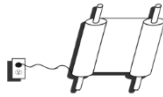


*The Bad Penny*

KERI BROOKS McWHORTER

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# *Dedication*

To my quiet mountain man.  
The way you love me inspires my stories.  
Our life is a romantic comedy.  
Also, I will punch you in the face.

*Books by*  
*Keri Brooks McWhorter*

Second Love in New York City  
The Bad Penny

*The Bad Penny*



# *Chapter One*

The pain from my fall finally surfaced. As I tried to push down my messy hair my fingers caught in the bits of my hair that stuck together with dried blood. My elbows and knees burned from the skin that had been torn off. My hands shook uncontrollably. I took a deep breath, and the smell of vinegar, bleach, and rubber took over my senses. The light above my head flickered and it distracted me momentarily.

I slowly and painfully walked closer to Jake's room hoping to hear and see something. The clean, pearl-tiled floor glistened back at me and I wondered how such perfection felt about carrying such dirty and damaged people on its surface.

A bright penny shone up at me. It looked new, clean, without blemish. I picked it up. If only I could start new.

A nurse passed me by and then turned back to put her hand on my shoulder. "Have you been seen yet, ma'am? You are apparently injured." She looked me over quickly. "What's your name?" she removed her hand and patiently waited for my response.

"I...my name...I just need to check on my friend...is he okay?" I slowly walked closer to his door.

The nurse looked at me and then back to the room. She turned



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and entered Jake's room and I followed, stumbling, close behind. I waited just inside the door and that's when I heard the doctor explain to Jake's parents that he was dying.

Dying. He was dying. It was like a slow-motion tornado coming at me and I was powerless to stop it.

"We did all that we could during surgery, but he'll be lucky to survive through the night," the doctor said.

The list of problems blurred after that, time slowed, the smell of vinegar and rubber gloves solidified in front of me. I was choking on them. Broken bones, internal bleeding then everything went black.

"She has some cuts to the head, let's get her set up for a CT."

I sat up in a bed, in my own room and watched as a nurse was examining my bumps and bruises. "Hey, what's going on? Where's Jake?"

It was the same nurse. It looks as if she had cut off all of my clothing now and was looking me over thoroughly.

"I'm Lynette." She smiled. "You have some injuries we just want to check out and make sure you're all right. Jake is just down the hall."

"Will he be all right?" I already knew he wasn't, I heard it with my own two ears. But I wanted her to tell me that he miraculously survived, and we could go back to the ranch shortly. "I need to see him."

Just then, Bill and Jennifer, Jake's parents entered the room. "Lexi, are you okay? You fell hard."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what happened." I cried.

Jennifer grabbed my hand. I could tell she had been crying. Hard. Her eyes were red and swollen. Bill put his hands on Jennifer's shoulders and looked over at me with a smile.

"She'll be all right." The nurse chirped in trying to cover me

as much as possible with the thick hospital blanket. “She’s mostly bruised and has a few good gashes that have already been sewn up and tended to. We’re running a few more tests just to make sure nothing else is going on.”

And then it happened, the tears, the choking up, the ugly cry. Jennifer held me tight and I bawled into her shoulder. Bill tried to hug me from the side but mostly he was hugging Jennifer. “It’s not your fault, Lexi.”

That made me bawl more.

“I want him to be all right.” I whimpered out.

“He’s asking for Lexi. Just Lexi, alone,” said a male nurse in the doorway.

He had some charts in his hands and looked like he was in a hurry.

“Is he going to be okay?” I mustered out from behind my tears. Why did I keep asking a question I knew the answer to, and why didn’t this nurse care as much as I did?

All eyes were on me and I immediately tried to sit up.

“Wait, wait, let’s get you cleaned up first, and get a gown on you and then I’ll help you to see Jake, all right?” Lynette put her hand over mine.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun seeped through the blinds and I could see the dust particles gently move in front of the window. I put my hand on the bed next to his foot and gingerly moved my way up to his damaged face. He still looked handsome under the swollen blue and red bruises. I carefully touched his hand. “Jake, I’m here.” I whispered.

His eyes opened slowly. “Lex, are you okay?”

“Way better than you.”

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I could see the side of his lip go up just a little. He grunted in pain trying to move his body slightly.

“Oh, Jake, I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. I should never have...” I was now softly grasping his hand.

“Lex, listen. This isn’t your fault.” His voice sounded so deep and groggy. He took in a few breaths before he continued. “You are my best friend and...” Small breath, small breath. “I need you to marry me.” Small breath, small breath.

“What, Jake, what? This is no time to joke around.”

Jake had probably asked me to marry him a dozen times. He wasn’t serious. We were just friends. Best friends.

“Lexi, my lawyer is coming now. I am going to do everything I can to...make it before...he comes.” Small breath, small breath. “If I die, the ranch...goes to Macey...”

“What!” I didn’t even realize how loud I was. I tried to calm myself down. Small breath. Small breath.

“Why me? Anyone else would be a better choice,” I almost pleaded.

“My will specifically states that it will go to Macey...even if she...is my ex. If I remarry...” he paused for a few short breaths and then closed his eyes for a moment... “and only if I remarry, then it will go to my new wife.” He coughed after working so hard to get that out. “If I try and leave it...to someone else...she will fight...and she will win. It must be a marriage.”

I had so many questions but refrained, letting his body and mind rest.

Jake groaned as he tried to turn his body slightly. “I trust you Lexi, this is the easiest way. Please.” He took a short breath and then closed his eyes.

“We just need to wait, Jake, everything is gonna be fine, you’ll be all right, Jake, you have to be all right.” I was

practically kneeling by his side. My face dug into the blankets between his arm and body. “Jake, you can’t go.”

“Lex, please listen.” Small breath. Small breath. He coughed a few times before he began again. “I’m divorced from Macey, but the will...still...has her name on it. He paused and tried to clear his throat unsuccessfully. “The only way to prevent it...”

He paused for so long, I thought he had stopped breathing. “Jake.” I pulled my head up to look at him.

“You have to marry me, now, Lex, please...do this for me.” Big breath and then a cough. A series of coughs.

“Okay Jake, I’ll do it, I’ll marry you, just please don’t leave me.” I softly kissed his cheek. And turned to see his parents standing in the doorway.

“Did he just ask what I think he asked?” Jennifer asked.

“Yes. We need a priest or a rabbi or a Bishop.” I yelled hoping to catch the attention of someone in the hallway.

Bill ran out asking everyone in scrubs. Jennifer moved to the other side of Jake and kissed his bruised fingers and hand. “Oh, my boy, you finally got the girl.”

I didn’t even want to think about what she meant. I looked up and out the window. “Dear God in heaven, if you can hear me, please don’t let this man die, I will do whatever you ask, please, he is my best friend.” I continued to pray in short bursts of mumbling.

“Are you mumbling again?” Jake whispered.

I smiled at his sense of humor. He hated it when I mumbled and always called me out on it. I couldn’t help myself. I’ve been mumbling since childhood.

“You hold on Jake, I will never mumble again, EVER, in my life if you just stay with us.” I took the new penny out of my pocket. It looked extra shiny in my still somewhat dirty, blood-

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covered fingers. I slid it under his pillow, desperate.

Jennifer smiled and once again I could see the corner of his lips crease up just a little.

Lynette walked into the room. I hadn't noticed before but her scrubs were Halloween kittens, even though it was July, and she had the kindest, most sweetest smile. "Your lawyer is here; he brought along a priest and the county clerk."

I looked over at the county clerk's familiar face. "Bo, it's good to see you."

He nodded and was shaking a little at the sight of his childhood friend on the bed.

"Worth every penny," Jake mumbled out to his lawyer who was now standing in the doorway.

## Chapter Two

I looked in the bathroom mirror. If someone had handed me a picture of me in this moment I don't think I would recognize myself. I tried to wash the rest of the crusted blood off of my face. I wet down the crazy pieces of my hair. I twisted it into a messy bun atop my head. I straightened my hospital gown as if it would somehow make a difference. A priest entered Jake's room just as I finished my impossible task and left the bathroom. I stood next to Jake and put my hand ever so softly on top of his.

I don't even remember what he said. I got lost in everything that happened and everything that would change if he was gone. "You are now husband and wife, you may kiss the bride."

Jake didn't move or even open his eyes. Maybe he didn't even know we were married now. I let go of his hand.

"What kind of wedding ends with no kiss?" he mustered out.

I leaned over to kiss his cheek, and Jake slowly turned his head so I would kiss his lips. I did.

"You'll be okay now Lex, don't worry." Jake said and then he seemed to disappear.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next two days were a blur. Whether it was the penny or

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an answer to prayer, I didn't know, but Jake made it through the night, and then the next one.

I had my own tests and scans to make sure I had no internal bleeding or head injuries. I luckily only had a lot of scrapes and bruises; some I didn't even know were there unless I bumped them.

They put Jake in a medically induced coma, and told us, again, that he probably wouldn't make it. This was the last hope. We tried to prepare ourselves for the worst.

After I was discharged, I continued to spend most of my time sitting with Bill and Jennifer next to Jake. We cried off and on and shared funny stories in between. Sometimes minutes and hours would pass in silence. "He really loves you, you know." Jennifer broke the two-hour silence.

I nodded my head.

"I could always tell by the way he talked about you."

I nodded my head again.

"I'm just sad it took you two a whole three years to figure that out." Bill said.

"We told him not to wait too long or you might move on to someone else," Jennifer said.

I was at a loss for words. I started to mumble, trying to make sense of the last three years. We just barely became good friends this past year and then most recently the best of friends. But we weren't in love. He flirted with me sometimes, but he flirted with lots of girls. Right? I looked back up to Jennifer and Bill. They lovingly smiled at me. They think we're in love, that I married him because...

"Bill, Jennifer, I think there has been a misunderstanding. I think you should know that Jake is just my best friend, we weren't planning on marrying..."

“Like this, we know Lexi. You don’t need to explain anything. When Jake is better, we will plan a huge reception for the two of you.” A tear fell down her face. “We’re just grateful we have a daughter now, too.”

And there it was. All the guilt came over me like a wet hospital blanket. Their only son was going to die and it would be all my fault. I couldn’t tell them. If they needed to believe we were in love and I was their daughter, then I owed that to them.



## *About the Author*



Keri Brooks McWhorter is a sixth generation native of Chandler, Arizona. Her mother fed her love of books, and Keri's been writing all her life, starting with short stories in her childhood. She's a fourth-generation graduate of Chandler High school, and has a Bachelors in Psychology from Arizona State University. She served a mission for the LDS church in New York City, and met her husband while she was there. They have three children, a love of family, and an English Bulldog.

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Lexi dared her boss and best friend Jake to ride down a steep hill, nearly killing him. The doctors think he won't make it through the night, so when Jake asks her to marry him to keep his ex-wife from inheriting his ranch, she agrees.

Now they're stuck in this sham of a marriage. The worst part is Lexi's falling for Jake, even though she knows she's no good for him; a bad penny that brings him nothing but trouble.

When his ex shows up claiming he's guilty of bigamy, Lexi has to choose between her one-sided love, and doing what's right.

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