

K MY NAME IS  
**KENDRA**

KAMICHI JACKSON

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## DEDICATION

*To all the girls for whom a story  
such as this is not fiction*

*excerpt 1*

Meisha gets quiet again, and then she finally asks about Uncle C.J., which I figured she would get around to doing sooner or later.

“Has he been by lately?” she asks as she digs around in her purse. I get the feeling she doesn’t really need anything in there. That she just really wants to hear about him, but she’s playing it off like it’s a casual question.

I remember Daddy telling me once that Uncle C.J. had come as a complete surprise to Nana and Papa, who had married young, had kids young, and had already raised three by the time the doctor told them they were pregnant again with a fourth child. Daddy had only been married a few months himself when my grandparents called to say he was going to have a little brother. He and Mama helped take care of Uncle C.J. as if he was their own son, because it had been years since Nana and Papa had a small child in the house and it was flat-out exhausting, they said.

My uncle was still around a lot when Aris and Meisha were born within the next few years, so growing up, he was more like a big brother to them than an uncle. They were tight, the three of them, even after he went off to college. On breaks from school, he would spend part of his time with his parents in Virginia in the house we live in now, and part of his time with us in Connecticut, where we lived back then. I was really little at the time, a toddler, so I never really got to know him. But I’ve seen lots of pictures of the three of them together doing crazy stuff. And of him and Aris playing basketball and football with some of the boys from our old neighborhood. And of him and Meisha laughing. That I do remember — them laughing

together all the time like they shared some private joke no one else ever got. I remember that she would pronounce his name *seej* and he would call her *baby girl*.

By that time, he was beginning to make headlines for his football skills, and some of my relatives said he started to change. Started getting a little cocky, a little arrogant, Mama once told me. He lived with us for a minute the summer before his first season as a professional player. That was the last time I remember him being close with our whole family, though I know my brothers have kept in touch with him over the years. After that summer, no one spoke about him anymore. After that summer, the two sides of the family stopped hanging out together. I could never understand why. But it hits me now that whatever had happened to change the family had happened that summer.

"We don't see him too much," I say, trying to think of a way to change the subject because I don't want to talk about my uncle right now. And I definitely don't want to think about what happened the last time I saw him a few months ago.

He had come into town to do some pre-game interviews one Saturday and had stopped by the house early that morning to invite my father to go with him. Daddy was so excited that he didn't even answer his brother, but he was upstairs and in the shower within seconds. I don't think I've ever seen him move so fast in my life.

Mama was out grocery shopping that morning, Jada had gone to a slumber party the night before, and Philip had gone to watch Aris scrimmage with the All-City high school football team, so it was just me and Uncle C.J. in the living room once Daddy went upstairs. He sat down on

the couch beside me and started asking me how school was and what my favorite subjects were. He wanted to know if I had any hobbies and what I liked to do for fun. After I answered all his questions, he told me how much of a young lady I had become since he last saw me, which had to have been about three years ago, I think, because Mama always seemed to have something to do outside the house whenever he called to say he was in town and wanted to visit with us, and she always took me and Jada with her. Then he asked me if I had a boyfriend and I told him I didn't—that Mama was not having that. He laughed and said that with a body like mine, Mama was right to keep boys from around me. Something about the way his eyes dropped to my chest and then down to my hips made me really uncomfortable. I was glad I could use the excuse that I had to get dressed to meet up with Nita. I got out of there quick and fast.

"But he does come around sometimes?" Meisha presses.

"Every now and then," I say. I figure she must really miss him, so I promise to call her the next time he stops by.

She nods and then stares off into the distance like she's lost in a memory, probably thinking about all the fun she used to have with Uncle C.J. I promise myself right then and there that I'll never tell her about that day three months ago. Especially the part about him popping into my room a few minutes after I had left him sitting downstairs on the couch. He had claimed that he'd come up to see what was taking my father so long, and that it'd been so long since he'd been in the house he grew up in that he'd made a wrong turn at the top of the stairs. But the way he looked me up and down as I stood in the middle of my room in my bra and panties told me he was

no different than the boys Mama was trying to keep from coming around me. Then he had called me babygirl and asked me if I wanted to hang out with him some time. Stupid me said okay, because I just wanted him to leave.

He had stepped into the room instead, though, closing the door behind him softly as he mumbled something about giving me a hug because it would probably be a while before we would actually see each other again. I remember trembling as he held me because it just didn't feel right. He didn't do anything nasty to me. But he did hold me too close for too long, and his hands moved over my bare skin in too many different directions for an uncle hugging his teenage niece, especially when she's not dressed in anything more than a bra and panties.

We both heard the shower in Daddy's bathroom shut off down the hall, and that's when Uncle C.J. pulled away. He gave me a soft kiss on the cheek, put his finger to his lips as if to tell me we had some secret to keep, and then he was gone.

I'm not sure why, but I cried for half an hour behind that. I never told anyone about it. And I wasn't going to do it today, especially not to someone who loves him the way Meisha obviously still does. I can't break her heart like that. If she wants to see Uncle C.J. again, I will just have to put my personal feelings aside to make sure they get together to catch up on old times. More than anything, I want to see Meisha laugh the way she used to with him.

## excerpt 2

I know when I walk through the front door of my house an hour later that I'm in more trouble than I've ever been in my life.

It's not like I don't expect it. I mean, I did walk out of school in the middle of the day and disappear for hours without telling anyone where I was. But if I'm woman enough to do something so bold, then I need to be woman enough to deal with the consequences.

Even still, I wish there was a way I could sneak in and get up to my room before anyone notices. Of course, that's not going to happen, because Mama and Aris are standing in the kitchen when I come through the front door, and both of them are heated. Mama's eyes narrow when she sees me, and Aris has the same tight jaw and jumping vein in his temple as Daddy has when he's angry. The worst thing I can do right now is speak, so I just keep my mouth shut and wait for one of them to get it started.

"This can go a couple different ways," Aris says after a few moments. His voice is even and steady when he says it, and I tense up even more.

Meanwhile, Mama is standing a few feet away from him puffing on a cigarette. Mama hasn't smoked in years, mind you, but there she is with that stick between her fingers. And it doesn't look like it's the first one of the night either.

"The best thing you can do for yourself right now is just be real," Aris says. "Simple as that. Just be real."

He folds his arms across his chest and glares at me as if he's daring me to be anything but completely honest with him.



"I felt like I was going to lose it," I say quietly. "I felt like I was going to flip out, right there in class. I had to get out of there. I just had to go."

Aris shakes his head. "So you leave school grounds in the middle of the day? Just get up and walk out without talking to anyone to let them know you're in crisis?"

"It was stupid, I know, and I'm sorry," I say. "I wasn't thinking straight. All I could think about was getting out of there."

"To go where, Kendra?" he asks.

"I wasn't heading anyplace in particular when I walked out," I say, which is true, because I didn't get that text from Uncle C.J. until after I walked out. "I just had to get out."

Mama closes her eyes and turns away from me. She's taking deep, long drags on her cigarette now, and I can tell she's trying real hard to keep herself from exploding all over me.

"And where did you end up?" Aris asks.

I clear my throat, wishing I could think of something to say to stall the conversation, because it's about to get ugly.

"Um, what?" is the best I can do.

"Where did you end up?" Mama yells, pronouncing each word as if she's talking to someone who doesn't speak English. "You've been missing for hours, Kendra. It's almost eleven o'clock at night! And if you say you were with Nita or Meisha it is on, because I've already spoken with them both and you weren't with either one of them. So where have you been?"

I don't say anything. I can't say anything. I cannot tell them I was with Uncle C.J., because to admit that would bring on all other kinds of questions I don't want to answer right now.

"Girl, if you don't start talking," Mama warns.

I clear my throat again. "I can't say."

I don't hear much of the rest of the conversation. There's a lot of yelling, a little bit of crying, and at some point Mama says she already has enough to deal with right now without having to put up with yet another fast-tailed daughter.

This is the first time I've ever heard anyone say anything like that about Meisha. For a quick moment I wonder if Mama calling her fast-tailed had anything to do with why she left all those years ago. Maybe they even had an argument just like this one.

As for me, I don't like being called fast-tailed, especially when I've tried so hard to be what my parents want me to be. It hurts me. It hurts me really deep.

"If you have two fast-tailed daughters, Mama," I say before I can stop myself, "then maybe you ain't doing something right!"

She slaps me. Hard. Aris crosses the room and pulls her off me. I honestly don't know what comes over me, because I stand there and actually dare her to hit me again.

Philip comes running into the kitchen at this point and it takes both of them to drag her out of there. She's screaming hysterically, and the only words I can understand are that if I'm so grown that I can stay out all night, then I don't need to be living under her roof.

"Mama, where's she gonna go?" I hear Aris say, trying to reason with her as they struggle to keep her from coming back at me.

"She can go right back to where she just came from!" Mama yells loud enough so that I can hear her from the staircase. "Let her go right back there if she's so grown!"

So I leave.

I'm on the city bus for about an hour when Uncle C.J. calls to say good night. He asks how things went when I got home and I half-lie and tell him that Mama is mad but everything is cool. I don't want him to know what really went down because I know he'll tell me to come and stay at his place for the night, and I can't do that.

I don't know where to go, so I decide that I'll just ride the bus for as long as I can and then figure out what to do from there.

## About the Author

In addition to *K My Name Is Kendra*, Kamichi Jackson is the author of an eBook entitled *Where Present Meets Past* (2016) (originally available for exclusive download from Amazon.com as part of its now-defunct Amazon Shorts Program), the middle reader book *You're Too Much, Reggie Brown* (2000), a forthcoming adult novel entitled *The Brownstone* (2017), two unproduced screenplays, and several short stories. KJ has made numerous appearances in support of her work, among them the Baltimore Book Festival. The South Norwalk, Connecticut native currently resides in Northern Virginia with family and close friends.