

# DEATH UNDER THE ICE

Trouble in Pleasant Valley • Book Four



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*To Doug, our talented and kind son*





No lights shone from the house. Not even the porch light. Homeland Security Agent Claire Green turned her back to the cold wind and leaned on the doorbell again. After a few minutes with no response, she slogged through the snow to the garage and entered the code.

The garage door creaked and groaned as it rose. Claire ducked under when it was waist-high. Alan's gray SUV stood to one side. She removed her glove and placed a hand on the hood. Ice cold. She peered through the windows of the vehicle. Nothing out of place.

If her brother had locked the interior door, she'd break in. But the knob turned easily in her hand, and she stepped inside. "Alan?" No answer. She laid her purse on the counter by the sink and walked farther into the house. Even though the house was warm, the abode had a deserted feel that made her edgy. It wasn't like Alan to call her in a panic about something, demand she help him, and then forget all about it.

She moved through her brother's rental home, turning on lights and searching everywhere—including closets. When she got to his room, his heavy coat, the one he always wore, lay on

his bed, along with his gloves and hat. Something was definitely up. He'd never go out in weather like this without them. She chewed on her lip and willed herself to stay calm. After all, she hadn't seen him in months. Was it possible he had another coat?

Knowing Alan as she did, the idea of him buying another coat when his old one was still good wasn't likely, but the other possibilities were too terrible to consider. On the other hand, she'd found no signs of a struggle or traces of blood. So maybe he did own two coats?

One more place to look. She retraced her steps to the garage. An old chest freezer stood in front of his SUV. She took a deep breath. "You can do this."

Claire closed her eyes and lifted the lid with a trembling hand. If she still believed in prayer, she would have said one now, but she'd long since realized her supplication did no good. A blast of frosty air hit her face and froze her breath. She opened her eyes and exhaled. No Alan. Only packages wrapped in white butcher paper, stacked in a bin on the left. Her knees gave, and she leaned on the rim until the cold seeped into her bones. She slammed the top shut and, shivering, fled back to the warmth of the house.

After pulling her car into the garage and unloading her suitcases, Claire fixed herself something to eat. "The fridge is stocked." She had a habit of thinking out loud, which drove her colleagues nuts, and her mom and dad before them. "He was ready for my visit." A clot of fear formed in her throat, making it hard to swallow. "Where are you, Alan?"

Had he forgotten when she was due to arrive? Not likely. Maybe he'd gone out with someone and couldn't get home or contact her, but that didn't make much sense either. "One more search before I let myself get worried."

A more thorough search yielded a few items Claire placed on the kitchen table—his appointment diary, an old photo of him with his police pals, a map of Ohio she'd found tucked back in a

drawer, and a key. But no cellphone or computer. She wasn't sure why she'd collected those things, but she trusted her instincts.

She tried calling Alan's cellphone, but it wouldn't go through. Maybe he *had* gone out and couldn't get in touch with her after all. She picked up the appointment book and moved across the great room to his recliner. The house seemed like it always did, but something prodded at the sixth sense she'd developed after years on the job. She surveyed the room.

Curtains covered the wall of windows looking out on Lake Pleasant. She let her gaze linger on the antique oak buffet that stood against the far-left wall. Claire had often admired that piece with the wide mirror hanging above it. A long oak dining table with mismatched chairs took up most of the space in front of it.

Closer to where she stood, Alan's old leather recliner rested on a large area rug with a sturdy end table beside it and a floor lamp on the other side. Across the room from his chair, tall bookcases flanked the fireplace with a big screen television mounted above the mantle. A sofa rounded out the furniture on this end of the room. All the furniture came with the house except her brother's chair.

Nothing seemed out of place. With a sigh, Claire grabbed a soft, beige throw and curled into the recliner with the appointment book in her lap. "Let's see what you've been up to, Alan."

Deciphering her brother's chicken scratch and shorthand proved too much for her distracted brain and worried heart. She closed the book and tilted the chair back. The piece of furniture cushioned her like a big hug, and she understood now why he drugged this recliner with him wherever he lived. The stressful drive through winter weather and concern for her brother left her drained. Her eyes closed.

A RAY of sunlight lasered through a slit in the curtains and lit up the inside of Claire's eyelids. She grunted, stretched, and banged her arm into the lamp on her left. "What the ..." She tried to swing her legs out of bed before remembering she was in Alan's recliner. "Oh, man. Alan, on second thought, I don't like your chair."

After wrestling the recliner to its upright position, she rose and folded the throw into a square before adding it to the pile in a basket near the hearth. Alan bordered on obsessive. There were no useless decorations in his house, and once he decided on a place for something, it never changed. A blind person would have no problem navigating her brother's house.

She opened the drapes on the floor-to-ceiling windows and gazed out on a winter scene right off a Christmas card. The December sun turned the blanket of pristine snow covering the yard and thirty-acre lake beyond into a field of diamonds.

"Wow. I see why you love it here, bro." Claire turned away from the view. Her chest ached to see him in his chair or at the kitchen sink washing dishes. "Where are you, Alan?"

Once more, she felt that pinch to the intuition she'd honed over the years. "Aargh. What am I missing?" His appointment book caught her eye, and as she retrieved it, she noticed the marks on the rug where the table normally stood. "Why would you move your table?" She explored the dents with her fingers. Even if he cleaned the rug, he'd be careful to place the furniture back where it had rested before. That's how Alan was wired.

She moved to the bookcases. The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Some of the books were upside down, and they weren't in alphabetical order. She reached to touch them but stopped.

There was one more place she needed to check. Claire hurried to Alan's bedroom and flung open his closet door. Her brother always hung his clothes in a certain order from left to right. T-shirts first, jeans, his two dress shirts, dress pants, his sports coats, and his one suit.



And there it was. The evidence she needed to convince herself. Shirts together, pants together. Alan would never deviate from the pattern he'd used his entire adult life.

Someone had searched her brother's house. Someone who thought they'd covered their tracks. But who? And what were they looking for?