



Madison only heard a growl like that from him one other time. The sweat along her back turned to icicles. She glided over to him.

Through the opaque ice, she saw what looked like a dead carp pressed against the underside of the frozen water. She dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around her dog's neck.

"It's a fish, you big lug." She buried her face in his fur and willed her heart to stop racing. "Only a fish this time."

He licked her cheek.

"Okay." She rose and surveyed the makeshift skating rink. A few more trips around the ice and then back to the house. Years had passed since the day she'd stumbled upon the body of her former boyfriend by the lake. Things were a lot different then. She turned her feet and scraped to a halt, sending ice particles spraying. Now, she was a private investigator.

And it was time for this private eye to fix dinner. She uttered a quick laugh.

---

MADISON MOVED around the scarred oak table, distributing silverware and straightening placemats. It had been a while since they'd had someone new to the house for dinner. The aroma of simmering beef mixed with roasted potatoes and carrots—with an undertone of yeasty rolls baking in the oven—made her mouth water and her stomach growl.

A simple and hearty meal that everyone seemed to enjoy. She put a hand to her mouth. Unless Claire was a vegetarian. Did she have the ingredients for a salad?

Oscar scrambled to his feet and let out a single woof. Someone was at the door. Madison wiped her hands on a towel and maneuvered through the dining room to where her dog stood with his nose against the door and his tail whipping back and forth. Rafe, her boss and friend, must be on the porch.

Madison gave her dog's ear a gentle shake. "You're supposed to love me best, remember?"

He turned sad brown eyes on her and let out a pitiful whine.

"I give up." She opened the door and stepped back to allow him time to say hello.

Oscar pawed at their visitor and barked. Rafe rubbed the dog's big head. "Where are the little people?"

"The twins are on a trip with Gran and Gramps." Nate walked in from the hallway, his hair damp and smelling of soap. "Hi, buddy." He shook hands with Rafe.

"Sounds like fun for the kids." Rafe O'Connell glanced at Madison. "Where are they going?"

"Nate's parents are taking them to his uncle's seventieth birthday party in Philadelphia." Madison herded the men farther inside. "Nate can't get away from work, and I didn't want to go without him. But his parents asked if they could take the kids so the rest of the family can meet them."

"And you two might get some much-deserved time to yourselves."

"That would be nice." She let out a small sigh. Somehow, she doubted that would be the case.

“Who’s the fourth person?” Rafe lifted his gaze from the extra place setting and narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re not playing matchmaker again, are you?”

“No. Although she is cute.” She threw him a quick grin. “She’s your tenant’s sister. She came to visit her brother and found the house empty.”

---

“EMPTY, HUH?” Rafe walked over to the kitchen windows. Something she’d said tugged at his memory. He rubbed his chin. What was it?

“His car’s in the garage, and his coat and gloves on the bed.” Madison pulled the rolls out of the oven. “She needs our help, and since you’re my boss and his landlord, I thought you might want to be a part of this.”

“Why not?” He gave a half-hearted shrug. “We don’t have much going on right now.”

“Madison, I need you in the bedroom for a minute.” Nate motioned to his wife.

She covered the food. “If she arrives before I get back, let her in, will you?”

Oscar raised his head and woofed low in his throat.

“I think your mommy planned this.” Rafe scrubbed his fist on top of Oscar’s head and strode to the front door.

“I hate coming to dinner without a gift, but ...” The woman stepped into the house, threw back her parka hood, and unwound her scarf before looking up. “Rafe?”

“Claire.” His chest constricted at the sight of the riot of auburn waves. That was it. When they were together, he’d met Alan briefly. He should have made the connection when Madison mentioned Alan’s sister. Why hadn’t it occurred to him it would be Claire?

Because he’d worked hard to forget the woman standing before him.

“There you are.” Madison smiled at her. “Let me get your coat. Rafe, would you please close the door?” She gave him a pointed look.

He took his time securing the door. If Madison had told him Claire Green was coming to dinner, he would have thought of an excuse and left before she got here. Now, he had no choice but to spend the evening in the presence of the only woman he’d ever loved but who’d broken his heart.

“I feel terrible about spilling my guts to you like I did. Alan’s probably off with some of his buddies and forgot I was coming.” Claire replaced her scarf and zipped up her parka. “I think I’ll pass on dinner tonight. But thanks for the invitation.”

“Nonsense. I’ve been cooking all day, and it’s ready.” Madison put her hands on her hips and peered from Rafe to Claire and back. “You two know each other, don’t you? Is that why you’re so anxious to leave?”

“Look. If anybody’s going to leave, it should be me.” A flush of heat traveled up his neck and into his cheeks. He squared his shoulders. “She needs your help.”

“And yours.” Madison pierced him with her gaze.

“Dinner and the details. That’s it,” he said through gritted teeth. Madison knew he couldn’t resist a puzzle. It was like an itch he had to scratch. He would do this for Madison and Nate. The two of them and the twins were the closest thing he had to family.

“Good. Let’s eat.”

Rafe let the women lead the way to the kitchen and took his usual place with his back to the blue antique cupboard. A pang of jealousy hit him as Nate welcomed Claire into their home. He scrubbed a hand down his face. Get a grip, O’Connell.

“I think that’s it.” Madison set the last dish on the table and pulled out her chair.

“It smells wonderful.” Claire leaned in and took a deep breath. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a home-cooked meal.”

“I’ll say the blessing, and we can dig in.” Nate folded his hands.

As his friend thanked God for the food, Rafe couldn’t resist looking out from under lowered lids at the woman across the table. Claire sat with her hands in her lap. After a moment, she raised clouded emerald eyes to his, and despite the years, his heart lurched in his chest.

Rafe admired the way Madison kept the dinner conversation light and put them all at ease. Her intuition about people never ceased to amaze him. She even managed to make him feel relaxed. After clearing the table, they regrouped with coffee and tea.

“Why don’t you tell us what happened and why you’re worried,” Nate said.

“Madison has already heard this, but here goes.” Claire related how she’d arrived, went in through the garage, and what she found inside. “Something seemed off, but I couldn’t put my finger on what. It wasn’t until the next morning I realized things weren’t where Alan kept them.” She told them about her brother’s obsessive habits and how she realized the house had been searched.

“That sounds like a police search or one done by the feds.” Nate furrowed his brow. “Doesn’t it to you?”

“Now that you point it out, it does.” Claire leaned back in her chair. “But why would they be searching my brother’s house? He’s been retired for five years.”

“No moonlighting?” Rafe asked. How would his ex-girlfriend know how the feds searched a house?

“I don’t think so.” She bit her lip. “He would have told me.”

“You see him a lot?” If that were the case, why hadn’t he seen her before now?

“No, but we talk every week.”

“Not the same. He could be speaking to you from anywhere.” Rafe ran a hand down his face. “Maybe he didn’t want you to know what he was up to.”

“True. But he begged me to come.” She nodded. “If he had to leave on an assignment, why didn’t he let me know his plans had changed? And why did he leave without his coat?”

Good questions, and Rafe vowed to find the answers.