

Murder suspect defends outer-worldly alibi in court.

The Alibi

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# THE ALIBI

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## Chapter Two

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He awoke lying on his right side with a pillow propped under his head to keep his neck straight. The air was cold and dry; it had a medicinal flavor and though light was limited, Riley could see other beds flanking his own.

Remaining motionless, Riley waited for his eyes to adjust and listened for other occupants; there were none. He could hear only his own heart and lungs and the omnipresent buzz of the fluorescent hallway light. What had happened? Where was he? He searched his memory.

At first, nothing, a barren desert... a few tumbleweeds rolled lazily through... and then...

A few

Drops

Of water.

Alice.

Was.

Dead.

The fight, the drive, the cop...

It all came back in a horrific rush, Alice was dead, the fight, the drive the cop...

You're under arrest for the murder of your wife, Alice Aisling...

With a tiny nudge, the floodgates creaked open, and now

Riley found himself without the strength to push them shut against a torrent of memories. He remembered the last night he and Alice had shared; he remembered the first time they'd made love. He had memories of their first date and their first fight, he remembered Alice, looking pale and lost and lovely at his father's funeral. He recalled holding Junie's new baby, a warm bundle who giggled up at him and drooled on his wristwatch.

Awash in this torrent, Riley struggled to keep afloat, and noticed as he did that other things were awash with him. Alice bobbed a few feet away; there was a jagged hole in the side of her skull and the cold water hurried in. *I'm too good for you and I don't love you!* The cop-thing who had arrested him was floating nearby too, its blonde hair wet against the hideous grey face. It hissed and started paddling toward him.

*No!* He had to get those floodgates closed and escape before he drowned or was drowned. Summoning all his strength, he pushed desperately at the obstinate gates, his feet churning against the water like fleshy propellers.

Even as the cop-thing splashed closer and closer, something more terrible approached, unseen. He could sense a giant roiling creature pressing against the gates on the other side... Frantic now, Riley pushed with all his might, crying out as the gates resisted a moment longer, then groaned shut. The monstrous memory on the other side howled and pounded at the gates with a dozen terrible tentacles, then splashed away and faded into the darkness.

Riley sat up sobbing, his face drenched with tears and sweat, and saw a figure standing in one corner.

"Who are you?"

The figure took a few steps out of the corner and put his hand out to flick a light switch. Fluorescent light flooded the room, and Riley once again waited for his eyes to adjust before he could see a man about his own age. The man was wearing a lab coat and had blond hair. "I'm Doctor Walker. You're in a prison medical facility. Someone's been waiting to speak with you."

Doctor Walker opened the door of the infirmary a crack and said something to someone in the hallway. Then the door opened all the way and a woman entered.

“I’m the Chief of Police, Mr. Aisling. My name’s Sarah Janis. Now that you’re conscious, I just wanted to be sure you’re aware of your rights. The arresting officer said she didn’t have a chance to Mirandize you before you passed out. Do you feel up to answering some questions?”

Riley took a deep breath.

The cops were swarming Junie’s house, buzzing angrily around the crime scene, flitting around the grid, social and efficient. They collected evidence as though it were pollen—laboriously, meticulously, and hungrily. Detective Hilde Casey often wished she had never been promoted, for though she was still a part of the hive, she was also forever in flight outside of it, not that the sensation was unfamiliar. She had worked twice as hard as any man, and sacrificed twice as much to advance in the force. She never expected to feel empty and depressed upon her promotion to detective, but here it was—a year later and no happiness in sight.

The victim’s sister, Junie, sat in the kitchen, drinking coffee laced with tears. Casey thought of her own sister, the cop who had arrested Riley Aisling, who she worried about every day, and seated herself at the table. “I’m Detective Casey. Sorry you had to walk in on this.”

“Thank you. But it was only a matter of time.”

How interesting. “What do you mean by that?”

Junie’s lip curled a bit at this; it displayed her canines and was extraordinary to watch. “My sister never grew up, Detective. She was used to getting what she wanted, from anybody. If that meant drugs, or sex, or money, or anything else, she got it. Half the time, though, she didn’t *know* what she wanted. She was dangerously impulsive. It was bound to catch up with her.”

Casey nodded. “What about her husband?”

A shake of the head; a long blink. "Riley thrives on routine and comfort. He was an impulsive acquisition—he's something she didn't want anymore."

Hilde fell silent a moment. Her own relationship with the opposite sex was strained, and not only because she worked eighty-four hours a week. She just couldn't help but feel that when there was a man in her life, she had acquired a new tedious and nauseating chore, like promising to care for a neighbor's diarrheic mutt, and it was always a relief when the neighbor returned from vacation. She made it crystal clear to any man she became involved with: Sex was all she expected from a relationship; isn't that what they both wanted anyway? "Do you think he killed her?"

Junie lit a cigarette and unconsciously tapped the tip on the rim of her empty coffee cup. "No. Alice was infuriating, and she was unfaithful and mean, but Riley's a gentle guy. I can't see him... doing that to her. He loved her very much."

Love hurts. Sometimes it kills. "Thank you for talking with me. Can I give you my card? Call anytime, okay? By the way, do you know who that is on the answering machine?"

Junie shrugged and dragged off her cigarette. "Alice had men. That's one of them."

Hilde smiled. *Had men*. Interesting choice of words, like *had horses* or *had cars*. Finding out where that phone call came from would be no problem—they'd just check the phone records—but if the call originated from a public phone, the caller's identity would be more difficult to ascertain. She said, "Uh-huh. Did her husband know she was unfaithful?"

"He knew. Riley... just didn't know how to do anything about it." Junie's azure eyes were wistful. Ah. Perhaps she was envious of one particular possession? Junie was pretty, but not a knockout like her sister, and Hilde had to wonder how far sibling rivalry could push a person.

"I'm sorry I have to ask you this, but where were you this morning, between 3:30 and 4:30 A.M.?"

"I was at a party."

"Witnesses?"

“About twenty.” She smiled wanly. “It was a really good party, and my mom took the kid.”

Hilde nodded, happy to have eliminated a suspect already. “I’ll need the names of your witnesses, and, for the ones you remember, their phone numbers. Give them to that officer over there, okay? I’m heading back to the station. Remember, call any time.”

Riley Aisling was smaller than Hilde expected, since she had inspected the victim’s cracked skull and her devastated face bones, but he was still bigger than his dead wife. Hilde had met many killers, perhaps a dozen in her ten years on the force, but as she imagined that mask whispering into the ear of a dying woman as he pulled the cord tight around her throat, Hilde settled without difficulty into her bad cop routine.

“So why’d you do it, huh?” she asked as she turned the chair around, swung a leg over it, and leaned on its back. She always sat backward in chairs like this one; she couldn’t help it. It was a cop thing.

Aisling’s mask warmed, and the eyes met hers. “I didn’t do anything,” he said in a tiny shocked voice.

“Give me a break, pal!” Hilde snorted. “You’re in this wonderland because there is evidence to support an arrest, understand? I saw what you did to her. I just want to know why.”

“No,” Aisling said in the same tiny voice. “We had a fight, I left, and I drove away...”

“Then what?”

“I can’t remember.”

Hilde stood up and leaned over her quarry. “That’s bullshit, buddy, and you know it. Tell me what happened, or you’re likely to find yourself in very high demand among the state’s homosexual prison population. You found out she was cheating? You got angry?” Her voice was growing in volume, while his seemed to be shrinking. “Well?”

The man cowered pathetically. “Yes,” he whispered, “I found out for sure. I got angry. But I drove away. I don’t remember what happened then, but I wouldn’t hurt Alice!”

“Oh, then someone else just happened to come along at the exact moment of your departure? Someone who did *this* to her?” She produced a few Polaroids one of the cops had snapped during her initial investigation of the crime scene. Aisling’s face drained of color; he made a horrified sound, shook his head and started to cry. His shaking right hand, attached to the left with a metal link umbilical, brushed new tears off his cheeks while the chain clinked.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Hilde pressed. The man’s eyes were saucers. “Not a pretty picture, is it? It’s kind of like the blood’s going to drip right out of this photo, huh?”

The trembling suspect whispered, “Oh, God,” and puked all over the table. Then he fainted.

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