



“**W**hat have you gotten yourself into, Alan?” Claire backed up and sat on her brother’s bed. “You’re not off somewhere with a friend. You’re in trouble.” Her eyes roamed over the sparse furniture in the bedroom. “But why would someone searching your house bother to try to put things back the way they were?”

She couldn’t cope with whatever this was, alone. But who could she trust to help? Not her co-workers at Homeland Security. If her brother was involved in something he shouldn’t be, she didn’t want to incriminate him, nor did she want to jeopardize her job. At least not until she discovered what her brother was involved in first.

The sound of footsteps on the front porch interrupted her thoughts. She jumped up and reached for her weapon, only to remember she’d left it with her suitcase in the guest room upstairs. “How could you be so stupid?” She inched down the hall toward the front of the house, her back against the wall. Shadows flickered across the frosted window adjacent to the front door. She jerked as a bell chimed above her head.

“Alan, are you in there? It’s Madison.”

Her brother had spoken of a couple he’d become friends

with. Madison and ... she couldn't remember the man's name. Claire cracked the door open and braced it with her body. A large black dog stuck his nose in and tried to lick her face.

"Oscar, no." The woman's light brown hair fell forward. She brushed it behind her ears and gave Claire a warm smile. "I'm Madison Zuberi. We live next door."

"I'm Claire, Alan's sister." The corners of her mouth lifted in response. She couldn't help it. Something was engaging about this woman.

"It's nice to meet you." Madison's face brightened. "Alan's told us so much about you. He says you are the smartest person he's ever known."

Alan had told them about her? She relaxed her stance, and Oscar must have seen that as a welcome gesture. Next thing she knew, he pushed between her and the door and bolted into the house.

"No." Madison threw out her hands, eyes wide with embarrassment. "Get back here pronto, mister."

Claire opened the door wider and bit her lip to keep from laughing as the dog slunk back down the hall.

"I'm sorry. He doesn't usually misbehave like this." Madison clipped a leash on Oscar's collar. "I came over to invite Alan to dinner this evening. We'd love to have you join us as well."

"I ..." She studied Madison. Maybe this was one of those rare times when things happen for a reason. "Do you have a moment?"

Madison glanced at Oscar.

"It's okay. He can come in."

"I'll keep him on his leash." Madison stepped onto the rug inside the door. "Oscar, sit."

"I know this sounds crazy." Claire shoved her hands into the pockets of her sweater. "But I think something's happened to Alan."

"From what he's shared about you, I doubt you're crazy," Madison said. "Go on."

“When I got here last night, I thought maybe he’d gone out with a friend and couldn’t get home or in touch with me.” Claire rubbed the spot on her forehead between her eyes where a headache threatened. “But this morning, I realized it’s more than that. He’s missing, and I’m not sure why.”

“Claire, I’m sorry.” Madison’s amber eyes darkened. “We’re happy to help in any way we can. Let me give you my number.” She pulled a card out of her pocket and handed it to Claire. “The dinner invitation still stands. Nate will be home around five, but feel free to come over anytime.”

RPI, Forensic Investigator, Madison Long Zuberi. “You’re a private eye?”

“Sort of.” Madison gave her a shy smile. “My husband, Nate, is the big gun. He’s captain of the Pleasant Valley police force.”

Claire nodded. She’d found help, but would it end up costing her brother his reputation?

MADISON RELEASED her dog and slogged through the snow toward home. It had been a long time—years—since she’d been involved in a serious case. Mostly because she’d had the twins.

Oscar gave a vigorous shake at the back door, sending wet snow flying everywhere.

“Thanks for that, dog.” She snorted a laugh and wiped her face. “At least you didn’t wait until we were inside.” In the past few years, they’d made improvements to their house. One was to convert their screened porch to all-season.

She gazed at the four pairs of ice skates sitting next to the door, two large and two small, and her heart swelled with gratitude for the one big person and two little people who wore them. Normally, the twins would be home from pre-kindergarten at about three in the afternoon and ready to hit the ice out back. But not today, and she was glad to have something take her focus away from how much she missed them.

She'd start a file on Alan Green and record the conversations they'd had in the last six months. A wave of excitement mixed with a shred of guilt ran through her. She didn't wish her friendly neighbor harm, but the idea of using her brain for something more than playing educational video games thrilled her. She grabbed her electronic notepad and settled into the new recliner in their enlarged living room/den.

The question remained. Was she ready to take on a major investigation again? She rubbed the silver filigree cross that hung around her neck. With His help, she knew she could.

Her phone rang, and her husband's handsome appeared on the screen. "Nate, I was just thinking about you."

"I was thinking about you too."

The low, soft tones of his voice still made her tingle inside, even after six years of marriage.

"Did you talk to Alan?" he asked. "Is he able to come for dinner?"

She paused, unsure how to tell him about her news. "Alan's sister, Claire, is at his house."

"Good. She can come too."

"She is, but Alan's missing. I told her we would help find him."

"Is she certain? Do you think she's, you know, reliable?"

"Nate, she's an analyst for Homeland Security. I think she knows what she's talking about."

"Sorry. You're right."

"I'm going through our conversations with her brother over the last six months—what I can remember—and making notes. I'll need your help since you two did most of the talking."

"Good idea. What about Rafe?"

"I'll call him. I love you."

"Love you more."

Her husband's call came at the perfect time. She set to work with renewed focus. Since Nate and Alan shared a law enforcement background, most of their conversations centered

on their work. She'd listened but hadn't caught everything as she served dinner or cleared away dishes. Nate would have to fill in the gaps.

Alan talked a lot about three close friends and the pranks they played on each other. They all left the force about the same time and went their separate ways.

One day, she'd asked Alan if he was still in touch with them. He looked down at his coffee and said, "Sort of." Then changed the subject.

Madison recorded the incident and added a question about what happened to his friends. Where were they now? Did they have a falling out? Was it one or all of them?

She filled five pages with snatches of memories and questions before breaking for lunch. Oscar stood at the kitchen window, gazing at the snowy playground outside. He loved this weather. She squatted beside him and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. "Hey, big guy. We'll go out and test the ice after I eat."

Oscar caught the word "out," and his ears perked up. Madison gave him a treat and fixed herself a sandwich. After inhaling the morsel, the black lab perched beside her chair and stared at her with big brown eyes.

"You know that doesn't work with me." She glared. "I'm not going to rush my lunch. You can wait."

Oscar sighed and collapsed onto the floor, head on his paws. But as soon as she pushed back her chair, he jumped to his feet and trotted to the back door.

Madison chuckled. "You're as bad as the kids." She washed her hands and headed for the porch.

A breeze almost always blew across the open stretch of ice, carrying with it bits of frozen snow that penetrated her jeans and stung her face. She took the time to pull on ski pants and her heavy boots, along with her parka and gloves.

She grabbed her skates, a snow shovel, and a long-handled pick to test the ice. The first blast of cold air took her breath away, but Oscar raced across the deck and down the steps as if it

were spring. He buried his nose in the snow, flung it upward, and snapped at it in his own private game. “I wish I had your energy,” she said to herself. “Or felt that joy.”

Lately, Madison had begun to question her purpose in life. Was she meant to keep the house, look after the kids, and be Nate’s wife? Was that all for her? Part of her wanted more, and the other part felt guilty because she’d been so blessed. How horrible that the disappearance of Alan Green got her blood pumping with excitement.

She reached the end of the yard and stepped out onto the ice. Every day, she scraped away a ten-to-fifteen-foot semicircle of snow around the dock. When the twins got home, she took them skating. Today, it was only her. She’d come to enjoy the exercise. Sweat trickled down her back as she worked, but she knew better than to take off her jacket. That was a good way to let her core body temperature get too low.

Oscar abandoned his game and padded onto the ice, sniffing the surface.

“What are you doing, dog?” Madison paused while putting on her skates.

At the far edge of the cleared section, he stiffened, nose to the ice. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and he uttered a menacing growl low in his throat.