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**They killed Sammy.** Maybe we all did.

He's dead. He died.

Don't you dare—not any of you—try saying my brother is *gone*, that he *passed*, *passed away*, *passed over*, had a terrible *accident*.

Sammy was 17. Now he's dead. Just like that.

Dylan says Sammy is in heaven. But even that doesn't make him less dead . . . or us less guilty.

I'm sitting on a shiny wooden bench outside the courtroom. Footsteps echo through the hall—people in a hurry, with places to go, people to go to. A door slams somewhere, and a burst of voices tangles and bounces against the cold cement walls.

Above, to my right, a branch scrapes a high window. Rain blurs the windowpane—blown there

hard, smacked to a stop and dropped, sliding down in sheets, like hands grasping but finding nothing to hold.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a while, Kyra." The D.A. smiles at me like she's afraid I'll change my mind about testifying. She sets down her briefcase and gives me a we're-in-this-together nod. Just two girls here. But Sammy wasn't *her* twin. And she should know *she'd* back down before I would.

"I'm okay," I say.

"It's good to go over your testimony in your head if you want to, while you're waiting." She tugs at her thin black ponytail and unbuttons her gray suit jacket. "Remember, just answer the questions. You're going to do fine, Kyra." She picks up her briefcase and goes back into the courtroom.

I try to see inside, but only get a glimpse of the guard at the door and part of a row of strangers in the back.

I've watched enough bad TV and *Law and Order* reruns to know you can't always trust judges and juries. They can't always trust the witnesses sworn in to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. People shape their stories, their *truth*, to make themselves look better, to make the world a place they can live in without going crazy. I know that better than anybody.

So maybe people won't get what they deserve in this trial. Sammy sure didn't deserve what he got.

I stand up, pace down the hall, and glance both ways through the corridor. No Miranda. No Tyrone. I don't even know for sure if they'll show. I don't

have any idea what they're going to say or who will believe them.

Maybe they won't believe me. Maybe nobody will. I can't blame them. For 17 years I didn't believe me either.

But believe *this*. Sammy James is dead. And somebody has to know how it happened, how we really got to this, a murder trial in Macon, Iowa, the first in our town's history.

So I might as well write it all down. I won't leave anything out—I'll tell it just like it happened. It all started New Year's Day, when Mitchell Wade sauntered into town like a New Year's resolution somebody forgot to make, a resolution that, from that moment on, changed life as we knew it.



**“No, look!** Across the street! Getting into his car?” I pause for effect.

Miranda Sanchez is sitting beside me in the booth. She’s the closest to the window and presses her nose below the backward yellow letters spelling out *Tiger Den*. The Den is one of the two places open on New Year’s Day in Macon, Iowa.

“Who do you see, Kyra?” Miranda asks, cupping her long fingers around her blue eyes. Her eyes are her least Latino feature. She’s a head taller than I am, with long dark hair I’d kill for. She’s wearing sweats and a shirt straight from the Helen Keller school of design.

“It’s Adam Sandler,” I announce, leaning back in the orange booth and folding my arms in front of me.

Across from Miranda and me, Jamal Jackson and D.J. frown out the ice-laced window. Snow has piled in the corners like mini-mountains. D.J.'s the reason we're all here, although I'm the only one who knows it. I decided it's high time for D.J. Johnson to ask Kyra James out. Sammy tipped me off that D.J. and Jamal were chowing down at the Den.

Ten minutes later, so were Miranda and I.

It hasn't taken much to draw the three of them into my personality-spotting game. We have never had a famous person set foot in Macon, so I hunt look-alikes and pretend. Passes the time.

Miranda turns back around in the booth. "Kyra's right, you guys. What's-his-name? Gleason? Guy from auto parts? He's a dead ringer for Adam Sandler."

"No way," D.J. mutters.

He's not articulate, and it comes out "*Nway*." But it doesn't matter. D.J. Johnson is ripped. So ripped, but laid back. Think long legs and bendable, like all his joints and points have been worn down like river rocks, like you knew his mother had to be one of those "D.J., no slumping at the table," "D.J., sit up straight" kind of mothers before she gave up.

"Okay. They look kinda the same," D.J. admits, taking a second look.

"Yeah," Jamal says, dipping a curly fry into ketchup and downing it, "but all you white guys look alike."

I grab two fries and scarf them down like I'm not even noticing.

D.J. notices. I can tell. He takes a fry. I take two. Research. I've done my homework on D.J. Johnson. He's the only major datable left to conquer in our fair town. In five months we graduate from Macon High. Good thing. I have history with just about every male Maconian. D.J. has three sisters—"good eaters," Gram would have said. I know he's used to seeing girls eat hardy. Picky, girlish eaters would make him uncomfortable.

Exact opposite of Manny, the big football star, who prefers girls to be little more than feminine decoration. When I targeted him, I made sure I never finished anything and never, ever ate fries or desserts.

"Can I have a bite?" I ask, leaning across the table and taking a big bite of D.J.'s burger. Burger with onions, I discover. I'll have to skip dinner *and* breakfast to make up for this.

"How do you eat so much and keep so skinny, girl?" Jamal asks, playing into my hand. "My sister counts every calorie she puts into her mouth."

"I never thought about it," I lie, taking D.J.'s pickle. I raise my eyebrows in a silent plea for it. He nods. "I just eat when I feel like it."

"No fair," says our waitress, as she rips off our bills from her little pad. Laurie's worked at the Tiger Den since before we were born. She's plump, but in a way I think looks good on older people. "Skinny little thing like you?" She plops our separate bills on the table, lining them in a straight, upside-down row. "Anything else?"

"Maybe later?" I smile at her and get a wink.

It makes me think she remembers my other dates here, when I left most of my meal on my plate.

The door opens. An icy gust fans in as the bell over the door rings—like anybody would need announcing in the Macon Tiger Den. Dylan Gray rushes in, pulls off his stocking cap, and waves it at us.

“Hey, Dylan!” I call, motioning him over. No sweat if he joins us. Everybody and their brother know Dylan and I don’t date. We’ve been buddies since before kindergarten. We fought over the same toys in the church nursery. Our families even took vacations together a couple of years in a row. We stopped when Bethany, Dylan’s little sister, was born with too many medical problems for the Grays to risk getting far from her doctors.

Miranda scoots over so I can make room for Dylan next to me. “You missed Lucille Ball, Cher, Drew Barrymore, Austin Powers . . . and Tommy Lee Jones,” Miranda says.

Dylan does his half-grin, making his dimple. He knows the personality game. I used to make him play it with me. In those days, we spotted Mr. Rogers, Barney, and that *Home Alone* kid. Dylan’s hair is long, a day away from the barber, and his glasses are fogged. He’s the only guy I know, though, who looks great in glasses, better than without them. He played freshman and sophomore football but dropped out last year to keep up his grades and work in his dad’s lumberyard.

Jamal slides the plate of fries to Dylan. “You also missed Adam Sandler.”



"Ah . . ." Dylan shakes his head no to fries. "But I'm in time for Gary Peyton." He nods to Jamal, so I figure it's some sports hero. "Ben Affleck." A fair assessment of D.J., only D.J.'s more of a stud. Dylan grins at Miranda. "Sandra Bullock." He turns to me, eyes narrowing. We lock stares, Dylan and I. When we were kids, I used to know what he'd say before he said it. Not anymore.

"Hmmm." He rubs his chin, touches his glasses, and sighs.

I'm ready to kick him if he says I'm somebody D.J. will think is ugly or uncool.

"This is a tough one." Dylan tilts his head for a better look at me. "Blonde, green eyes . . . it's either . . . a thin Marilyn Monroe or Britney Spears with soul. Hard to say."

Not bad. Even Dylan's working for me tonight. "So, Dylan, how was your New Year's Eve? Where did you go again?" I know before he answers that it has something to do with church and the youth group I haven't gone to since junior high. Dylan still invites Sammy and me to things a couple of times a year. Sammy usually goes.

"We had a New Year's Eve party that ended up in the church gym with a great Christian rock group. I think you would have liked them, Kyra."

*Come on, Dylan! Ask me what I did.*

"What did you end up doing?"

Yes! "Don't ask," I say, taking the last fry. "Horrible date. Only good thing about it is that it was my first, and it'll be my absolutely last date with Tyrone." *Hear that, D.J.?*

“You serious?” Miranda asks.

“Is Barbie thin?” I answer, wishing I’d gone for a basketball analogy. D.J.’s into ball.

Dylan takes a sip of my Coke. It makes me sad. I think I’m remembering when we used to be so close we shared school lunches. Or maybe the weird feeling I’m getting is just my body’s way of telling me it doesn’t like French fry grease.

“I can’t keep up with you, Kyra,” Dylan complains.

“I thought you and Tyrone were going out?” Jamal leans back in the booth. His legs stretch to our side and then some.

“Never.” I risk a glance at D.J. He’s looking at me but shifts his eyes back to his empty plate. “That was our first official date. And nevermore, as the Raven said.” *Stupid! Barbie and Poe? I have to read up on basketball quotes.*

“What happened?” Dylan’s studying me now, his brown eyes slits behind wire-framed glasses.

I shrug. “Let’s not go there, okay?”

I see that D.J.’s finished his burger and is reading the milk-shake flavors written in black marker on the white menu board hung over the counter, like something new could actually appear there.

I nudge Dylan. “Scooch! Lemme outta here! I’m still hungry.” Of course, I’m not hungry. But I have to get D.J. by himself. He’s not brave enough to ask me out in front of Jamal. Couldn’t take the razzing if I turned him down, which I won’t. But he doesn’t know that.

“D.J.?” I give him my best smile. “C’mon. I’m

thinking milk shake, a new flavor creation . . . chocolate definitely, with maybe fudge, and possibly peanut butter?"

He gets up. His tennis shoes are so big they catch on the table leg.

I manage to bump into him when I slide out. "Sorry." I grab his arm to steady myself. Clumsy me. I don't come up to his shoulder. He's way taller than my brother, and Sammy is six-one barefooted. Jamal and Sammy are the best players on Macon's basketball squad, but D.J.'s not half-bad.

D.J. and I walk to the counter, me still holding his arm. Not holding exactly, just touching.

"So, D.J., did you have a great New Year's Eve, like everybody seems to have had except me?"

He shrugs.

I know he went out with Tressa. We're cheerleading buddies, but all's fair in love, plus I know they didn't have that great of a time. I told you I did my homework.

Laurie the Waitress—who's probably younger than my mom but looks 10 years older because she's a smoker without the benefits of Mom's oils, masks, and ointments—is the only one on duty tonight, except for Mr. Fisher in the back. She's refilling coffee for a man. I should know his name. He drives a truck and has a son who used to be friends with Sammy.

"I wish I'd broken my date with Tyrone and just gone by myself to see that new Vin Diesel movie like I wanted to."

D.J. stops reading the flavors and frowns down

at me as if he's never seen me before. "You like Vin Diesel?"

*Bingo.*

"Who wouldn't? *The Fast and the Furious? Triple X? Classics!*" I'm hoping he won't ask me about the movies because all I know is what Sammy said after he saw them with Jamal and some other guys. I hate car-chase movies. But they are so D.J.

"Vin is tight! I loved *Fast and Furious!*" It's the most he's said since he ordered his meal.

*You've hooked him. Easy now. Reel him in easy.* "They say that new movie's his best," I claim, thinking the guy's best probably isn't that hot. "It's playing at Clarinda, but I'll bet you anything it only runs through tomorrow night. If I miss it, I'm going to be so bummed."

"Me too." He's thinking. I can almost hear the wheels turning. "Hey, you wanna go see it?"

"Of course," I answer, pretending I don't get his meaning.

"Like with me? Tomorrow before it leaves Clarinda?"

"Tomorrow night?" I repeat. "Sure."

*Ta-da. Mission accomplished. Operation D.J., a success!*

I order a large chocolate-peanut-butter-fudge milk shake just to be on the safe side. And I get a lid so D.J. won't notice I'm not actually drinking the stuff.

It's all I can do not to strut back to the booth. I want to tell Miranda, but she's arguing with Jamal about something. I hear her say "Sam" and I'm

about to ask her what they're talking about when the bell rings and the door opens.

Jamal and Miranda stop arguing. D.J. and I, half-way back to the booth, stop walking. It feels like all the air is sucked out of the Den, vacuum-packing us together.

You wouldn't have to have grown up in Macon to know the guy who just walked in isn't from around here. Nobody here has a long cashmere overcoat like that. Nobody in all of Iowa has a tan like this guy's—rich and golden even though it's the dead of winter. And that hair—brown, thick, brushing his forehead—was not cut in the Macon Unisex and Shears Shop on Main Street.

I've never seen anyone this handsome this close up. He's not high school, but not old. Maybe college. Maybe out a couple of years.

Someone drops a fork, and the clang of it jump-starts the room's heartbeat again. D.J. moves toward the booth. Jamal laughs. Dylan stands up to let me slide back into the booth.

The tanned wonder orders coffee, black, and thanks Laurie in a voice as low and warm as coffee.

Laurie stands there staring at him until he has to ask her how much he owes her. "Fifty cents," Laurie says, even though coffee at the Den has been 55 cents since last Easter.

"Thank you," he says. "It smells perfect."

Nobody in Iowa would say that.

He turns to leave, but he pauses—just a second too long—and glances at our booth, sizing us up, one after the other.

Dylan clears his throat. Miranda bites her nonexistent thumbnail. Jamal brushes crumbs off his lap. Even D.J. sits up straighter.

I stare back. And something happens between us. I feel it inside, deep in the spaces between my bones. And I think he feels it, too. Who is he?

The door shuts. Who was he?

Miranda breaks our awkward silence. "Kevin Costner? No! Harrison Ford in that first *Star Wars* movie."

"I haven't seen *him* around before," Dylan says, leaning in front of me to peer through the window. The night has turned pitch-black, without a single star breaking through. "Man, take a look at those wheels! What is that, Jamal? Porsche 911?"

In the background Mr. Fisher's scratchy radio is playing an old country-western song. I try to hear the lyrics, straining for the words wailed from the kitchen, as if they hold secret meaning, a code woven around ordinary words.

Dylan leaves. Then Jamal. So there's only Miranda, D.J., and me. The slurp of D.J.'s straw is our only contribution to the Den's audio track.

"So what time, Kyra?" D.J. asks.

It's a second before I realize he's talking to me, asking me something. "What?" I look up from where I've twisted my straw cover into a wrinkled ball.

"What time you want I should come pick you up tomorrow?" D.J. asks.

Miranda punches my leg under the table.

I try to focus. D.J. Pick me up. The movie. "Six,"

I say. But I can still smell *him*—something tropical, totally not sold here, a fresh scent filled with promise and mystery. And I think if I don't see him again—the tanned, brown-haired stranger with eyes that bore through me—I think I'll die.