

My Defender

He reached over and grabbed the knife, admiring the blade. "When did you learn how to sharpen knives?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "It's semi-offensive that you assume I can't." She grabbed the knife from his hands and started slicing the peppers. "Sorta sexist too." But she was smiling.

Leaning toward her, he rested his arm across her shoulders. He loved that she was funny, that she was kind, that she was bold. If he was honest with himself, he loved her. But he couldn't bring himself to admit it. He still wasn't sure what he meant to her.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Her voice startled him back into reality. She was gazing at him intently. He wondered how long he had zoned out.

"Sorry," he said, "It's been a long day." She took his hand and silently led him to the couch. She leaned against him. "Let's take a break. Dinner can wait." Her head rested on his shoulder, and he leaned his head against hers and smiled, feeling peaceful.

His phone dinged. It was probably his roommate, wondering where he was. He often stayed out late with her.

Something glimmered outside the window, probably a car driving by.

He tried to gather the courage to say it. The words that echoed in his head every time they were together. The ones he felt too scared to say. I love you.

"You've gotta get back, don't you?" She kissed him.

"Yeah, I promised him we would watch movies tonight. He's lonely." he said with a sigh, wrapping his arms around her. She hugged him tight. "I'll see you soon."

“Yeah.” He paused. He wanted to say those three simple words, but they stuck in his throat. It’s fine, what’s the rush? We have plenty of time.

“See you tomorrow, Aliana.”

“See you tomorrow, Kyden.”

“Defense Attorney Ryley Mendax, rise and present your closing statements.”

I glanced over at Kyden briefly. His hands were clasped tightly in his lap. The room was silent. All I could hear was the steady beating of my heart and the faint ticking of the clock. Although I had been in the courtroom many times, today was different. Today I was defending my best friend.

The legs of the chair beneath me screeched loudly as I stood. “My apologies,” I said, straightening my papers. Kyden looked up at me, awaiting the verdict that could forever alter the course of his life. His eyes met mine, and I gave him a slight nod, attempting to reassure him.

After all, he was my best friend, and no one knew him better than I. And I was certain he was innocent.

I cleared my throat and scanned the room. “On May 18th, Kyden James was accused of murdering Aliana Dettick. There was evidence at the crime scene that suggests his involvement, including a knife with fingerprints matching his and eyewitness testimony that placed him at the scene of the crime. However, the defendant stands here today, wrongly accused of a crime he didn’t commit.”

People whispered amongst themselves as I shuffled through my papers. I opened my mouth to continue, but someone else beat me to it.

“You’re his best friend, there is obviously a conflict of interest. You shouldn’t be on this case!” An older guy with white hair yelled from the back of the room.

The smack of the judge’s gavel against the wooden table echoed throughout the courtroom, making my ears ring. “Enough. Do not talk unless you are addressed.”

I took a step closer to the crowd. “I swore an oath to always seek justice, and I stand by it.” I shifted from one foot to another. “The evidence in question is a knife found at the crime scene with Mr. James’s fingerprints on it, and eyewitness testimony that a witness saw a man about the height of Ky– Mr. James stab Ms. Dettick that night. However, the evidence is purely circumstantial. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, it is your responsibility to investigate all the facts in order to uncover the truth.”

I paused. Ky looked up at me, still worried, but his posture had slightly relaxed. “It would be a big assumption to assume the only probable explanation for the knife containing Mr. James’s fingerprints is because he murdered her. Mr. James and Ms. Dettick were in a relationship, he was at her house often. My client has testified that he used that particular knife earlier, while cooking supper with Ms. Dettick, and thus, leaving his fingerprints. As for the eyewitness testimony, look around, there are many males who appear to be over six feet tall, and would fit the description.”

The crowd was silent, but I could almost see the gears in everyone’s brains turning as they analyzed my explanation. We lived in a small town, and although I knew I had to convince the judge, it was imperative that the people be convinced too.

“Furthermore, multiple witnesses observed how distraught Mr. James was over her death. As Mr. James’s psychiatrist stated, his level of anguish could not have been contrived. My client is not responsible for Ms. Dettick’s death. He is innocent. Law enforcement must continue the

investigation of other suspects in order to uncover the real truth of Aliana Dettick's murder.
Thank you."

I heard murmurs of agreement from the crowd. I knew from the start that Kyden was innocent; we had been best friends since before we could walk. I had known the case was airtight, but I still felt relieved. Still, a knot of worry tightened in my stomach. A little seed of doubt, not in Kyden's innocence, but in the outcome of the trial. It wouldn't be the first time someone was apprehended for a crime they didn't commit.

I sat back down next to Kyden and looked at him. He was grinning at me, and I smiled back. "I knew you could do it," he whispered.

"No sweat," I whispered back, pleased with myself.

"No sweat."

I heard hushed whispers all around as we waited impatiently for the final verdict. As time passed, Kyden grew more anxious, fiddling with his clothes and tapping his foot.

"I never doubted you." He whispered.

"Yes you did, you started writing a list of who I should give your stuff to after you went to jail." I replied.

"It's good to have it written down for other reasons, I could die randomly. You never know."

"Liar."

"Shut up." I knew he was trying to distract himself from his fear.

It felt like hours before the jury flooded back through the doors. The whispers of the crowd ceased immediately. Everyone was on the edge of their seat, anxiously awaiting the

verdict, but no one was as anxious as Ky. The purple-blue vein in his neck throbbed in time with his racing heartbeat. I had presented a good case, but the law isn't always fair.

“In the murder of Aliana Dettick, we find the defendant, Kyden James...” The head of the jury announced. She scanned the crowd. The brief silence felt like an eternity.

Kyden squeezed his eyes shut. I held my breath.

“... not guilty.”

Kyden's shoulders relaxed and he let out the breath he'd been holding.

Relieved, I clapped along with the rest of the crowd. *I did it. It's over. We're free.*

I looked over at him, and he smiled at me. I could almost feel the freedom in the air, even if the victory was bittersweet, it was victory nonetheless.

On the drive home, it was dark, the moon was barely a sliver in the sky. Kyden was silent, he stared out the window with an unreadable expression.

Honestly, I didn't know what to do. Ky was both happy and sad. Happy to be a free man, but sad Aliana was dead. I knew him well enough to know he felt guilty for feeling any sort of happiness when Aliana was dead.

The day the police showed up at our apartment, was the day that everything came crashing down.

I heard a knock at the door, Kyden looked up, mouth full of cereal.

“It's seven in the morning, who the hell is at the door?” He mumbled.

I shrugged and stood up, grabbing a robe, “only one way to find out.”

“If it's our crazy neighbor again, I swear to god.”

I rolled my eyes, “God I hope not, it’s too early for that.”

Kyden sighed and downed the rest of his coffee.

I opened the door. When I saw who it was, my heart started pounding. I wasn’t expecting a police officer.

“Kyden James?”

I glanced over at Ky, who stood and came to the door. Everything happened so fast.

Suddenly Kyden was being turned around and handcuffed with his hands behind his back, bewildered, his eyes met mine.

“Kyden James, you are under arrest for the murder of Aliana Dettick. You have the right to remain silent, anything you say may be used against you in a court of law—”

I pulled into the driveway and shut off the car. Ky didn’t make any effort to move. I put my hand on his shoulder, “C’mon, Ky, let’s go inside.” I said gently.

He still didn’t move.

“There’s an entire bottle of whisky waiting for us.”

He sighed and opened the car door. “Fine.”

I grabbed my briefcase and locked the car behind us. The sky was bright tonight, covered with glittering stars. I breathed in deeply, the cold night air stinging my lungs.

The house was freezing. Kyden made his way to the kitchen while I turned up the thermostat.

Some things never change.

I kicked off my shoes and sat on the couch, pulling out my phone to check my emails. Ky plopped down next to me, a pint of Ben and Jerry's in one hand, vodka in the other, and a bottle of cranberry juice tucked under his arm.

"Interesting snack choice," I said.

"Don't knock it till you try it," He said, eyes closed.

I switched on the TV. Ky didn't like silence, he found it unsettling. I wanted to do anything I could to make him feel better. He had thrown himself into preparing for the trial, and I knew that it was his way of distracting himself from dealing with her death. Now that the trial was over, the shock was settling in. In preparation, I had talked to a counselor. I wanted to know how to help Ky deal with his grief and be as supportive as possible. I felt powerless to help him.

I was dealing with it okay since I hardly knew Aliana; we'd only met twice. Ky usually went to her house, but I knew it was serious. When he met her, his demeanor changed. He was always smiling and laughing. It was clear to me that he'd loved her.

"Fair enough," I said, pouring some vodka into a glass, but before I could add the juice, Ky grabbed the glass, downed it straight, and slammed it back on the table. The sharp crack echoed off the walls and my eardrums, making me flinch. The glass wobbled near the edge.

He leaned back against the couch. "I don't know what to do, or how to feel, or how I'll ever get past this!" He shouted, pressing his hands into his head as if he could block the painful reality. He took a deep breath and whispered, "I loved her, Ry. It hurts, it just hurts."

His foot bumped the coffee table, and the glass shattered as it hit the floor. I caught a brief glimpse of the beautiful rainbow reflecting off the sparkling shards that fell to the ground. One of the pieces struck my foot, drawing a beautiful, bright red bead of blood that swelled up where it had struck my foot.

Focus.

I tore my eyes away and reached over to rest a hand on Ky's shoulder. His eyes flickered shut at my touch, and I felt him relax slightly. I took a breath, "Honestly? There isn't much I can say that will make you feel better, and that sucks. But I'm here with you, like always."

He leaned against the side of the couch, he placed his feet on the coffee table, shoes and all. I grabbed a blanket for him. "The alcohol will help way more than I will."

He snorted, eyes still closed.

"It doesn't make sense. Who would kill her? And why?" He said, as I poured him another glass. "Why the hell would they think *I* killed her?"

"They'll figure it out, Ky. Unfortunately, people are more likely to be murdered by their partner than anyone else. They were just trying to be thorough."

"I guess..."

We stayed silent for a while. Eventually, Ky started to fall asleep, the combination of exhaustion and intoxication catching up to him. His face was still wet with tears. I straightened his blanket, making sure it covered him completely.

"Get some sleep, okay?" I whispered, and he nodded drowsily, but his eyes flickered open as I turned away.

"Wait, Ry?"

"Yeah?" I turned back around.

"Do you know if they uh- what they did with her clothes?"

My eyes widened, "Yeah--"

"I want her jacket, the red leather one she always wore. She loved that thing," he asked, his voice catching. A bittersweet smile flashed across his face, but faded quickly.

“They didn’t find her jacket, and she wasn’t wearing it when she— sorry, Ky. But we can go look at her belongings tomorrow,” I said, my throat tight.

He nodded, and his eyes closed again.

There, on our worn-out blue couch, he had never looked so small or so broken. A brief thought flashed through my mind, a thought that maybe I had made a mistake.

Still, I got up, quietly making my way down the hallway. I took off my suit, carefully draping it over a hanger. I desperately needed sleep, especially since Kyden would be relying on me to help him grieve the loss of the woman he loved. He had relied on me since we were kids, and he knew I would always look after him.

Before I got into bed, I went into the bathroom to brush my teeth. While the water was still running, I closed the toilet lid and stepped on top of it.

The interesting thing about the truth is that the best lies, the most believable ones, aren’t the ones that appear perfect. They aren’t rehearsed over and over and told so convincingly that everyone believes them in their entirety.

I slid aside one of the white textured ceiling panels, trying to be quiet, so as not to wake Ky. I reached up, my fingers searching for what I knew they would find.

Maybe if someone had paid more attention, if they had noticed I’d answered a little too fast, that I was a little too convinced of Kyden’s innocence, that I stared at my best friend a little too fondly, or that I had weaved my defense together a little too thoroughly, none of this would’ve worked.

People don’t tell the truth flawlessly. They stutter, mess up their sentences, forget details, and tell inconsistent stories. The real truth is authentic.

The soft caress of leather against my skin satiated my slightly guilty conscience. The red leather jacket was brilliant, a skillfully constructed work of art. Just like the best of lies, skillfully woven from a grain of truth.

And this lie I'd fabricated was my most beautiful work of art.

I turned off the sink, glancing down the hallway at Kyden, still passed out on the couch. Turning back around, I snuck outside with the jacket in hand, closing the sliding door with a soft click. I lit the bonfire pit in our backyard with a splash of gasoline and a flickering match. Soon, flames licked up the side of the pit, burning with an insatiable desire to destroy everything they touched.

Including the secret that I needed to put to rest once and for all.

As humans, we consider our humanity our greatest quality, but we often forget that it is also our fatal flaw. We tend to see the best in everyone. We ignore the small, insistent voice in the back of our heads that whispers truth. We see in others what we want to see.

And that's exactly what I had been counting on.

This was our new beginning, I told myself as I tossed the red leather jacket into the fire. The scent of vanilla and cherry blossom lingered in the air as the flames engulfed it. I stood there and watched it burn. The more it burned, the lighter I felt.

I did it.

I knew Kyden's DNA would be on the knife. That his DNA would also be all over Aliana's house. I knew the case would be dismissed due to circumstantial evidence. It was the perfect cover. The perfect crime.

Finally, when all that remained was ashes, smoke, and the sweet sense of satisfaction, I doused the fire with a bucket of water and went back inside our house. I peered into the living

room, where Kyden still slept. I glanced at the beautiful tangle of purple-blue veins that caressed the side of his throat, throbbing slowly and steadily with the beat of his heart.

I couldn't help but smile slightly as I turned down the hall.

You're mine now, Kyden. All mine.