

# ECHOES BETWEEN US

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK

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ECHOES BETWEEN US

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# VERONICA



The only reason people come to live in this small town is to hide or to die.

Nazareth's parents brought him here in seventh grade to hide. My father, on the other hand, uprooted me from our suburban, cushy, lower-middle-class, chocolate-chip-smelling home when I turned eleven for me to die.

There aren't many of us new people in town, so I've always been curious which reason brought Sawyer Sutherland to this forsaken land. Is he here because he's hiding or dying?

"It's bad enough Sutherland is moving into your house, but now it appears he's invading your mountain." Leo jumps onto the crumbling brick wall that runs along the concrete porch of the old TB hospital and looks down the hill. Sure enough, Sawyer Sutherland and his band of merry friends are walking through the thick bushes and tall, green trees up the narrow path.

Leo's right about Sutherland invading my space, but wrong on the hill being mine. Our backyard touches the property, but the hill and the sanitarium belong to the state. Leo doesn't come here as often as I do. We spend most of our time at Jesse's farm, but Leo's on a count-down to college and he wants to visit all his favorite places before he leaves. The hike up the hill is killer, but the view is breathtaking.

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“Fantastic.” Sarcasm in full effect. “I’m so happy he’s feeling at home.”

It’s early evening, not quite nightfall, and the sky surrounding us is full of pinks and the dark blue of evening. Behind us is the massive porch where nurses would roll out patients in their beds so they could take in the fresh air. Back in the early 1900s, thousands of people lived here as they tried to “cure” themselves of TB by taking part in a fresh-air treatment. Many lived. Many more died.

Most people in town are terrified of this building. It has been abandoned for so long that not even the windows are in place anymore, leaving gaping, dark holes for all sorts of wild animals and undesirables to wander in. It doesn’t scare me, though. To have fear for this place is to be scared of death and that is not a dread that I possess.

Leo drops to sit beside me and our legs dangle over the wall. His shoulder rubs against mine, and I’ll admit my heart skips several beats. I wish it wouldn’t, but it does.

He smells of sandalwood, and I hate how handsome he is—beautiful black skin, black curly hair that almost touches his shoulders and a smile that makes even the stone-cold people in the world feel included.

Maybe if Leo’s eyes were misplaced on his handsome face like a Picasso painting or he had an alien popping out of his forehead or slimy tentacles attached to his back, I could find a way to not like him a little too much. But there’s no alien, no tentacles, and I have feelings for Leo even though he has no idea I’ve fallen for him.

I have to stop thinking of Leo and feelings so I focus on the opposite of Leo and find Sawyer Sutherland leading the pack. Following him are a few guys and a few girls. The girls are huddled together and laugh hysterically when Sawyer turns his head toward them and surely says something witty.

That’s what Sawyer does—talks. Laughs. For some reason everyone loves him. Girls want to date him, guys want to be friends with

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him, teachers want to hate him but he charms them regardless, and coaches fall over themselves to convince him to be on their teams. That is what popularity looks like.

Sawyer cons them all. He makes them all feel as if they're important—that is, everyone but me and my friends. He and I have been alphabetical buddies since he moved here, and he acts like I'm invisible. "Do you think he'll talk to me now?"

"No," Leo replies.

"That was blunt." Yet probably true.

"Starched button-down shirt, cargo shorts, Nike high-tops. He's got that same God-awful haircut everyone else has, and like the rest of the losers in town, he thinks he's original. People like him don't know how to see anything beyond themselves."

I wouldn't say God-awful haircut, but I'll agree on the unoriginal. Sawyer's brownish-blondish hair is cut into a low fade, longer on the top with the brush up that's popular among most guys of our town. He's on the taller end of the student population, has a swimmer's build, and he's as semi-good-boy-cool as they get. On the outside he checks all the boxes adults require to be a good boy. He says "yes, sir" and "no, ma'am" at the right times with the smile that hints at the mischief he's been up to, but he's the type to down a few beers with his "bros" on Saturday night and act like an ass.

But because I like to make life interesting . . . "What if it's a façade and there's really a rebel hiding underneath?"

Leo snorts, and even I have a hard time keeping a straight face. Sawyer Sutherland is as textbook cool-boy-with-money as one can get, and I gave up on anyone who's textbook years ago.

"I like your outfit." Leo gives me an appreciative once-over.

I waggle my eyebrows. "I do my best."

Today, I'm in a knitted see-through pink top with a black lace tank underneath, a layered black skirt that ends midthigh and striped black-and-green knee-high socks. I'm a real-life, vertically impaired anime character.

Four-foot-nine isn't an impressive height. Like, there are Charlie

Brown Christmas trees taller than me. And God help me, I look cute and cuddly. Like a stupid kitten with big blue eyes. I can't look mean and menacing even when I've tried, and trust me, I have. Anytime I've attempted to straighten my corkscrew blond curls, I've failed. They spring back into place.

Nazareth, one part of our small group of friends, pops out of the forest and climbs up the brick wall. Wondering if I've forgiven him yet, he offers me a questioning rise of his eyebrows. I'm already sad that Leo and our other friends graduated last year and won't be attending school with us anymore, and knowing that I'll be alone at school next year sucks.

Nazareth is supernova intelligent and will be taking college classes online at home to supplement his high school education. Tragically, this year, he and I will only share two classes. He won't even be there for lunch. A part of me is seriously pissed at the traitor. Yeah, I get it, the decision is best for him, so I'll hold on to a fraction of my anger and be passive-aggressive about it until he buys me tacos in repentance for his bad-for-me, yet good-for-him choices.

The past three years have been the best of my life. Now everything is changing, and not for the better. When it's clear I'm pouting, Nazareth clasps hands with Leo. "Hey."

"Not sure how long we'll stay. Sutherland and his friends are on the way up." Leo jacks his thumb in their direction then pulls his cell out of his pocket, no doubt texting Jesse to see if he's started his ascent since the popular people may possibly ruin our plans for the evening.

My cell rings. The caller ID informs me it's Glory, Jesse's older cousin and town psychic. She's been helping me avoid my fate, but I'm avoiding her so I reject the call.

"I started packing for school," Leo says as he pockets his cell, and my stomach bottoms out. Soon, Leo will be two hours away, and while he promises we'll hang out all the time, I don't believe him. When Leo went to a three-week-long camp for his college this

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summer, I didn't hear from him once. Typically when people leave this town for more than a month, they don't return.

Instead of accepting the inevitable, I intervene by dropping the news onto Nazareth. "Sawyer Sutherland moved in with his mom and sister into the downstairs apartment."

Nazareth isn't much of a conversationalist. He isn't much on showing emotions, either, yet his eyes widen. Nazareth has been my best friend for so long I can practically read his mind. *One of the most popular guys at school is living in the house of the girl voted most bizarre in the latest Tillman High's student Insta poll?*

"I know, right?" I make a funny face of twisting my mouth and crossing my eyes. Nazareth's lips turn up.

"Did you hear what happened to Sawyer's arm?" Leo asks.

No. School gossip isn't my thing. "I'm assuming the cast means he broke it."

"On how he broke it. He told everyone he slipped on the pool deck at the YMCA."

"So he's suing the Y?"

"No, he lied to his mom and the doctor. He didn't slip on the pool deck and his friends know he lied, but he won't tell anyone how he broke it. Everyone's covering for him, but they want to know what happened."

That's interesting, but nothing noteworthy. Sawyer Sutherland is known for playing it close to the edge in the search for a good time. In this instance, karma bit him in his cute butt. "Let's return to the real subject at hand. This guy is now living in my house. Doesn't that obligate us to talk? Before it wasn't awkward. We were two people who share the letter S for our last names, but now ignoring each other will be weird."

"Stay away from him, V," Leo says. "Guys like him don't know how to appreciate a girl like you."

A girl like me. Translation—misfit. Leo made the mistake once of calling me a misfit. I didn't talk to him for a week. Misfit suggests

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I don't fit in anywhere. I do fit in. I just don't fit in easily with other people, and that's okay because I fit in fine with me.

Nazareth and I are kindred spirits in that way. Neither of us would ever change who we are in a fruitless quest for more friends. We're content being ourselves.

Like me, Nazareth has his own style. He recently had his mother cut his long hair and buzz it on the sides. He now wears it in a spiked Mohawk. He's a muscled guy, wears black thick-rimmed glasses that hide his dark green eyes, and he's taller than me, but who isn't? On his arms are a string of tattoos. Not common for a teen, but what's more fascinating is that every single one of those tattoos was inked at home by his mother.

"You're one of a kind, V," Leo says. "You deserve better than to put yourself out there for the unoriginal, and that kid is as original as a blank sheet of paper. He won't get you, and if you try to be friends with him, he'll make your life a living hell by being nice to your face then talking crap about you behind your back. That's how his group of friends work."

There's bitterness to his tone. Leo could fit in if he wanted. In fact, he used to fit in, but literally one day, out of nowhere in middle school he moved from a lunch table overflowing with people to sitting at the loner table across from me. My life changed then. For the better and I'm grateful.

The sound of pebbles bouncing along the floor of the empty sanitarium causes all of us to turn our heads. I strain to see into the darkness, eager to catch a sight of the shadow figures people have talked about online. Leo moves closer to a window then gives me a wide grin. "Want to go in with me?"

I'd love to, but the annoying giggles from below keep me rooted in place. I shake my head, and Leo disappears through the floor-to-ceiling window and into the darkness.

To be honest, Leo could have rocked smart, cool-boy overachiever. A part of me believes that's who he'll become in college,

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and that's why he'll forget me. With Leo now a safe distance away, I finally release the air I had been holding. Nazareth gives me a concerned glance as he takes the spot beside me Leo abandoned.

"How are you?" he asks in that quiet way of his.

Only my closest friends are aware that pain is a part of my life. Sort of like how my arms and legs are attached to my body. But today is a good day and the pain level is minimal. More like a shadow of a memory of what it could become. "I'm migraine free."

"That's not what I'm asking." Nazareth swings his gaze from me to where Leo disappeared, and my chest aches.

I'm in love with Leo, and Leo doesn't know. Nazareth does. Jesse, too. Some days I wonder if I'm that good at hiding my emotions from Leo. Other days I wonder if Leo is blind. "I don't want him to go."

"Do you want him to stay?"

I shake my head. I'd never clip anyone's wings. Especially Leo's.

Nazareth pats my knee, and with that one touch, I lean into him and place my head on his shoulder. Nazareth is like my security blanket I used to drag around with me when I was a child. I'm not into him, and he's not into me so we're safe and easy with each other.

A ladybug walks along an overgrown bush close to us and it's clear she's headed for a spider's web. Nazareth, of course, reaches over and lets the ladybug walk onto his finger before gently depositing her onto the rock wall beside him. I smile; there's such a gentleness to Nazareth I'm not sure exists in anyone else. He literally lives the phrase *do no harm*.

"What about nature's balance?" I ask. "Didn't you just starve the spider?"

"The spider already has a meal and one waiting. She doesn't need three."

Because Nazareth is not only the kind of guy who cares to know what markings make a spider a male or female, but he also cares enough about a ladybug to save the day. Sure enough, the spider is

weaving a web around a struggling fly and there's another fly caught in her sticky nest waiting for its turn to be spun.

Ice-pick pain spikes through my brain, and I shut my eyes and wince.

"V?" concern oozes from Nazareth's quiet tone.

Though the pain of that spike still reverberates through my skull, I force myself to lift my head and smile at my friend. "What?"

"You flinched."

"I yawned." My vision doubles and it takes a moment before the world refocuses. This is why I refuse to drive. I tell Dad it's because we don't need the additional cost of insurance, especially when living in the center of a small town, I can easily bum a ride or walk. But it's really because headaches like this can hit fast, and I don't want to ever cause an accident.

Nazareth broadcasts his doubt rather loudly through his tense jaw, but he does what I need and lets it go.

"I have an idea for our senior thesis," I say, ignoring the baby tremors of aches rolling through my brain. "It's a crazy idea, but I love it."

"I wouldn't expect anything less." Because crazy is who I am.

"I'm thinking we center our project on ghosts. Urban legends. Kentucky ones to be specific. It'll meet all the requirements we need to hit." I stick out a finger as I tick off each of the "rules" of the game our teachers have created. "We'll have to do extensive research, so we'll research the legends. We have to visit areas that deal with our project, so we'll visit the haunted spots. We have to conduct interviews, so we'll—"

"V," Nazareth interrupts me, which he rarely does. I fall silent, and it's weird that he won't meet my eyes.

"What?"

Nazareth rests his arms on his legs then joins his fingers together. For each beat of time that passes my stomach turns like the spin cycle of a washing machine.

"Because I'm on an accelerated schedule, they had me do my

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senior thesis last year. I thought they'd let me do the thesis again and I'd partner with you, but they said no. I'm to focus on my college courses. I'm sorry, V. I'll help you if you want, but . . .”

But the project requires us to work in a group of two to four people and Nazareth won't count. My inhale rattles through me as I'm hollowed out. Jesse has graduated and is focused on his farm, Scarlett is already at college, Leo is leaving and Nazareth might as well be gone. The worst has happened. I'm going to be alone.