The Alibi Man

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Extract

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Chapter 1

SHE FLOATED on the face of the pool like an exotic water lily. Her hair fanned out around her head, undulating, a silken lily pad to drift on. The sheer layers of fabric that made up her dress skimmed the surface, backlit by the pool lights, purple
and fuchsia, the shimmering skin of a rare sea creature that came out only at night in the depths along a coral reef.

She was a vision, a mythical goddess dancing on the water, her slender arms stretched wide to beckon him.

She was a siren, tempting him closer and closer to the water. Her blue eyes stared at him, her full, sensuous lips parted slightly, inviting his kiss.

He had tasted her kiss. He had held her close, felt the heat of her skin against his.

She was a dream.

She was a nightmare.

She was dead.

He opened his cell phone and in punched a number. The phone on the other end rang . . . and rang . . . and rang. Then a gruff and groggy voice answered.

'What the hell?'

'I need an alibi.'

Chapter 2

I AM NOT a cop. I am not a private investigator, despite all rumors to the contrary. I ride horses for a living but don't make a nickel doing it. I am an outcast from my chosen profession and I don't want another.

Unfortunately, our fates have little to do with what we want or don't want. I know that all too well.

That February morning I walked out of the guest cottage I had called home for the past year, just as the sun was beginning to break. The eastern horizon was color-saturated in stripes of hot orange, hot pink, and bright yellow. I like that hour before most of the world wakes. The world seems still and silent, and I feel like I'm the only person in it.

The broad-leaved St. Augustine grass was heavy with dew, and thin layers of fog hovered over the fields, waiting for the Florida sun to vaporize them. The smell of green plants, dirty canal water, and horses hung in the air, a pungent organic perfume.

It was Monday, which meant I had the peace and quiet of absolute privacy. My old friend and savior Sean Avadon, who owned the small horse farm on the outskirts of Wellington, had taken his latest amour to South Beach, where they would oil themselves and roast in the sun with a few thousand other beautiful people. Irina, our groom, had the day off.

All my life I have preferred the company of horses to people. Horses are honest, straightforward creatures without guile or ulterior motive. You always know where you stand with a horse. In my experience, I can't say the same for human beings.

I went about the morning routine of feeding the eight beautiful creatures that lived in Sean's barn. All of them had been imported from Europe, each costing more than the average middle-class American family home. The stable had been designed by a renowned Palm Beach architect in the Caribbean plantation style. The high ceiling was lined with teak, and huge art deco chandeliers salvaged from a Miami hotel hung above the center aisle.

That morning I didn't settle in with my usual first cup of coffee to

listen to the soft sounds of the horses eating. I hadn't slept well—not that I ever did. Worse than usual, I should say. Twenty minutes here, ten minutes there. The argument had played over and over in my mind, banging off the walls of my skull and leaving me with a dull, throbbing headache.

I was selfish. I was a coward. I was a bitch.

Some of it was true. Maybe all of it. I didn't care. I had never pretended to be anything other than what I was. I had never pretended I wanted to change.

More upsetting to me than the argument itself was the fact that it was haunting me. I didn't want that. All I wanted to do was get away from it.

I had lost time thinking about it. The horses had finished their breakfast and were on to other things—hanging their heads out their windows or over their stall doors. One had grabbed a thick cotton lead rope left hanging beside his door and was swinging it by his teeth around and around his head like a trick roper, amusing
himself.

'All right, Arli,' I muttered. 'You're it.'

I pulled the big gray gelding out of his stall, saddled him, and rode off the property.

The development where Sean's farm was located was called Palm Beach Point—which was neither a point nor anywhere near Palm Beach. All horse properties, it was common to see riders on or along the road or on the sandy trails that ran along the canals. Polo ponies were often jogged along the road three and four
abreast on either side of an exercise rider. But it was Monday, the one day in seven most horse people take off.

I was alone, and the horse beneath me didn't like it. Clearly I was up to no good—or so he thought. He was a nervous sort, highstrung, and spooky on the trail. I had chosen him specifically for that reason. My attention couldn't wander on this one or I would find myself in the air, then on the ground, then walking home.

Nothing could be in my head except his every step, every twitch of
an ear, every tensing of a muscle.

The trail ran straight with the road on my right and a dark, dirty, narrow canal on my left. I sat, bumped the gelding with a leg, and he jumped into a canter, pulling against the reins, wanting to run. A small group of white ibis browsing along the bank startled and took wing. Arli bolted at the explosion of bright white feathers, leaped in the air, squealed, bucked, and took off, his long legs reaching for as much

ground as he could cover.

A saner person would have been choking on terror, hauling back on the reins, praying to survive. I let the horse run out of control. Adrenaline rushed through my veins like a narcotic.

He ran as if hell was closing in behind us. I stuck to him like a tick, sitting low over my center of gravity. Ahead, the road made a hard turn right.

I didn't touch the reins. Arli ran straight, leaving the road, staying with the canal. Without hesitation, he bounded across a small ditch and kept running, past the dead end of another dirt road.

He could have broken a leg, fallen on me, thrown me, paralyzed me. He could have stumbled hard enough to unseat me and dragged me by one foot caught in the stirrup. But it wasn't the horse that frightened me, or the potential for injury or death.

What frightened me was the excitement I felt, my euphoric disregard for my own life.

It was that feeling that finally made me wrestle for control—of the horse and of myself. He came back to me a little at a time, from a dead run to a gallop to a canter to a huge prancing trot. When he finally came more or less to a halt, his head was up in the air, and he blew loudly through flared nostrils. Steam rose from his body and mine, both of us drenched in sweat. My heart was racing. I pressed a trembling hand against his neck. He snorted, shook his head, jumped sideways.

I didn't know how far we had run. The fields were long behind us. Woods stood on both sides of the dirt road. Tall, spindly pine trees thrust themselves toward the sky like spears. Dense scrub choked the far bank of the canal.

Arli danced beneath me, nervous, skittish, ready to bolt. He ducked his big head and tried to tug the reins out of my hands. I could feel his muscles quivering beneath me, and it dawned on me that this was not excitement he was feeling. This was fear.

He snorted again and shook his head violently. I scanned the banks of the canal, the edge of the woods on either side. Wild boar roamed through this scrub. Wild dogs—pit bulls set loose by rednecks who had beat them into meanness, then didn't want them around. People had reported sighting the occasional panther in the

area. Rumors always abounded that something or another had escaped from Lion Country Safari. Alligators hunted in the canals.

My body tensed before I could even process what caught my eye.

A human arm reached up out of the black water of the canal, as if stretching out for help that was far too late in coming. Something—a bobcat, perhaps, or a very ambitious fox—had tried to pull the arm out of

the water, but not for any benevolent reason. The hand and wrist had been mangled, the flesh torn, some bone exposed. Black flies hovered and crawled over the limb like a living lacy glove.

There were no obvious tire tracks leading over the bank and into the water. That happened all the time—too much to drink, asleep at the wheel, no common sense. People plunged to their deaths in South Florida's canals every day of the week, it seemed. But there was no sign of a car here.

I took a hard grip on the reins with one hand, pulled my cell phone from my belt with the other, and punched in a number.

The phone on the other end of the line rang twice.

'Landry.' The voice was curt.

'You're going to want to come out here,' I said.

'Why? So you can kick me in the teeth again?'

'I've found a body,' I said without emotion. 'An arm, to be precise. Come, don't come. Do what you want.'

I snapped the phone shut, ignored it when it rang, and turned my horse for home.

This was going to be one hell of a day.

Chapter 3

A PAIR OF deputies in a white-and-green Palm Beach County cruiser rolled through the gate behind Landry. I had ridden back to the farm to eliminate the complication of a horse at a crime scene, but I hadn't had time to shower or change clothes.

Even if I'd had time, I wouldn't have gone to the trouble. I wanted to show James Landry I didn't care what he thought of me. I wasn't interested in impressing him. Or maybe I wanted to impress him with my indifference.

I stood beside my car with my arms crossed over my chest, one leg cocked to the side, the portrait of pissy impatience. Landry got out of his car and came toward me but didn't look at me. He surveyed his surroundings through a pair of black wraparounds. He had a profile that belonged on the face of a Roman coin. The
sleeves of his shirt were neatly rolled halfway up his forearms, but he had yet to jerk his tie loose at his throat. The day was young.

As he finally drew breath to speak, I said, 'Follow me,' got in my car, and drove past him out the gate, leaving him standing there on the drive.

A short gallop on a fast horse, the location of my gruesome discovery was more difficult to find by car. It was easier to lead the way than try to give directions to a man who wouldn't listen anyway. The road bent around, came to a T. I took a left and another left, passing a driveway with a busted-out motorcycle turned into a
mailbox holder. Debris from the last hurricane—three months past—was still piled high along the road, waiting for a truck to come haul it away.

Dust billowed up behind my car even as I stopped the vehicle and got out. Landry got out of the county sedan he had pulled for the day, swatting at the dust in his face. He still refused to look at me.

'Why didn't you stay with body?' he snapped. 'You were a cop. You know better.'

'Oh, screw you, Landry,' I shot back. 'I'm a private citizen. I didn't even have to call you.'

'Then why did you?'

'There's your victim, Ace,' I said, pointing across the canal. 'Or part of. Go knock yourself out.'

He looked across the brackish water to the branch the human limb had snagged on. The flies raised up like a handkerchief in the breeze as a snowy egret poked its long beak at the hand.

'Fucking nature,' Landry muttered. He picked up a stone and flung it at the bird. The egret squawked in outrage and walked away on yellow stilt legs.

'Detective Landry?' one of the deputies called. The two of them stood at the hood of the cruiser, waiting. 'You want us to call CSI?'

'No,' he barked.

He walked away fifty yards down the bank, where a culvert allowed a narrow land bridge to connect one side of the canal to the other. I shouldn't have, but I followed him. He pretended to ignore me.

The hand belonged to a woman. Up close, through the veil of flies, I could see the manicure on the broken nail of the pinky finger. Deep-red polish. A night on the town had ended very badly.

Blond hair floated on the surface of the water. There was more of her down there.

Landry looked up and down the bank, scanning the ground for shoe prints or tire tracks or any sign of how the body had come to be in this place. I did the same.

'There.' I pointed to a partial print pressed into the soft dirt just at the very edge of the bank, maybe ten feet away from the victim.

Landry squatted down, scowled at it, then called to the deputies. 'Bring me some markers!'

'You're welcome,' I said.

Finally he looked at me. For the first time I noticed that his face was drawn, as if he hadn't slept well. The set of his mouth was sour. 'Is there a reason for you to be here?'

'It's a free country,' I said. 'More or less.'

'I don't want you here.'

'It's my vic.'

'You're not on the job,' he said. 'You quit that too. Remember?'

His words hit me like a fist to the sternum. I actually took a step back at the verbal blow, not able to prevent myself from gasping.

'You are such an asshole,' I snapped back, more upset than I wanted to show. More upset than I wanted to be. 'Why should I want to be hooked up with you? You don't get your way and the first thing you do is fight dirty. You really know how to sell yourself, Landry. I can't believe women aren't beating down your door,
you fucking prick.'

My eyes were burning, anger trembling through me like the vibrations of a plucked wire. I turned to go back to the body, thinking that the woman below the surface of the filthy water had undoubtedly been put there by some man she shouldn't have trusted—as if there were any other kind.

The arm seemed to wave at me in acknowledgment, and I thought I was hallucinating. Then it waved again—violently—and I knew instantly what was happening. Before I could react, there was a terrific splashing and thrashing, and water came up at me in a sheet.

Landry shouted behind me, 'Jesus Christ!'

One of the deputies called, 'Gator!'

Landry hit me in the back and shoved me to the side. As I tumbled onto my hands and knees, a gun went off above me, the report like the crack of a whip in my ears.

I scrambled away from the bank and tried to regain my feet, the worn soles of my riding boots slipping out from under me on the damp grass.

Landry emptied his Glock 9mm into the churning water. One of the deputies ran along the bank on the other side, shouldering a shotgun, shouting, 'I got him! I got him!'

The blast was nearly deafening.

'Son of a bitch!' Landry shouted.

As I watched, the perpetrator floated to the surface on its back, a bloody, ragged, gaping hole torn in its pale yellow belly. An alligator about five feet long, with part of a human torso still caught between its jaws.

'Shit,' Landry said. 'There goes my scene.'

He swore and stomped around, looking for something to hit or kick.

I went to the edge of the bank and looked down.

Alligators are known for rolling with their prey in the water, disorienting
the thrashing victim, drowning them even as the gator bit through tissue and bone, rupturing veins and arteries. This one had jerked his intended meal free of the branches she had become entangled with. The gator may have even stashed the body there himself earlier—another common practice: stuffing the victim away for later, letting the body begin to decompose while wedged under a tree trunk.

Nature is cruel. Almost as cruel as human beings.

I stared down into the muddy water, looking for the rest of the body to surface. When it did, I went numb from head to toe. I mouthed the words *Oh, my God,* but I don't think I said them out loud. I felt like I

was floating out of my body. I sank back
down to my knees, and my hands covered my mouth—to stifle a sound, to keep from vomiting, I didn't know which.

The pale blue face that stared back at me should have been beautiful—full lips, high cheekbones. She should have had translucent blue eyes the color of a Siberian winter sky, but the small fish and other creatures that lived in the canal had begun to feed on them. More of Mother Nature's handiwork: a death mask from a horror movie.

Over the years that I had been a street cop and a narcotics detective, I had seen many bodies. I had looked down into the lifeless faces of countless corpses. I had learned not to think of them as people. The essence of the person was gone. What remained was evidence of a crime. Something to be processed and cataloged.

I couldn't do that as I stared at this face. I couldn't detach, couldn't shut down my mind as it flashed images of her alive. I could hear her voice—insolent, dismissive, Russian. I could see her walk across the stable yard—lithe, lazy, elegant, like a cheetah.

Her name was Irina Markova. I had worked side by side with her for more than a year.

'Elena . . . Elena . . . Elena . . .'

It registered somewhere in the back of my mind that someone was trying to speak to me, but it sounded as if the voice was coming from very far away.

A firm hand rested on my shoulder.

'Elena. Are you all right?'

Landry.

'No,' I said, moving away from his touch.

I fought to stand and prayed not to fall as I walked away. But my legs gave out within a few steps and I went down on my hands and knees. I felt like I couldn't breathe, and yet my stomach heaved and I vomited and choked.

Panic gripped me by the throat—as much from my fear of my own emotions as from what I had seen or from fear of aspirating my own vomit and dying. I wanted to run away from my feelings. I wanted to bolt and run, just as Arli had bolted and run away with me earlier, bringing me to this terrible place.

'Elena.'

Landry's voice was in my ear. His arm came around my shoulders, offering strength and security. I didn't want those things from him. I didn't want anything from him. I didn't want him seeing me this way—weak, vulnerable, out of control.

We had been lovers off and on for the last year. He had decided

he wanted more. I had decided I wanted nothing. Less than ten hours previous, I had pushed him away with both hands, too strong to need him—or so I claimed. I didn't feel very strong now.

'Hey, take it easy,' he said quietly. 'Just try to breathe slowly.'

I pushed at him, wriggled away from him, got to my feet again. I tried to say something—I don't know what. The sounds coming from me weren't words. I put my hands over my face, trying to hold myself together.

'It's Irina,' I said, fighting to regulate my breathing.

'Irina? Irina from Sean's?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, Jesus,' he murmured. 'I'm sorry. I don't know what to say.'

'Don't say anything,' I whispered. 'Please.'

'Elena, you should sit down.'

He told one of the deputies to call in a crime-scene unit and ushered me not to my car but to his. I sat down sideways in the passenger seat, bent over my knees, my hands cradling my head.

'You want something to drink?'

'Yeah. Vodka rocks with a twist.'

'I have water.'

He handed me a bottle. I rinsed my mouth out.

'Do you have a cigarette?' I asked, not because I was smoker per se but because I had been and, like a lot of cops I knew—Landry included—had never entirely abandoned the bad habit.

'Look in the glove compartment.'

It gave my trembling hands something to do, my mind something small to focus on. It forced me to breathe slowly or choke.

'When was the last time you saw her?'

I took a deep pull on the smoke and exhaled as if I was blowing out candles on a birthday cake, forcing every last bit of air from my lungs.

'Saturday. Late afternoon. She was anxious to go. I offered to feed the horses and take care of night check.'

Unlike myself, Irina had an active social life. Where it took place and with whom I didn't know, but I had often seen her leave her apartment above the stables dressed for trouble.

'Where was she going?'

'I don't know.'

'Where *might* she go?'

I didn't have the strength to shrug. 'Maybe Players or Galipette. Maybe clubbing. Clematis Street.'

'Do you know her friends?'

'No. I imagine they were mostly other grooms, other Russians.'

'Boyfriend?'

'If she had one, she didn't bring him to the farm. She kept her business to herself.'

That was one thing I had always liked about her. Irina didn't burden those around her with raunchy details of her sex life, or who she had seen, or who she had done.

'Has her mood been any different lately?'

I tried a weak laugh. 'No. She's been churlish and arrogant, like always.'

Not sought-after qualities in a groom, but I had never really minded her moods. God knew I made her look like an angel. She had opinions and wasn't shy about voicing them. I respected that. And she was damn good at her job, even if she did sometimes act like she was in forced labor in a Siberian gulag.

'Do you want me to take you home?' Landry asked.

'No. I'm staying.'

'Elena—'

'I'm staying.' I put out the cigarette on the running board of the car and dropped the butt into the ashtray.

I figured he would try to stop me, but he stepped back as I got out of the car.

'Do you know anything about her family?'

'No. I doubt Sean does either. It would never occur to him to ask.'

'She wasn't a member of the taxpaying club?'

I gave him a look.

Undocumented aliens made up a large part of the workforce in the South Florida horse business. They migrated to Wellington every winter, just like the owners and trainers of the five or six thousand horses brought here to compete in some of the biggest, richest equestrian events in the world.

From January to April the town's population tripled, with everything
from billionaires to barely-getting-by. The main show grounds—Palm Beach Polo and Equestrian Club—was a multinational melting pot. Nigerians worked security, Haitians emptied the trash cans, Mexicans and Guatemalans mucked the stalls. Once a
year the INS would make a sweep through the show grounds, scattering illegal aliens like rats being run out of a tenement.

'You know I'm going to call this in and people are going to come out here,' Landry said.

By *people* he meant detectives from the sheriff 's office—not my biggest fan club, despite the fact that I had been one of them. I had also gotten one of them killed in a drug raid three years prior. A bad decision—against orders, of course—a couple of twitchy meth dealers, a recipe for disaster.

I had not escaped unscathed physically or mentally, but I hadn't died either, and there were cops who would never forgive me for that.

'I found the body,' I said. 'Like it or not.'

Not, I thought. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to know the person who had become a corpse ravaged by an alligator. But somehow this trouble had managed to find me, and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

Life's a bitch, and then you die.

Some sooner than others.