

Alibi Song

Chapter 1

I pictured Ray's face as I squeezed the trigger. The creature's head exploded in a satisfying red splash and my score jumped a thousand points. It felt good to at least fantasize about doing him damage. I pretended to blow smoke from the end of the gun while two more creatures slunk from between identical cartoon trees. They looked so much like my ex that I didn't need much imagination, hulking and menacing and almost the right shade of brown. I settled into my gunfighter stance as best I could while wearing a business suit, and blew them both away.

The familiar surroundings almost had me back in a good mood. I breathed in the smell of popcorn and cotton candy. MTV bounced and bopped from the TVs overhead, Billy Idol again. This segued into yet another commercial for the L.A. Olympics. I rolled my eyes as Chuck Mangione blared through all the speakers. The Olympics were months away, but they felt the need to remind us continually. Most days I was so tired of that song I could scream, but today it was reassuring. The world was going on as normal, and so should I. Though my triumph dissolved when this morning's phone call replayed in my head.

I'd been reading production reports in my cubicle when the phone rang.

"Hey, Sandy." So casual, as if he hadn't been threatening me for two months.

My stomach knotted. On reflex I'd grabbed a pair of scissors out of my desk organizer.

"What do you want, Ray?" I'd kept my voice down. Nosey Laurie in the next cubicle was probably listening.

"Attitude," he chuckled. "I've still got your floor mats. Don't you want them back?"

I frowned at the receiver, but kept my voice level. “No. You can have them.” I’d moved and changed my phone number to avoid him, but he thought now I’d want to meet him because he stole the floor mats from my car? I’d since had my car re-keyed.

“My mother asked about you. She wondered why you didn’t come to game night,” he complained. “I told her you were visiting your parents and you’ll be there next time. You should call her.”

“What? I don’t think I should be calling your mother.” I did miss her, though. Everything she said was either kind or funny. I liked his whole family. Loved game night. Too bad I couldn’t just dump him and hang onto them.

“You keep this up, we’re going to end up enemies. Is that what you want?” When his tone changed I could imagine his pinched face, moustache twitching like a giant angry rat. The last time I saw that face two months ago, I’d ended up in the emergency room with multiple contusions.

I froze, all his threats flooding in. If I ever left him he’d promised to gut me with a hunting knife or climb in my window and strangle me in my sleep.

“I didn’t think so.” When I didn’t respond he answered his own question, as if he could sense my fear. I’m sure he could. “Don’t worry about game night. I’ve got someone else I can bring,” he said. “But I’ll be seeing you soon.”

When he hung up, I’d bolted. No privacy in a cubicle. My coworkers didn’t need to see me taking deep breaths and dabbing at my eyes. I drove around for a while, then ended up at my favorite arcade just as their lunch special was starting, all you could eat at their buffet and all the games you could play for an hour and a half.

A buzzer rang behind me. I glanced toward the pizza counter as the light high on the wall changed from blue to orange. The guy behind the counter pointed at my blue wrist band then jerked his thumb toward the door. I assumed he was singling me out because I was black, then noticed the place was deserted. The rest of the lunch crowd had already gone back to work. I put the gun down without finishing my game.

I'd taken a long break, but between Ray's phone calls and my boring job, I was in no hurry to race back to my cubicle at JTech. I stopped at Lucky's to buy Fig Newtons to stall even more. It was a little past two when I finally made it back to work.

My heart sped up when I saw a red Mercedes in the lot. I reasoned with myself that it wasn't Ray's. There were plenty of Mercedes in Silicon Valley and a lot of them were red. There was no point in him coming here. He'd never get past the security door in the lobby.

I swiped my cardkey on a side door and trudged up the back stairs. As long as no one saw me coming in, I was golden. I'd heard they recorded our card swipes, but doubted they checked them. My manager would be shocked if he knew how little time I'd spent in the building today. I smiled at that thought as I opened the door to my second floor cube farm.

The general office hum of dozens of low conversations, machines clicking, and phones ringing covered the sound of my high heel pumps clacking on the tile. I stooped slightly to keep my head lower than the beige partition walls. I was the only brown-skinned woman in the building. If anyone saw me, they'd know exactly who was sneaking in late from lunch.

The ruse didn't work. When I passed a hallway, Andrea popped up from her cube like a prairie dog and waved. We'd become instant friends as we were the only two black people in the department. Several coworkers asked if we were related, even though I was a café au lait bean pole while Andrea was dark and solidly built.

I nodded in reply, making a mental note to ask her not to draw attention to me while I was obviously creeping.

Andrea was still waving. I was almost far enough into the building to pretend I'd been there all along, so I stood. And that's when I saw someone sitting in Andrea's cube with his hands folded in his lap.

Ray.

I scrambled back down the stairs as if a demon was chasing me, didn't stop to see if he was. Didn't pause until I was doing seventy on 280 North. The image of Ray played over and over. Him sitting calmly in my office building as if he belonged there, squinting into the middle distance because he refused to believe he needed glasses.

An angry horn let me know I'd drifted into the other lane. I yanked the wheel straight, trying to decide where I was going.

No. I knew. There was only one place I wanted to be. I headed to campus to see Mike.

Mike was a year behind me in school. I was already with Ray when he arrived. He became my best friend while Ray became even more demanding and controlling. Ray had realized how I felt about Mike before I had. Now it was too late.

The man of my dreams answered his dorm room door in a school t-shirt and shorts with a baseball cap on backwards. Damn he was gorgeous. And I was an idiot.

"Sandy, good to see you but shouldn't you be working?"

He hugged me hello and followed me to the couch in the common room. The "couch" was a lumpy futon with a sheet thrown over it to hide stains. Something crunched when I sat. I managed not to cringe.

I told him what happened with Ray. Mike nodded and gasped in all the right places then looked at me expectantly when I finished. So I added, “He still thinks you’re the reason I broke up with him. He doesn’t know where I live, but you’re easy to find. Thought I should let you know.”

“Thanks for the warning.” The look on his face said what I was thinking. I could have just called.

Now I regretted minimizing how dangerous Ray was. I’d been too embarrassed to tell Mike about the violent arguments or the beating that finally persuaded me to leave. He probably wondered where this was coming from.

He searched my face. “And you’re Okay?”

I tried to smile. “I’m fine,” I lied. “It didn’t turn out the way he wanted. I don’t think he’ll try anything like that again.”

“Good.” He got up from the futon. “Try to behave and stay safe while I’m gone. I’ve got to get to the airport. We’ll talk when I get back.”

“Your interview. Of course. Want a ride?”

“I’m going out of San Francisco.”

“Oh.” That would be a three or four hour round trip. I might be able to get him there, but good luck getting back. I’d do it anyway to hang out with him longer, but it would be weird for me to offer.

“Not a problem. I’ll just take the 7F. Let me find some jeans.” He went into his room, leaving the door ajar.

I imagined opening his door. He'd be waiting for me with open arms, wearing only a towel. We'd fold into each other, fitting together perfectly. As we kissed, Barry White would start playing and candles would burst into flame.

My mouth was open when I came out of my reverie. Smoothing my skirt, I scooted over to perch on a less worn and dented part of the futon. "I'll walk you to the bus stop," I called out.

"Okay." Mike emerged in jeans and a sweatshirt, the hat gone and his short afro brushed back. "I've been practicing at the shooting range, getting pretty good. Want me to take care of Ray?" He sat next to me to put on athletic socks and Nikes.

I laughed. "No, but thanks for offering. You don't need to go to jail for me."

He grabbed a khaki carry-on bag with a shoulder strap. "Maybe threaten him back, then. Want to come shooting with me? You should learn."

"We can talk about that when you get back." Who was I kidding? I wouldn't do any of that.

He held the door for me as we left. The bus stop was only twenty yards away across the lawn.

"This is probably Ray's last stunt." I leaned against the bus stop sign, trying not to stare at Mike while I talked. "He's moving up from the Richmond Flying Squirrels to the Triple-A league, the Sacramento River Cats. He has something to lose now and he'll be farther away."

"Good. I worry about you."

I didn't know what to say to that, so changed the subject. "Tell me about this interview."

"It's in Virginia, the same company Maya works for. That's why I'm going. I'll get to see her this weekend, then hopefully I'll already have a job when I move there."

My stomach dropped. I knew Maya existed, but I was hoping things would fizzle when she graduated and got a job across the country. Mike wasn't supposed to get a girlfriend. He was supposed to wait for me to wise up and dump Ray so we could run off together to marry and raise babies.

The bus arrived. I thought of grabbing him and telling him not to go.

"Wish me luck," he said.

"Luck." I tried to seem cheery, complete with fake smile, but the thought of him moving to Virginia to be with Maya made me want to throw up. I felt adrift once the bus pulled away.

My dashboard clock said 3:30, too late to go back to work but too early to go home. I went to see Purple Rain again, stopping at a grocery store for frozen pizza and Bacardi on the way.

The sun had almost set when I pulled into my parking space behind the duplex. My neighbor, Susan, wasn't home yet. Usually she crowded my space with her station wagon and I could either squeeze in and crawl out the passenger side or have her move. She was always good natured about it but kept doing it. I seized this opportunity to park over the line into her space, then decided I wouldn't be that petty and moved back onto my side.

The house seemed deserted without Susan and her boys around. They were always doing something that took up the whole backyard; Susan hanging laundry diagonally across the entire area, her two sons dueling with sticks or building forts out of whatever they could find. I hoped they'd be home soon. For once, I could use the company.

I grabbed my grocery bag and headed for the back porch, juggling it as I walked while I positioned my keys in the other hand. Susan had a swing on her side of the porch which had come apart on one side long ago. I had a large rocking chair on mine. The porch was deep in

shadow at this time of the early evening, but as I stepped on the first stair I noticed a silhouette in my rocker.

An icy wave of adrenaline washed through me. I knew instinctively that it was Ray. I backed off the step, my mind flailing around for what to do. Susan wasn't around, but should I scream for the other neighbors? Could I get back in my car before he chased me down? My eyes locked on the shadow in the chair, waiting for Ray to leap at me or start barking orders. For a moment, I thought I saw the gleam of eyes, but nothing happened.

Maybe it wasn't him. Maybe it *was* just a shadow. The day had been an emotional rollercoaster and now I was imagining things. But I wasn't going onto that porch until I was sure.

"Ray, you get out of here." I yelled. I thought of Mike's offer. "I've got a gun. You leave now and I won't shoot you." No response. He might be playing possum, waiting for me to get close so he could snatch me and hustle me inside. Or I'd lost my mind.

I dropped the grocery bag and grabbed a fist-sized rock from the empty flower bed.

"I'm not a ball player, but I bet I could hit you from here," I said. That should do it. There's no way he'd let me hit him with a rock.

Nothing. But he knew me well enough to know I was bluffing. And that I had a terrible arm. So I threw it.

I'd aimed far to the left, expecting it to sail past the rocker and off the side of the porch, but it hit the chair dead center. There was a thump as it connected, not the clack of wood. I cringed and held my breath, waiting for shouting and cursing, holding my car key in front of me to use as a weapon. The rocker creaked once then stopped.

Now I was angry. Susan's sons, whom I'd nicknamed Thing One and Thing Two, must have left one of their giant stuffed animals in my chair. Well, they weren't getting it back.

My grocery bag had fallen over. I picked my pizza and bottle of rum from the scraggly grass and marched up the stairs. How many times had I asked them to keep their toys on their side? This time it was going in the trash bin.

I stopped dead when the motion sensor turned on the light over my door and I could see what was in the rocker. It was Ray. With his mouth open, eyes open, and a bullet hole in his forehead.