

Visit the exciting Degrees of Guilt Web site at [www.degreesofguilt.com](http://www.degreesofguilt.com) and Tyndale's thirsty(?) Web site at [www.areUthirsty.com](http://www.areUthirsty.com)

Copyright © 2003 by Melody Carlson. All rights reserved.

Cover photos copyright © 2003 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.

Edited by Ramona Cramer Tucker

Designed by Julie Chen

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

thirsty(?) is a trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or publisher.

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

---

Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04 03  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



**Sammy James is dead.** He died in my living room. Last night. Right there on the ugly purple sofa that Shelby hasn't even finished paying for yet. She'll freak when I tell her.

My hands are still shaking and I've thrown up four times, twice at home and twice at the police station. Mostly dry heaves after the first time, but it's like my body is trying to purge itself of the memory. When the police finally allow me back inside the apartment—after collecting all their “evidence”—I wander around from room to room like a zombie, trying to clean stuff up. But it's hopeless. This place will never be clean again.

*Sammy, where are you?*

I know I should rest, but I can't go to sleep. Or maybe I *am* asleep, and this is all just a hideous

nightmare. I will wake up and everything will be back to what it used to be. I'll live differently, make better choices, and Sammy will still be alive. But I know I'm not asleep. The wail of last night's sirens still rings in my ears, and the flashing emergency lights are scorched into my brain like a sizzling brand that will burn there forever. But what's worse—and it makes me ache to remember—is how Sammy looked before they wheeled him away.

I never thought the first dead person I'd see would be one of my oldest and dearest friends. Or that I'd be the cause of his death. At first I thought he was just asleep. Okay, maybe passed out even. And that in itself didn't seem so surprising since I'd never seen Sammy drink anything more than a single beer in his entire life, and that was last New Year's, back when life was still normal. But even then I had been the one to talk him into it.

But for some reason Sammy really cut loose last night. At first I was pretty shocked that he even came over at all. I mean, Sammy has never been into partying in the first place. And even though the party was supposed to be a celebration—an “after the play” party—Sammy had still insisted he wasn't coming. If I hadn't given him that last backstage hug after our final big scene—pressing myself fully against him—I'm sure he never would've come over here at all. Although I only saw him drink a couple of beers, he was definitely the life of the party for a short while. Totally un-Sammy-like. I was pretty wasted myself, but I can still remember thinking, *How weird is that?* But then, stupidly as it

turned out, I said nothing, did nothing. Just kept on partying like I've done over the last few months.

Then Kyra shows up and finds her brother sacked out on the purple couch. She just totally loses it. "What's wrong with Sammy?" she shrieks.

"He's asleep," I tell her. "Wanna drink?"

"He is *not* asleep, Miranda!" she yells at me as she slaps him on the cheeks.

"Easy, girl," I say in what I think sounds like a soothing voice. "He just had a little too much to drink is all."

But she is shaking him now. "Something's wrong!"

Now I'm thinking she must be high herself and just flipping out. I mean, it wouldn't be the first time. "Hey . . . Kyra?" I put my hand on her shoulder. "Just chill."

"I don't need to chill!" She's screaming now, loud enough to be heard over the music, which is pretty cranked up. "Call 911!"

"Just a minute, Kyra." Now I'm getting seriously worried. Not about Sammy so much, because I'm pretty sure he's just passed out. But the kind of trouble I'll be in if the cops come in here and bust—

"Where's the phone?" she demands.

"Okay. I'll be right back." So I go to the kitchen, take the cordless phone off the hook, and drop it into the utensil drawer next to the stove. Then I return to the living room, where Kyra is shaking her brother's limp body. "Come on, Sammy. Wake up."

"Let's get him some coffee," I suggest.

“Just get him in the shower,” offers someone else from behind me.

“Did you call? Where’s the phone, Miranda?”

Kyra leaps up and grabs me by the arm with an ironlike grip. “Call 911 *right now!* I’m not kidding!”

“Okay!” I yell as I pry myself out of her grasp and return to the kitchen. But I don’t get the phone. Instead I stand like a dummy in front of the sink just wondering, *What should I do now? Do I call 911 and risk serious trouble? Or maybe I should get everyone out of here first, clean up the bottles and cans and—*

“*Miranda!*” Kyra’s voice makes me jump. “Where is it? Where’s the freaking phone?”

I look around the kitchen. “I dunno.”

She takes off now, and I know she’s going to Shelby’s bedroom, the only other phone in our apartment—and not a cordless. I grab a garbage bag from under the sink and start heaving the empties into it.

“Party’s over!” I yell toward the living room as I pour the remains of a vodka bottle down the sink, thinking it looks expensive and wondering if Mitchell Wade brought that.

“You guys help me clean up,” I call out, but all I hear is the sound of music still pounding. I walk into the living room to see that everyone—except Dylan, Kyra, and Jamal—has cleared out. The others must’ve realized that Kyra was serious about calling 911. I pause now, garbage bag hanging limply from my hand, to look at Sammy. I mean *really* look. I drop the bag on the floor as I realize that Kyra is

probably right. Something *does* seem to be wrong here. He is totally out of it. His face is so pale that his freckles stand out like chicken pox, and he is so still that I can barely tell if he's breathing. But I believe he is. I kneel beside him now and start speaking quietly into his right ear, because I know he doesn't hear very well from his left one.

"It'll be okay, Sammy," I promise as I push his hair from his damp forehead. So cold. I reach for the red chenille throw that Shelby doesn't like anyone to actually use. She says it's just for an "accent."

"Kyra's getting some help," I assure him as I tuck the soft blanket around him. His face looks even paler contrasted against the bloodred fabric. I can hear Kyra in the other room, her voice loud and tight—irritated, as if she thinks the person on the other end is an absolute moron.

I take his cold hand into mine and hold it to my flushed cheek, as if to warm it. "Hang in there, Sammy. Hang in there. It's going to be okay."

When the paramedics arrive, I'm still kneeling on the floor, leaning into the couch, and holding his hand against my face. I wonder how they got here so quickly, or if I blacked out for a few minutes. Even now I don't know for sure. But I hear Kyra's voice from below, screaming at them to hurry, telling them that it's just one more flight of stairs. And suddenly I am pulled away from Sammy and everything is happening fast. Too fast—like a blur. Voices and directions. I am pushed away, and a paramedic tears open Sammy's shirt as if he's not even a real person—as if he's a piece of machinery or one of

those resuscitation dolls. And I hear snatches of phrases like “no blood pressure . . . cardiac arrest . . . possible overdose.” And I think, *Overdose? Of what? A couple of beers?* I just don’t get it.

Then the cops arrive. They usher me into the kitchen to ask me questions—too many questions. Not enough answers. I can’t focus on their words. It’s like every sentence is a Superball, just bouncing off one blank wall in my brain and smacking into another. I can’t think straight—everything is ricocheting all around. I think I actually laugh when they start to recite my “Miranda rights.” I’m thinking, *Did they make this stuff up just for me?* Then suddenly I sober up and want to know what’s happening with Sammy. I jump up from the kitchen table and push past the policewoman and go into the living room and look.

They are carrying Sammy out on a stretcher. But I can see his face—can still see it now—just empty and blank, like a house with all the lights turned off. And somehow I know. I know it’s too late. I know Sammy is gone. He’s dead. And it’s all my fault.

That’s when I rush into the bathroom and throw up in the toilet. The policewoman stands in the doorway, watching, as if I’m a dangerous criminal, as if I might try to climb out the bathroom window to escape. She slowly shakes her head as she waits for me to finish and flush the toilet. I remember how I cleaned that toilet earlier today. Back when I was eager to impress Mitch with our little apartment, back when I thought I was, oh, something—so grown-up, so cool. I struggle to my feet and

wash the vomit off my face with cold water. The coldness reminds me of Sammy—how cold he was—and I wonder. For the first time that evening I wonder if Sammy had something more than just a couple beers. And then I throw up all over again.