, Ms. Tiva.” He reached up and smoothed his comb-over back into place, then steepled his pudgy fingers in front of his nose.

Kai bit her bottom lip and took a deep breath. “Yes, sir.”

A dark look crossed his face, but his voice was calm. “Yes, sir, what?”

Kai mentally rolled her eyes. “Yes, sir, I understand that any further violence will not be tolerated...even if I am only standing up for a special needs kid that Zach Coho is emotionally, verbally, and physically bullying.” She met his eyes, and returned his dark look.

He took a deep breath and sat back in his chair, watching her carefully. “Kai, what Zach Coho does or does not do is of absolutely no concern to you.” Kai started to protest, but he raised a finger to silence her. “In the future, you will take your concerns up with one of the teachers or with me, but you will not take justice into your own hands. If it happens again, you could be expelled, and if that happens, you will not come back for the remainder of the term. That means you fail your classes and you don’t play basketball. Do I make myself clear?”

This was her third time in Mr. Higgenbottom’s office this semester, and every time it was because of that tumor, Zach Coho. She could tell Higgenbottom was super serious this time, and it kind of scared her. She looked down at her lap and nodded. *Zach wins again. Big surprise.*

“All right then.” Mr. Higgenbottom picked up a pen and started scribbling furiously in her student folder. “Let’s talk about your punishment. I will talk to the teachers.” He sighed heavily. “But you will write an apology for assaulting Zach...before we’re all sued.”



Riley cut the interview short by telling the skeezy reporter she had cramps and had to use the washroom. She didn’t, but he didn’t have to know that. She waited awhile before scurrying back past the

conference room, and let out a sigh of relief that it was empty. As she rounded the corner to the main hallway, she saw her friends Amber and Meghan standing in front of the trophy case.

“Hey, guys.”

Amber put a hand on her hip and Meghan mirrored the move. “Riley, where you been, girl? Brock was waiting for you at your locker after last period.”

Riley shrugged. “Yeah, I know, but I had to go talk to some guy from the newspaper.”

“Too bad.” The two girls giggled in unison. “Hey, guess what? We totally got the scoop on Tiffany’s breakup with Devon.”

Riley mentally gagged. She could care less about why Tiffany broke up with Devon—again. “Cool. Hey, sorry I missed it but I really have to get home. Text me with the four-one-one.” She waved over her shoulder, and the two girls immediately started jabbering about cheerleading.

“Later guys,” she muttered as she continued down the hall to her locker. Most of the time she liked hanging out with her friends, but lately everything they did just seemed so stupid and juvenile. Tiffany was the worst, but since school started, she and ‘Devon The Boyfriend’ had been attached at the hip, so that at least made it a little easier. *Please get back together, if not for each other, for me.*

As she pulled her coat out of her locker, she noticed someone down at the end of the hall. There was no doubt who it was by the dark shaggy hair just visible above the top of the locker door. Riley snapped shut the combination lock and shrugged into her Mr. Rat backpack. As she got closer, she could hear Kai muttering to herself.

“Hey, you okay?”

Kai stuck her head around the locker door looking startled. Her dark brown eyes narrowed, then softened. “Oh...uh...hey.”

Riley leaned against one of the lockers. “Didn’t mean to freak you. Have you been in the principal’s office all this time?”

Kai looked down at her shoes as a shock of hair fell across her forehead. She brushed it back behind her ear. “Yeah, he made me write an apology to the dick Chiclet.”

“Wow. That royally sucks!” Riley said.

Kai closed her locker and buttoned her peacoat. She reached down and picked up her backpack. “Yup. Nothing I can do about it though.”

Riley laughed. “It won’t help, but I sure piled it on the poor receptionist. I’m sure there won’t be a smiling reception next time I go down there.”

Kai looked up. “That was you? I heard yelling and thought it was another potential kid ready to be expelled, or the skeevy rat they were all jacked about.”

“Is he expelling you?”

“No, but I really have to watch it.”

They started down the hall to the entrance. “Is someone picking you up? What rat?”

Kai shook her head. “Supposedly there was one in the cafeteria. And no, I usually walk home.”

“Me, too. My mom doesn’t get home till after four thirty.” Riley looked up at the tall girl striding next to her. *Man, she’s a giant.* “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Kai said with a shrug.

“How tall are you, Stretch?”

Kai grinned. “Five feet, fourteen inches.”

Riley groaned. “God! She makes me do math.”

Kai laughed and pushed open the door, then followed Riley through. “Which way do you go?”

Riley pulled out her mittens and pointed down the street. "That way. I live right off Tremont."

"Really? Cool, me too." Kai shoved her hands in her pockets. "I'm on Raand, by the park."

Riley looked and grinned, realizing the Kai was matching her much longer strides to her shorter ones. "I'm on Bellegrade. That's so wild. We only live like two blocks apart!"

Kai grinned back. "Yeah, I've seen you walking home before."

Riley threw her shoulder into Kai. "Really, you goof? How come you never walked with me before?"

Kai shrugged and stopped. "I dunno, I guess because you always have a bunch of friends with you."

Riley stopped and looked up into Kai's dark eyes. "Well, if it means anything, I kinda like talking with you a whole lot more than them."

Kai grinned from ear to ear.

A laugh bubbled out of Riley. "Dude, you really need to smile more, you know that, Stretch?"

A blush rose up Kai's neck.

Riley grabbed Kai's arm and pulled her down the street. "Do you walk to school in the morning?"

"Yeah." Kai nodded.

"Wanna walk with me tomorrow?"

"For realz?"

Riley pointed down the street. "I have to turn here. Seven ten?"

Kai nodded. "Yeah, sure. Okay. Seven ten."

Riley smiled and started walking. "I'll see you tomorrow at seven ten. Oh, friend me on Facebook, okay?"

Kai nodded and give a quick wave. "Okay, sure. See ya."

Chapter Two

“All right, what gives?” Riley’s mom slathered peanut butter on the newly popped toast. “This makes two weeks in a row that I haven’t had to nag you to get ready for school.” She narrowed her eyes and crooked an eyebrow. “You are going to school, aren’t you?”

Riley gulped the orange juice, zipped up her jacket, folded the toast in half, and grabbed her backpack. “Yes, Mom, I’m going to school. Sheesh. Why is it you always think I’m doing something wrong? Rebekah never got grilled like this.”

“You, young lady, are not Rebekah. Your older sister was very serious about school, and never gave me a reason to worry. Recently, you’ve done a complete one-eighty, and I’d like to know why.” Her mother stood with her arms folded across to her chest and glowered.

Riley hated that look. She shrugged. “It’s no big deal. I just found out that one of my friends from school lives over on Raand so we walk to school together. Is that a major crime?”

“Of course not,” her mother tutted. “It’s just curious how responsible you’ve suddenly become without threats or bribes.” She picked up her coffee cup. “What’s your friend’s name?”

“Kai Tiva. She’s in the same grade as me, but a different homeroom. I gotta go.”

Her mother’s brow furrowed. “Why does that name sound so familiar?”

Riley turned. “I don’t know, but I’ve gotta go. Bye, Mom.”

Riley didn’t expect the wind gust and the snow flurries that buffeted her, but she didn’t care as she jogged to make sure she wouldn’t be late. She liked having someone to walk to school with, especially Kai. The night before, they had IM’d till after ten. Kai was funny once you got to know her, but she was also really super smart. Well, smart and way shy. But that was cool too, because Riley didn’t have to pretend she cared about stupid stuff when they hung out. When Kai said something, it was usually for a reason. She smiled to herself. Kai also got nervous sometimes and babbled. That was kinda cool too, but she wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was her voice. It had a sing-songy sound and was kinda low pitched.

A smile bloomed on her face as she remembered the funny story Kai told her about showing up at basketball practice with her shorts turned inside out, and the epic ribbing she took from everyone. She giggled as she turned the corner and saw her gigantor friend waiting for her. She broke into a jog.

“Hey, Stretch. G’morning,” Riley said as she deliberately bumped into her.

“Watch it, Shorty. Do you want to knock me over?” Kai grabbed her arm to keep them from veering into the bushes.

“Sorry if I’m late. My mom went all five-oh on me this morning. Apparently, getting up on time is a big deal. Give me a break.”

“Tell me about it. My aunt thinks I’m going in early because I’m in trouble again.”

Riley laughed. “Don’t tell her you’re with me, she’ll know you’re in trouble.”

Kai snorted. “Yeah, hanging around with you is totally wrecking my rep.”

As they approached the school, Riley saw Kai stiffen. Lately they’d both been getting teased by some of the kids. Their height difference was always good for a few lame jokes, but some of the cracks were starting to get mean, especially the ones making fun of the fact that Kai was a tomboy, was Native American, dressed weird, and played on the basketball team.

“Hey, Riley, that your new boyfriend?” The group of boys obstructing the hall burst into hysterics as Brock looked on and said nothing. “Do you call her Tonto or Toto?” A chorus of hoots followed.

She saw Kai's fist clench. "Just ignore these dickheads," Riley whispered hotly as she shot them the bird, then elbowed through the group.

When they got to Riley's locker, she said, "Hey, I've got choral practice this afternoon, so I'm gonna be here late."

A nod. "That's okay. I have b-ball practice, and if I finish up early, I'll just go to the library for a while and study. I don't want you to have to walk home in the dark by yourself."

Riley cocked her head as she grabbed her algebra book and shut her locker door. She looked up into Kai's sincere brown eyes. "That's really nice of you. Nobody's ever cared if I walked home alone before." She tugged the end of Kai's multicolored scarf. "Then I guess I'll see you later, Stretch."

A blush appeared on Kai's strong face, replacing the fierce look that had lingered.

"Yeah, I guess you will, Shorty. See ya."

Riley started to track down the hall and turned. "By the way, I didn't forget that you play Dalton Prep tomorrow. I'll be there."



Kai stood at the free-throw line and tried to focus on the two upcoming shots. They were up by three with forty-two seconds to go. A five-point lead was two possessions and a lot safer than a one-possession game, especially since their starting point guard was out of the game on fouls.

"We're shooting two," the official said as he handed her the ball.

She dribbled once. Twice. A third time, then twirled the ball once. She lifted the ball over her head and launched a soft rainbow that bounced off the rim onto the backboard, then in.

A roar went up from the crowd, and her teammates all stepped in and slapped her hand, then returned to their positions along the lane and at the half-court line. The official approached her again with the ball. "This one's in play."

She dribbled once. Twice. A third time, then twirled the ball once. She lifted the ball over her head, and heard a familiar voice. "YOU CAN DO IT, KAI!" She grinned to herself, and brought the ball back down into her dribble routine, then lofted a perfect swish.

As she ran to the baseline to get into position for the press, she glanced up in the stands and saw Riley jumping up and down furiously as she let loose with a piercing two-fingered whistle. Kai couldn't keep the wide grin off her face as she waved her hands in front of the player trying to inbound the ball over her. The much shorter girl tried a football throw over her head, but she jumped up and batted the ball to herself. As she wrapped it up and waited for the sure foul, she made eye contact with her new best friend in the stands and nodded.



The gymnasium exploded with cheers as the home team claimed the Lindan Holiday Tourney crown for the first time in more than a decade. Fans from the opposing team began to trail out as the Lindan High band stumbled through the school song in various stages of pep. The four cheerleaders did their best to encourage the students and parents to sing along, but the majority of the crowd was more concerned with scrambling down the old wooden bleachers to help their team celebrate the unexpected win.

Riley beamed with pride as she watched her classmates surround the suddenly popular Kai. She shook her head at how changeable everybody acted. Yesterday at lunch, a bunch of her friends were dishing about

how Kai's dad was a lame-o magician and one of his stupid tricks backfired and blew him up. They laughed, and joked that she should keep her distance just in case one of Kai's science labs went nuclear. Well, they could laugh all they want, because if Kai weren't such a good player, then they wouldn't have won the Lindan Holiday Tourney.

Riley made her way down the bleachers as the janitor and several teachers helped erect a small platform at the north end of the gym. Feedback from the microphone squealed through the large space, and Riley slowly pushed her way to the front of the crowd. She had gotten used to Kai's lanky form in her standard uniform of jeans and T-shirts, but she was surprised at how much different she looked in the gold and blue basketball uniform. She felt an unfamiliar swirl low in her belly as she took in the long, toned arms and legs of her friend. *Duh. Of course, she has arms and legs. She just looks so...well, geez, so not like anybody else.*

Kai raised a hand and waved, and a warm glow rippled through Riley. A giggle bubbled out as she waved back. It made her feel special that of all the people in the gym right now, Kai singled her out. Kai gave her the thumbs-up, and then lowered her head to say something to one of her teammates.

The microphone squealed again. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm David Graham, superintendent of the Lindan City School System. Thank you for supporting the Lindan City School System and all of our fine student-athletes and coaches. As many of you know, I've been affiliated with this school district for more than ten years, and I will tell you, it is my honor to present, for the first time, the Trophy for the Annual Lindan Holiday Tournament to Coach Logan and the Fighting Polecats of Lindan High." The superintendent hefted a large, gaudy trophy and handed it to Coach Logan, who was wearing her bright gold blazer.

Riley zoned out briefly as the coach rambled on about school spirit, the importance of teamwork, and blah blah. But her ears perked up when the superintendent picked up a smaller trophy, and said, "And I'm equally proud to award the Tournament MVP trophy to Kai Tiva of LHS." Without thinking, Riley let loose another loud whistle, and screamed, "Way to go, Tiva!"

The gym erupted again in applause as the tall, exotic-looking girl made her way to the stage. She shook hands with Superintendent Graham and accepted the trophy as he pushed the microphone into her face.

"Thank you, Mr. Graham. This should really be a team award. Thanks, Coach, for letting me play on your team." With that, she stepped back with her teammates.



Riley waited for Kai to change clothes and meet up with her in front of the gym by the weird blue polecat statue. As Kai jogged down the front steps, she brushed wet hair off her forehead and flipped her scarf around her neck.

"Way to go Stretch! I'm really proud of you," Riley said as she grabbed a friend's arm with both hands. "Wanna go celebrate? Pizza at Carmine's?"

"Cool. I'm starving. You sure your mom won't mind?"

"Nah, she has her DAR meeting on Saturday afternoons, and won't be home till dinner time. What about your Aunt Tilley?"

Kai beamed at Riley, "She's working, so I'm on my own. I just have to be home before dark."

As they sat in a booth near the back of the restaurant, Kai bubbled over with details about the game, and Riley listened with rapt attention because she'd never heard her friend so stoked. It was so cool to see Kai so unguarded and playful.

Riley took a sip of her soda as Kai plopped the last pizza bone down on the empty tray. "I can't believe how good you are," Riley said. She leaned forward and began folding and unfolding her paper napkin. "I've never really been into sports, but you know, it's kinda different when you know somebody on the team." She laughed and felt herself blushing. "Especially the most excellent player on the team."

Kai had pushed her plate away, and was leaning on crossed arms. She swallowed hard, and slowly moved her hand until one finger touched the back of Riley's hand. "I've played on a bunch of teams since I was a little kid. Anyway, I'm pretty sure this is the first time anyone has been there to watch me. I'm really glad we're friends."

Riley felt something funny in her belly when she saw the way Kai was looking at her. She turned her palm up, and Kai didn't pull away. "I know. Me, too." The fluttering was stronger, and it felt like her heart was going to beat out of her chest. She looked up to see Kai's dark brown eyes staring at her, and laughed lightly. "I really like you a lot."

Kai gulped so loudly Riley could hear it. Her fingers stopped moving and then she squeezed Riley's index finger. "Ri, I really like you a lot. Like, more than I've ever liked anybody." She pulled her hand away and grabbed her soda cup in a death grip.

Riley sighed with relief as a huge smile spread across her face. *That wasn't so hard. It was scary, but Kai feels the same way, so that's good. Right?* She curled her fingers into a fist to preserve the warmth of Kai's touch.

Kai slowly looked up and their eyes met. They didn't speak, but Riley knew they were still somehow connected. It felt cool but it kinda weird at the same time.

She had all kinds of friends, but she'd never told anyone she liked them. Ever. The truth was, she really did feel closer to Kai than anybody, even more than her sister. And when Kai had touched her hand, it made her stomach get all tight and tingly inside. It was a feeling she really liked.

Kai walked her all the way home, the long way. While neither one said anything more about their conversation, they playfully bumped shoulders and agreed to IM after dinner.

Chapter Three

Sunday felt like the frickin' longest day in the world. Kai slept in until almost eleven, and then tried to focus on doing homework but she couldn't. Then she tried getting into a good game of *Portal 2*, and then *Deus Ex*, but they both seemed just as pointless. She even thought about doing some laundry. It felt like she was coming out of her skin. She'd probably checked her phone and Facebook page every ten minutes since noon, hoping for another message from Riley.

She picked up her phone and let out a deep sigh. Nothing since

Riley: TTYL. Mom on rampage.

The longer she waited, the more she paced. *I bet Amber and Meghan came over to listen to music.* She threw a dart at a picture of Mrs. Klein on the back of her bedroom door. No, Tiffany probably invited her out to a movie. *Stupid Tiffany, with her stupid whiney voice and her stupid Nicole Scherzinger boob job!* She threw another dart that missed far left and bounced onto her bed. "Dammit!" She sighed again and threw her head back.

She picked up her iPod, slipped the ear buds in, and selected MCR's "The Black Parade." A couple of days ago, Kelly, the point guard, asked her if she knew if Riley and Brock Jones were hooking up. Kai let her know Riley wasn't really into anybody.

Still, Kelly swore that Riley and Brock were making out at Amber's birthday party right before Thanksgiving.

A sick feeling swamped her stomach.

Sometimes Riley took hours to IM back. She always said it was because her mom was on a bitch-bender about something. She yanked the ear buds out and tossed the iPod on her desk. MCR was just depressing her more, and she sighed heavily. *No wonder Brock is always staring at her with that stupid look on his face.*

She picked up her dad's old goat head drum and drumstick, and started a soft, familiar rhythmic beat. It was a simple, redundant harmonic that instantly starting soothing her jagged emotions.

What did Riley really mean yesterday when she said she "liked" her? Did she mean she "liked" her liked her, or did she mean she simply liked her? The drumming took on a slightly different timbre as she closed her eyes and focused inward.

I don't want Brock looking at her like that. It's creepy, and I want to punch him out. The timbre changed again. *Riley deserves more than a spoiled rich kid with Bieber swag who smells like a goat.* Her breathing slowed but the drumbeat remained steady. *The truth is, I really like her. More than a friend. I think about her all time. Everything is tied to her. When I'm with her, I want to touch her. No, more than touch her. I want to kiss her.*

The drumming stopped.

Kai opened her eyes, swallowed hard, and then took a deep breath. Lately she'd had to admit that she'd been having a bunch of girl crushes, but this thing with Riley was way beyond that. Way, way beyond that. She wanted to be with her all the time, and kiss her, and hold her, and she wanted Riley to want that with her. She looked down at the drum and set it back on her desk. Unexpected tears spilled down her face, and she angrily swiped at them with the palm of her hand. If she wanted to keep Riley as her friend, then

there was no way Riley could ever know how she really felt. Ever. A sob bubbled up from her chest, and she hurled herself onto her bed as harder sobs racked her body.



“I already cleaned up my room!” Riley screamed as she ran up the stairs. “Why don’t you just leave me alone?” She slammed the door, and then for good measure opened it and slammed it again, jarring three stuffed animals off her bookshelf.

Her mother’s voice echoed. “If you want to be in the Holiday show, young lady, you will get that room clean.”

Once the hot tears dried, she sat up and looked around. It didn’t look that bad. Sure, there were a few clothes on the floor and a pile of schoolbooks. The Holiday show was the biggest production her school did every year, and she really wanted to be in it. She sighed dramatically, then halfheartedly picked up two sweaters, folded them, and stuffed them into a drawer.

Her older sister, Rebekah, starred in the production her junior year. Of course, Mom and Dad still bragged about her amazing voice. “She sings like an angel,” she mocked. “Like Rebekah was better than Beyoncé or something. I sing better than she ever could, but does anyone ever notice? Nooo.”

She’d show them that she could do more than draw pictures and get passing grades.

Riley sighed and looked at the other twin bed, the one Rebekah slept in until three months ago when she went off to college. As much as Rebekah annoyed her and as much as she loved having her own room, it was pretty lonely. It had been really cool for the first week or so, but now she began to notice how much she missed her. Rebekah wasn’t all bad; she really was a pretty cool big sister. It wasn’t really her fault that Mom and Dad worshiped her. She picked up her stuffed Mr. Rat and squeezed him to her chest. *God! If it wasn’t for Kai, this would be the worst year ever.*

On impulse, she peeked out her bedroom door to make sure she could hear the TV set the living room, then grabbed her cell phone and closed herself in the closet as she dialed Kai’s phone number.

“Hey,” Kai said. Her voice sounded a little funny.

“Hey. It’s me, what’re you doing?” Riley whispered.

“Playing a game. Why’re you whispering?”

“I’m not allowed to talk to you until I get my room cleaned up. Stop laughing. It’s not funny.”

“Ri, it’s not that big a deal, why don’t you just do it?”

“Easy for you to say, Ms. I-Alphabetize-My-Locker,” she teased as she sat down on the laundry basket in the closet. “I wish I was a superhero and I could do this in three seconds.”

“Yeah. I’d help you if your mom would let me.”

Riley sat up as a grin blossomed across her face. “That’s a great idea, why don’t you just come over?” Riley chuckled.

“Because last time I did that she told me you were too busy and couldn’t have guests.” Her voice trailed off, and she said softly, “I don’t think she likes me.”

“Don’t be a goof. She’s stoked that my grades have been going up since we met.” Riley giggled. “She thinks you have some sort of magical powers. Hey! I’ve got an idea, bring your Earth Science book, and we’ll say we need to study for the quiz tomorrow.”

“We already did that Friday in study hall.” Kai’s voice trailed off again.

“I know, Kai, but Mom doesn’t. It’s perfect. You can help me clean my room, and if she comes up, we can be studying. Come on...it’ll be fun.” She waited a beat, but Kai didn’t respond. “Seriously, Kai, I really

have to get this done or she won't let me be in the Holiday production." Another silent beat. "And...I really want to see you today. Please?"

"Okay, Ri. Let me call my aunt and tell her where I'll be, then I'll head on over."

As soon as she had Kai's agreement to come over and hang out, Riley grinned widely and headed downstairs to find her dad. She could usually get his approval on things if she gave him a rational explanation.

"Hi Daddy," she called as she walked into the living room.

"Hi pumpkin, how's it going?" He muted the football game

She sat down on the arm of his chair. "I know Mom's upset about my room being a disaster area and everything and I'm almost done, but I also have to study for a science test. Can I have my friend Kai come over and help me? You know how smart she is."

He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose then sighed. "Honey, you know how your mom feels about having your friends over when you have things to do."

She grabbed his hand and squeezed. "Please, Daddy. You know how hard I'm trying to get better grades. I promise I'll get my room cleaned up, and we'll be really quiet. Please?"

Her dad chuckled then winked. "All right, all right, but you better not be getting me in trouble with your mother or I will disavow all knowledge of this conversation."

Riley threw her arms around her dad's neck. "I love you, Daddy, you're the best."

"Don't forget to clean the room!" he shouted as she sprinted upstairs laughing.

About the Author

After sixty years in the Midwest, Barrett packed up her life and her chocolate lab Murphy and moved to the high desert of New Mexico. With a long nursing career behind her, she began making up stories and writing them down.

Today, there are eight novels, two novellas, and a new one on the way. Retirement has been a good thing.

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