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What Happened to the McCrays?

A NOVEL

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<u>One</u>

Kyle was sitting by himself at a small corner table in the back of the sub shop when the four teenaged boys walked in. There was no one else in the place except the young woman working behind the counter, the friendly one who'd put together his foot-long turkey and cheese. Her name tag read AMY, and she looked about the same age as the boys, maybe eighteen or nineteen. Too young to be working in a lonely eatery in a sketchy neighborhood by herself at night. Kyle had been extra polite to her when he ordered, pulled the cap off his longish sandy hair, and he'd left his jacket on in case a lot of arm tattoos made her nervous. Right after serving him she'd started prepping to close up. He glanced over now to see her shaking her head at the new customers, likely wishing she'd already locked the door.

His radar went on high alert. The kids were obviously intoxicated—unsteady on their feet, flushed faces, far too loud. But there was also a menacing aura to them, to the way they'd thrown open the door, the numerous f-bombs and caustic laughter, how they yelled over each other and disregarded anyone around them. They were the kind of kids he had disliked even when he was their age. They all wore flat-brimmed caps and expensive ski jackets and sneakers. Likely wealthy kids from the South Hill looking for trouble in downtown Spokane on a Wednesday night.

They stayed near the door, staring at phone screens and passing around an aluminum water bottle that no doubt contained something other than water. Kyle was done eating, but he didn't like the idea of leaving Amy alone with them, so he stayed put, sipped his soda, and kept his head down. He had time before he had to leave for the airport for his red-eye flight. Or flights, actually. It took stops in Seattle, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C., to finally get to Potsdam, New York, by tomorrow afternoon because it was so far upstate. Ask ten New Yorkers where

upstate began and they might offer ten different answers, but they'd all agree Potsdam was as upstate as it gets.

He could have found a more convenient route, but it would have cost extra time, and he was already late, so to speak. It had taken him two days to learn his father had a stroke. He initially ignored the calls from his hometown area code and prefix, assuming they were spam. No one called him from that area code except his dad, and he always called from the old landline that had been hooked up to the house since before Kyle was born. He'd learned long ago that any other calls from St. Lawrence County were bullshit attempts to sell him something or get his personal information. He left there two and a half years ago, lived 2,600 miles away now. But they never gave up on that tactic, trying people from hometown numbers. Not a bad strategy; most people were still in touch with family and friends from back home, especially when they'd lived there for thirtynine years. Kyle was probably an exception to that rule.

It wasn't until that morning, when he realized the calls were all coming from the same number, that he decided to check the voicemails. They were from a family liaison with the Canton-Potsdam Hospital who was trying to reach him about his father. Before calling her back Kyle had phoned Rod Geiger, his old hockey coach and a good friend of his dad's. Coach Geiger's voice had been solemn: *They're not sure how much damage the stroke caused, but Danny's in rough shape, and he'll need help after they discharge him. I know it won't be easy, but you need to come home for a while, son.* Kyle didn't ask what "a while" meant; Coach wouldn't have known. Or maybe Kyle was afraid of the answer.

A sharp clattering pulled his attention back to the boys, who were still hanging out near the front door. A couple of them were in hysterics about some video on a phone, and one of them had knocked over a chair. They left it there and kept laughing, except for the tallest one of the group, the guy with a patchy goatee. Under the brim of his hat his glassy red eyes were openly staring—no, leering—at Amy while she cleaned behind the counter. She probably got that a lot. Even in the shapeless black apron she was a pretty girl, with bright eyes and a long chestnut ponytail. And there was a spunk to her movements, like she was hearing a song in her head while she wiped down bins and covered them with plastic wrap. She reminded Kyle of someone he used to know.

She glanced up to see the kid staring, and Kyle could tell it made her uncomfortable. It was the way her hands stopped moving midair, and she rocked back on her heels a bit. When the boy offered her a downright suggestive wink, Kyle considered clearing his throat or shifting his chair, making noise so his presence was more obvious. The kids either hadn't noticed the lone guy in a mechanic's uniform sitting in the back, or they didn't care he was there. But then Amy rolled her eyes, turned, and pushed through a swinging door behind the counter.

He felt his shoulders relax, figured the boys would just leave. Then he could catch an Uber to the airport. He needed to stop in a restroom before boarding his flight so he could change out of his work clothes, which were covered in grime and grease. He'd arranged the whole trip in a couple of hours. After booking his flights and throwing some things in a bag, all that remained was telling George, the owner of the garage, that he needed a leave of absence. That had been the toughest part. He knew he was leaving George in a bind, that there was already too much work and not enough guys. They worked in an industry that tended to attract transient employees. So instead of stopping back at his apartment for a shower, Kyle had stayed at the garage as long as possible, helping the crew get at least somewhat caught up before he left. Last thing he did was promise George he'd be back as soon as possible.

He'd been at George's Automotive for going on two years, ever since he wandered in one day looking for work. George, a wiry guy in his sixties with bowed legs and a walrus mustache, had given him the job out of desperation—*I* can tell by that black eye and the worn duffel bag on your shoulder you probably won't stick around for long, but I'm sorely shorthanded. Every morning thereafter when Kyle showed up for work, George's bushy gray eyebrows would tick up, and he'd grunt in surprise. By then Kyle had moved several times within nine months, making his way west from New York, and he still wasn't sure what kept him in Spokane. Might have been because there wasn't much farther west he could go without hitting the ocean. Or maybe it was that Spokane reminded him of Potsdam, with the lack of sunlight and underlying rough-and-tumble, working-class feel. Or maybe it was just to keep proving George wrong.

Whatever it was, about a year ago George stopped being surprised and started trying to talk Kyle into taking on a management role, or even buying into some ownership of the garage—You're a top-notch mechanic, Kyle. Hell, you could help me expand and make good money for yourself, find a better place to live, maybe even a wife. But Kyle had no interest in management or ownership or a wife. He'd been down all those roads before and preferred to keep it simple: rent a studio apartment month to month, keep relationships brief and airy, deal mostly with vehicles instead of people.

When the boys made their way toward the counter, as if to order food, Kyle checked the time on his phone. He was cutting it a little close. But these guys gave him a bad feeling.

It occurred to him he might also be looking for an excuse to delay this trip another day. Like if he put it off long enough he might not even be needed back home. Coach Geiger had said the doctors were still evaluating his dad's chances for a full recovery, but Danny McCray was a tough bastard. Kyle doubted his dad had called in sick more than a few times during his thirty-year career as a firefighter. He'd be fine. But there really was no one else to help him get back on his feet. Kyle's mom had split when he was twelve, and there was no other family to speak of. It's not that Kyle didn't want to see his dad, make sure he was okay. But their interaction the last two and a half years had been limited to brief, obligatory phone calls every month. Truthfully his father probably didn't want him back home any more than he wanted to be there. And it's not like anyone else would be all that excited to see him back in Potsdam. Small towns don't forgive easily. Even when they do, they never forget.

The swinging door behind the counter swished open and Amy walked through, chin raised, face stiff with determination, as if she'd come up with a plan back there and was ready to see it through. She stood behind the counter and looked at the boys.

"I'm sorry, guys, we're closed." She pointed to a digital wall clock, which read 8:06. "I should have locked the door, but we closed at eight."

The boys swapped offended glances, and the tall one who was trying for the goatee, apparently the leader here, leaned his whole upper body against the glass partition shielding the food and rested his arms on top. "We've been here since *before* eight. You're the one who was hiding out in the back."

One of his posse cheered him on with a "Hell, yeah."

Damn. Kyle might have to get involved. He gave it more time. He knew as soon as he intervened the situation would take a sharp turn in one of two directions: the boys would back off and leave, or they wouldn't.

Amy tilted her head. "Well, you were too busy scrolling through your phones and knocking over chairs to order in time."

Kyle smiled to himself. Good for her.

But Goatee wasn't having it. He pointed to a picture above the register, a smiling headshot of the store manager. "What's your boss gonna say when I call and tell him you decided to close early and send paying customers away?"

Amy gave him a breezy shrug, but it was at odds with the way she blinked and swallowed.

And the kid saw it. He grinned in smug victory.

While keeping an eye on the action, Kyle took his time piling trash on his tray. Then he stood and headed for the waste bin near the soda dispensers, leaving his jacket and duffel bag at the table.

Amy sighed and slid on plastic gloves. "I still have the turkey, ham, and cheeses out," she said. "And most of the veggies. What do you want?"

"I want a foot-long chicken with provolone, extra meat," the kid said. "And I want it heated up."

"And yo," his buddy said, flicking a hand toward her while he spoke. "I'll take a twelve-inch meatball sub."

"I already wrapped and packed everything else away for the night," she said.

Goatee offered an exaggerated shrug. "Guess you'll have to unpack it."

His buddies snickered and nodded in support.

Fucking bullies, that's what these guys were. Picking on this poor girl to make themselves feel powerful. Kyle turned from where he was sliding his trash into the bin to see Amy's face flush and quiver a bit. Like she was angry, a little scared, and trying not to cry. If there was a shred of decency in these guys they would do the right thing now and just leave.

But the meatball sub kid leaned toward her and spoke in a loud, hard-ofhearing voice, pretending to sign the words with one of his hands. "Do you need us to repeat our order?"

To keep from smacking him in the head, Kyle flipped his cap backward and crossed his arms. Then he stepped up behind the boys, took a wide stance in his boots, and cleared his throat.

Five startled faces, including Amy's, turned to him.

He half smiled, tinged his voice with a conciliatory note. "Why don't you guys cut her some slack. She's just trying to get home for the night." While he spoke he could feel the boys' eyes sweeping over him, and he recognized what they were doing: taking stock. Weighing it all—his six feet, the nature of his tattoos, the potential strength of the biceps shaped by his job—against four-to-one odds.

Goatee, who was about as tall as Kyle but scrawny, narrowed his eyes. "Why don't you mind your own business, old man?"

Old man? He was forty-two. But he could remember a time when that seemed ancient. He laughed a little to show no hard feelings. "Don't you boys have

something better to do tonight than hassle her?"

Goatee turned to his buddies. "Do you believe this shit?"

They shook their heads, standing a little straighter to back him up, but sideeyeing each other at the same time, like they weren't fully committed to following him down this road.

"Listen," Amy said, shooting Kyle an anxious glance, "it's okay. Why don't you guys just pick from what I have out here?"

Kyle didn't even want to give them that, but she was right. Ending this peacefully was the best option for all concerned. "That sounds fair," he said.

The kid shook his head. "I already ordered what I want." He stepped closer to Kyle, close enough that Kyle could smell the cheap whiskey on his breath, see up close the acne he was fighting. Then he pointed a finger in Kyle's face. "What are you gonna do about it?"

The air between them stood still then. Goatee's little gang shifted their weight foot to foot. Behind the counter Amy brought an uncertain hand to her mouth.

What are you gonna do about it? Part of Kyle really wanted to punch this thug in the face. Without question he'd go down, and if his friends tried to intervene—which was unlikely—he wouldn't have much difficulty taking care of them as well. He'd been in more than his fair share of fights, many against guys bigger than him. He didn't have any special skills or training, it just wasn't hard to win when you fought with no fear. He could teach these guys a badly needed lesson.

But as much of a tough-guy front this kid was putting on, Kyle could see it was a lot of bluff and bluster in the way his cheek twitched and his lips mashed together in a shaky line. This was a no-win situation for the kid. Either he backed down and lost face, or he stood his ground and risked a different kind of humiliation. And Kyle sensed a sad recklessness in his expression and posture, like he was ready to take the beating. Kyle knew about that. There'd been times in his life when he looked for a fight anywhere he could find one. Hitting someone and getting hit back relieved some of the pain he was carrying around. It was Coach Geiger who had pulled him aside in elementary school, after breaking up yet another brawl Kyle had started, and told him he needed to play hockey. *It's the only place where fighting's allowed, son. You can leave all that anger out on the ice.* But Kyle was betting this kid didn't have a Coach Geiger looking out for him. So he stepped back a bit, giving the boy space and a small win, trying to make it easy for him to do the smart thing.

The boy's eyes flinched the tiniest bit in surprise and—Kyle could have sworn—gratitude. He lowered his finger and smirked. "That's what I thought."

Kyle angled his head in a don't-push-your-luck kind of way.

Goatee turned to his friends. "Man, let's get outta here," he said, his upper lip curling in disgust. "Go get some real food."

His crew mumbled agreement while they slowly followed him to the door, making sure not to rush lest they appear nervous. They walked right past the chair they'd knocked over and sauntered outside.

"Assholes," Amy said, watching them walk away.

Kyle checked the clock on the wall and turned to her. "How much time do you need to close this place up?" He doubted the kids would return, but he didn't want to leave her alone.

"Not long at all," she said, moving into high gear.

While she slapped plastic around bins of food and stacked them in a fridge, Kyle took out the trash for her and ordered an Uber. After she locked up he walked her to a beat-up Kia parked behind the shop.

Before she got in she turned to him. "I'm here most weeknights till close. If you come in while I'm working I'll give you a free sub."

"Thanks," Kyle said. "But that's okay."

"I mean it. I get a lot of jerks in here on my shifts. No one ever stuck up for me like that before." She stuffed her hands in the pockets of her jacket and offered him a grateful smile. "Thank you for being different."

He pulled his head back as those words caught him off guard. Then he returned the smile and said good night. Shortly after she pulled away his Uber appeared.

Thank you for being different. Hearing those words had felt like an omen of sorts, considering where he was headed. He replayed them in his mind the whole ride to the airport, but the voice changed. Kyle had heard those exact words once before, a lifetime ago, when he was about Amy's age. The girl who said them to him was even younger at the time, and from that moment forward his life had been forever changed.