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Whatever anyone tells you about Sammy James and the night he died, it's a lie. Because I know the truth.

Not that I'm going to tell the cops.

It's Monday morning, 10 days after Sammy died. I'm sitting in a math class, contemplating a theory about life that essentially says it's a highway and too many of us become roadkill because we're too dumb to realize what's behind the bright lights that mesmerize us, when that chubby middle-aged secretary from the principal's office knocks on the door and hands Mr. Gimble a note.

Gimble adjusts his bifocals and strains to read the note, then tells us that Tyrone Larson and Hale Ramsey are requested at the office.

Low murmurs go through the class.

That shows how little Gimble pays attention. He's already checked off class attendance and should know that Hale didn't make it to math this morning. The rest of us know he's already skipped the first two classes of the day. For that matter, Hale didn't make it to school at all, something that doesn't surprise me after the events of the last two weeks.

Some of the murmurs, I'm sure, are because of that. No one has seen Hale since Friday night.

The other murmurs, I guess, are for me.

Tyrone Larson. Eighteen. About to graduate from Macon High. Three claims to fame. Quiet science brain. Quiet son of a religious man now in jail. Quiet field-goal kicker for the Macon Tigers. Mostly I'm the invisible guy at Macon High. The way I like it and the way I work to keep it. I'm so weird on the inside that I think it's smarter to keep my mouth shut and have people *wonder* if I'm weird than to open my mouth and prove it.

Gimble calls my name again.

I stand.

Miranda Sanchez—tall, athletic, and good-looking with serious blue eyes—glances at me, then snaps her eyes back to her books real fast.

Sammy had it for her bad.

I think she had it bad for him too.

But they never got the chance to see where it would take them.

Kyra James, Sammy's twin sister, keeps her head down and doesn't look my way. She's blonde and does that whole cheerleader thing, except she's got

a brain. And even though she's dated nearly every eligible male at Macon High, including me, doesn't have a reputation for being easy.

Kyra was best friends with Miranda, but Sammy dying the way he did has messed them up. They don't talk anymore.

Kyra won't talk to me either. Same reason. Sammy dying the way he did.

I tell myself I don't care about her silence. That it doesn't matter. After all, last New Year's Eve I had my big chance with her and blew it. Because I let her have a glimpse of the weirdness inside me.

But as much as I tell myself otherwise, I do care. So it's just as well she keeps her face hidden as I stand. For every time I see her eyes and her smile, it makes me want to find a white horse and a lance and go conquer a fire-breathing dragon. It's something she doesn't know, something the world doesn't know, and something I intend to keep hidden.

I walk to the front, to the door.

As I get halfway up my row, Brianna Devereaux, the class flirt, blows me a kiss and whispers, "Hurry back, baby!" in this low sexy Marilyn Monroe voice loud enough to make a couple guys nearby laugh. Partly because of how she said it, partly because it's funny that someone like her would publicly show that kind of interest in someone like me.

I'm the science whiz. She's the blonde bombshell.

Like Kyra, she's a cheerleader, but unlike Kyra, Brianna makes every bad cliché about cheerleaders true. Her well-deserved reputation for what happens when she's alone with a guy is a little different than

Kyra's. No, a lot different. No wonder Kyra and Brianna don't get along.

There's plenty about Brianna and me I don't want the world to know, either. But with what's happened in the last two weeks, I doubt I'll win the fight to keep all of that as easily hidden as how I still feel about Kyra.

I follow the secretary and the *swish-swish* of her panty hose down the hallway. I wrinkle my nose at the smell of cheap perfume that drifts behind her.

I'm not worried this visit to the office is something like the day that Amy Sing went down and was told her old man had just suffered a heart attack, because frankly, my old man doesn't exist for me. I figure if he did have a heart attack, it would make him the first roadkill that makes sense in my life.

Instead, I'm worried—for good reason—that it's about Sammy.

And my involvement in his death.



Sammy is gone.

On the highway of life he stepped into the embrace of bright headlights at a party—his first—less than two weeks ago. By the time anyone realized what was roaring in his direction, it was too late.

For all of us.

Nobody really understood how much a part of Macon High Sammy was until everything in our world was changed as a result of his death. Like he was the center of gravity, and now the bus is wobbling as the rest of us keep going on a one-way trip that takes us farther every day from who he was. And what he meant to us.

My role in his departure is ripping me apart with

guilt. And as I walk down the hallway, I'm afraid it's a guilt the rest of the world will soon discover.



Sure enough, in the office there's a cop waiting for me, some guy with a big belly.

I recognize him because he sets up speed traps just down the road and lets the businessmen who can afford the tickets whiz by while he waits to nab all the teenage drivers who are desperately escaping our high school prison after the final buzzer of the day.

Now the cop speaks to me in a low, sympathetic voice that he probably thinks is going to fool me. "We need you for some routine questions," he says, and eyes me.

I'm in a bad mood. Of course, I've been in that kind of a mood since the night Sammy died. No, if I'm going to be honest with myself, I've been in a bad mood since long before that, with nobody to blame but myself.

Now, to make it worse, I know this cop's lying to me. Who actually gets pulled out of class for routine questions? Am I stupid? Well, that's the way he's treating me. And I'm about done with acting like I'm Teflon, so that stuff just rolls off my back. Ever since Sammy died, things seem to be sticking.

"Routine questions?" I say. "I guess that means you're looking for routine answers. How much use could that be for anyone?"

He stares at me.

The secretary, who was pretending to be busy with some memos, looks up at me. Her mouth is open. We live in a small town, where everybody knows everybody. And that means everybody knows I'm a cynic. But in this situation, I can tell the secretary thinks I'm taking the smart-mouth attitude just a little too far. She's probably right. Still, I smile at the cop, amazed at how good it feels to really vent. I don't usually say much around school.

Now I notice that the cop's hands are twitching, like he wants to wrap them around my neck. I have this image of him screaming as he rushes forward to rip me apart. And for some reason, I want to egg him on. To see what he'll really do if he's pushed.

So I say, "Is that doughnut dust around your lips?"

"What's that, kid?" His face turns mean.

"Doughnut dust," I deadpan. "The white sugary stuff. It's a dead giveaway that you just got here from a coffee shop."

His hands keep twitching.

"I had it in my mind we were going to speak privately someplace here in the school," he says. "But now I think I'll take you down to the station."

"Let me call a lawyer," I say. I should be afraid. I've been through more than my share of cops and lawyers because of my dad going to prison. And I know more about Sammy's death than I want to. But I've turned my fear into a wave of anger. It feels good to surf this wave. I pull my cell phone out of my pocket.

“Need one?” he asks, still trying to out-tough me. But I realize something.

Now that the worst has happened, just the way I expected and dreaded, I’ve got nothing to lose. A person with nothing to lose doesn’t care. And someone who doesn’t care is a bad person to fight. Suddenly that’s me.

“I’m a TV kid,” I tell him. “That’s where we get our role models. Watch any cop show. Everyone demands a lawyer.”

I start punching numbers, like I know exactly who to call.

The cop doesn’t say a word. Just pushes me out the door.

My phone still to my ear, I pick up the latest sports news on this service I subscribe to.

The cop escorts me to his police car in the parking lot. All the kids in my math class are now staring out the window and watching me get in the backseat. I can already hear the gossip when they talk about it later. Because they will. That’s the way life in Macon, Iowa, works.

Then I go.