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*Anatomy
of an Alibi*

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of an Alibi*

CHAPTER 1

Aubrey

THE ALIBI

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10

With a single nod of my head, the bartender reaches for the bottle of gin. The crowd has steadily increased in the forty-five minutes I've occupied this barstool, and I'm thankful the place was relatively empty when I arrived.

These old wood floors really sell the honky-tonk vibe, but they practically attacked me the second I walked into the room. I nearly took out a waiter and his tray of drinks, along with a couple of patrons whose only mistake was being too close to me when my three-inch heel got stuck between two boards. There are a few things I'll miss from my time here, but these shoes aren't one of them.

The second Negroni of the night appears in front of me. "Wanna order food?"

Glancing at the bartender's name tag, I say, "No thanks, Ray. Just drinking tonight."

He moves to the cooler and pulls out two Ultras for the girl who has wedged herself between my seat and the one next to me while I brace myself for that first sip. I get a thimbleful down without cringing. An improvement.

“You sure I’m making it right?”

I have Ray’s full attention, the two beers forgotten in his hand. Maybe I wasn’t as composed as I thought I was.

When I ordered my first cocktail, he was surprised by my choice. This crowd looks like they lean more toward well drinks and shots when ordering hard liquor.

“Yes, it’s just right.” And it’s made exactly the way it should be. It’s not his fault I hate gin. I lift the glass and take a healthy swig, praying I don’t have to wobble my way to the ladies’ room to throw it back up.

He seems satisfied and turns his attention back to the girl, exchanging the two bottles for some crumpled bills.

Tapping my phone screen, I see it’s only been seven minutes since the last time I checked. I need to stay at least another hour. If only I could stir my drink in the same way I would push unwanted food around my plate so I could spare Ray’s feelings.

The couple on my right drops a few bucks on the bar before taking their leave, but the stool next to me is only empty for a second or two.

“Miller Lite,” the man says when Ray asks for his order.

He takes a deep drink as soon as it’s set in front of him. “What a fucking day,” he mumbles to himself, then runs a hand down his face.

God, do I know that feeling. I could say the exact same thing about the day I’ve had. I know what was rough about mine, but I’m biting my tongue so I don’t ask him about his. I remind myself I didn’t come here

for idle chitchat with strangers, no matter how antsy I am for this night to be over.

The man turns in my direction as if summoned by the questions slamming against my tightly closed lips. His gaze sweeps across me, and I pull my hand off the bar and bury it in my lap before he has a chance to spot the rather large diamond solitaire and platinum band on my left ring finger.

Instead of analyzing the motive behind that impulse, I swivel around on my stool. My back is to the bar as I take in the scene in front of me. Smoke clouds the already dim lighting, making everything look a bit hazy.

It's only a few seconds before he mirrors my move. There's at least a couple of feet between us, but sitting here like this, next to him, feels oddly intimate.

In desperate need of a distraction to pass this last bit of time, I lean toward him and ask, "Have you heard this band before?"

Spotlights highlight the trio of instruments on the tiny stage in the corner of the room. The band finished setting up just after I arrived but has since wandered to the end of the bar, where they've held court with a group of girls here for a bachelorette party. From the looks of it, it doesn't seem like *Live Music* will happen anytime soon.

"I haven't." His voice is deep and rich. Nodding toward the three pool tables at the other end of the room, he says, "Most people come here to play pool and drink, not listen to the band." There are lines of stacked quarters down the side rails of each pool table staking claim on future games. Looks like you've got to get here pretty early if you want a chance to play. He adds, "Gary, the owner, has the worst taste in music, so I wouldn't get your hopes up that they're any good."

I steal peeks of the stranger next to me while he watches the game

closest to us. We look like we're about the same age, so I'm guessing he's a few years shy of thirty. He's attractive but still seems approachable, which is the best combination. His deeply tanned face and rough hands tell me he doesn't work in an office, but the pressed button-down says he likes to look good when he's off work. No wedding ring. Nice watch. Altogether, it's a pretty good package.

He eyes the drink in front of me. It's still mostly full but clearly watered down now that the ice has melted and a river of condensation has soaked the napkin under my glass.

"You want something else to drink?" He angles toward me and I do the same until we're almost facing each other.

"I can't order anything else," I say with a shrug.

His head tilts as he analyzes my words. "But I can order something else for you." It's not a question.

My eyes fall on the bottle resting in his grip.

The man raises his beer and holds up two fingers. I can't look at Ray when he sets one down in front of me. Once he's moved on to his next customer, I ditch the cocktail and grab the beer, but before I can take a drink, he taps the neck of his to the neck of mine. "I hope this is more to your liking."

I've never been so happy to cleanse my palate. I blot my lips with the paper napkin after I take a long swig. "Thank you for the drink."

His stare holds mine while I silently recite *This is not why you're here!* over and over. I shouldn't be talking to this stranger. Letting this stranger buy me drinks.

"I really want to say *You're not from around here*, because I know everyone from around here, but I realize it's the absolute worst line."

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. "Yeah, don't say that," I say, even though he already did.

This is where I should mention Ben.

But I'm tired of talking about Ben. Ben and his high-profile cases. I'm over explaining how a wife can get really bored when her husband spends more time at the office than at home. And as soon as I mention Ben, this man's gaze would search for my still-hidden left hand. His eyes would move to the diamond earrings and the Chanel purse hanging off the back of my stool, then to the smoky eyes and red-stained lips that match my dress perfectly. I can already anticipate the change in his demeanor after he has summed me up with such a quick appraisal: what a spoiled brat I must be.

So I don't mention Ben or demanding clients or big court cases.

The stranger next to me doesn't offer his name, nor do I offer mine. Maybe there's a woman he should mention but chooses not to as well. Maybe we're both enjoying a few minutes in which we could be anyone other than who we're supposed to be.

"I'm calling your bluff that you know everyone here."

His eyes light up. "Try me."

I swivel back around toward the crowd and he does the same. My eyes sweep across the room until they land on a middle-aged man in faded jeans and a black leather biker vest covered in patches. No shirt underneath, just the vest. It's not a bad look, but in my opinion the arms need to be droolworthy to really pull it off, and sadly, his are not. I lean closer and try to point at my target without being too obvious. "What's that guy's name, and tell me one interesting fact about him."

The space between us shrinks even more. He laughs when he sees

who I'm asking about. "Ah, we're starting out with an easy one, I guess. That's Kenny Hudson. He manages the bakery on Commerce Street. While you would think there's a Harley in the parking lot with his name on it, he actually drove here in a beige Corolla. He bought that vest on eBay. A couple of guys roasted him the first time he showed up wearing it, and he retaliated by taking his apple crumble off the menu for the next week. No one has said anything to him since."

I can't stop the laugh that started somewhere in the middle of his description of Kenny. "I don't believe you."

He shrugs one shoulder. "It's a mean apple crumble." His face is close and the corner of his mouth is kicked up in an adorable little smirk. "Maybe that's what brought you to town? Kenny's world-famous apple crumble?"

The smile on my face feels permanent now. This guy is ridiculously charming. "Okay, game on." I scan the crowd once more. "What about the woman leaning against the jukebox?" She's got her back to the machine and seems oblivious to everything and everyone around her while endlessly scrolling on her phone.

"Oh, that's a sad tale for sure," he says. "That's Frieda von Samsung."

I almost spit out my beer. "Did you just say Frieda von Samsung?"

"Yeah, she's the missing heiress of the Samsung empire. But she's an Apple girl at heart so she ran away and has been in hiding here ever since, so she can live in peace with her iPhone." He leans a little closer. "Did you come here to find Frieda von Samsung so you could collect the reward?"

I'm not even trying to hold my laugh back. "You caught me. I have been tracking Frieda since she fled from home."

The next thirty minutes fly by as we move from person to person, each description more and more absurd. And each one ending with his increasingly far-fetched guesses for why I'm here. The band has finally

started playing, and by the second song the dance floor is about half full, even though this *is* the worst band I've ever heard.

"Had high hopes for this band but it looks like Gary's taste hasn't gotten any better," he says, nodding toward the guys onstage.

"Oh, I hate to hear that." I give him a small frown. "I'm their manager. Cheese Freedom has a lot of potential. I'm determined to make them the next One Direction."

For a split second, I've caught him off guard, then his mouth stretches into a smile, and I have to admit he's not only charming, he's devastatingly handsome.

"Just for that, you're going to have to dance with me while Cheese Freedom destroys this Tom Petty song."

Before I can even consider whether to take him up on his offer, my screen lights up with the alarm that was set earlier, and I'm reminded very quickly my day isn't over just yet. I swipe it from the bar and turn it off, then flag Ray down and make the universal sign for the check.

"You're going already?" the man asks once we're both turned back toward the bar.

"Yes, I'm sorry." It's been fun killing time flirting with him but I need to go.

Ray hands me my bill and I give him a credit card without looking at the total. When he returns, I scribble a generous tip on the slip and sign across the bottom line.

Sliding off the stool, I pray I don't roll an ankle so I can get out of this bar with some dignity still intact. Just before I step away, the man asks, "Can I walk you out?"

I'm shaking my head before he finishes his question. I give him a quick glance then say, "I needed to laugh more than you know, so thank you."

I make my way to the door in slow, steady steps. The second I'm outside, I strip off the heels and run to the car.

Once I'm inside, I crank the engine and stare at the clock on the dash as I idle in the parking lot. A couple stumbles into the passenger-side door, startling me enough that I let out a startled cry. The guy is pressing the girl right against the window, and his hands are pushing up the back of her shirt. This cannot be happening right now. I knock on the glass loudly, spooking them like they did me. They both lean down to look inside the car then give drunken waves before finding another spot to continue their make-out session.

Stopping here for a drink was really not a great idea. I put the car in drive. This won't be my problem for much longer.

CHAPTER 2

Aubrey

THE ALIBI

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10

At this hour, it's a quick drive back to the gas station, the same one I stopped at just twelve hours ago on my way into town. The foggy mist that has settled around town distorts the glow of the neon lights that edge the overhang above the gas pumps, giving the night an eerie feel. My time at Chantilly's was a nice distraction, but the unease I've had most of the day is back. I grab the plastic bag from the passenger seat, drop the phone inside, then hop out of the car.

It's more crowded than I thought it would be given the hour and the size of this town. The haze plays tricks on my eyes as strangers seemingly slip in and out of existence as they step into the darkness.

The bright fluorescent lights are a shock when I step inside the store, causing me to squint as I make my way to the small public bathroom.

I must have beat her here.