



Chapter 3

BROKEN ALARM

UPSTAIRS IN THE CLOSET, Valorie laid the knife on a shelf. She stripped out of her nightgown and slipped on a pair of jeans. As she turned to choose a t-shirt, her reflection in the mirror stopped her.

Where did all those bruises come from?

She traced memories of the previous night.

The bar. Of course! She rammed into it. And the coffee table. And who knows what else she hit in her panic mode?

She surveyed the number of bruises on her body. She always had them—especially when Mitch left town. Twisting, she glanced at different places on her arms, legs, even her stomach. Did she hit all those spots? Against what?

She shook her head, bewildered by a body that looked as if someone beat her. Not possible.

Pictures from the dream flitted across her mind.

“No! I won’t believe some stupid dream. None of it happened.”

She pulled on her shirt. Red marks across her forearm screamed at her. Puzzled, she studied them. Maybe Bruce scratched her. His toenails needed a trim—always. That had to explain it, although they looked more like someone dragged a knife over her skin.

A scene from the dream took control of her thoughts.

A young woman with long, dark hair approaching. The glint of a knife. A few cuts before Valorie jerked her arm back.

“No! That was just a dream. I won’t believe it happened. I can’t.”

The bong of the clock downstairs jerked her back to reality. Grabbing the knife, she headed to the office to check her email. She needed to feel secure when the tech arrived to look at the alarm. Enough of her insanity.

Was she losing her mind? Sometimes, she wondered.

Turning on the computer, a message from Ace Alarms appeared. She opened it without hesitating.

The technician assigned to your case, Donny Temple, should arrive within the hour. Check his photo badge to verify his identity. Please see the attached picture. We are sorry for any inconvenience and promise to correct your issue as soon as possible. As always, thank you for your patronage. Your safety is our primary concern.

Misti

Valorie opened and studied every detail of the assigned technician. Looked nice enough. Clean cut, blond hair, and green eyes. No facial hair. Good. Certain she would recognize him, she gathered the knife and retreated to the kitchen. Staring at the blade in her hand in the stillness, she chuckled. If Mitch and her dad saw it, they'd both swear they needed to lock her up. Totally off her rocker.

Coffee. She needed coffee.

She poured a cup, breathing in the scent of spices and vanilla. Tension eased before she tasted the dark liquid. After a sip, she sighed.

Better.

Breakfast and wait for the tech. She'd be fine—as soon as he reconnected the alarm.



Breakfast finished and dishes washed, dried, and put away, Valorie blew out a breath.

Why hasn't that tech showed up yet?

The thought skipping through her mind, she refilled her coffee mug and headed to the living room. As she moved to the window, the thud of a car door caught her attention. Bruce barked. She never knew if that dog barked in warning or greeting. It sounded like he wanted to play with the guy more than he wanted to protect her.

She opened the drapes an inch. A blue and gold van with the Ace Alarms logo on the side sat in her driveway beside her Volvo. A clean-cut young man, holding a clipboard, approached the front door.

Valorie raced across the room as the doorbell chimed.

"Who is it?"

"Hello, Mrs. Ferguson. I'm Donny Temple. Here to check your alarm."

She peered through the peephole. "Can you hold up your badge?"

He complied, smiling. "I promise. It's me."

Her hands shook as she unlocked all the deadbolts. No choice but to trust him. He looked like the photo from the email. Her heart sped up when she opened the door. "I'm sorry. My husband and father tell me I'm paranoid. But I don't take chances."

"No, ma'am. You can never be too safe. Do you mind if I take a quick look at your panel?"

Running a hand over her mouth, Valorie hesitated for a second. "If you think that's necessary..."

"I find the issue there 90% of the time, so I always check it first. If you'd rather I not..."

"No. Of course. Come in." She looked across the street and down the road. No white vans. She closed the door, not locking it in case she needed to run.

Dang. She ought to have the keys in her pocket.

Donny tilted his head up after searching for the panel and crossed the few steps to it. For several minutes, he pushed buttons and looked over everything. Removing an instrument from his bag, the technician held it up. "Well, it appears you don't have any power coming to the panel. Did you check breakers?"

Valorie raised her eyebrows. "I... That's something Mitch, my husband, would do. I'm not sure..."

Donny chuckled. "No problem. Most of the time, they're in the garage. May I go through the house, or would you prefer to open it and let me go in from outside?"

"Oh, it's such a mess out there. We keep saying we're gonna clean it out. I remember seeing a gray panel out there, near the door from the garage to the house."

"That's it."

"Then you can get to it much easier from the kitchen."

"Excellent. This way?"

"Yes." Valorie locked the bottom deadbolt—just to be safe.

Donny sauntered around the breakfast bar and through the kitchen. Valorie followed, picking up the keys from the bowl on the bar and stuffing them into her pocket, hoping he didn't notice. Nonchalant, he opened the door, found a light switch, and flipped it.

"Yep. There's the breaker box, like we expected." He turned and flashed a grin at Valorie. "Hopefully, we'll find the culprit right here and be done." He opened the breaker box and checked for a thrown switch. "Well, darn. Apparently, this won't be a quick and easy fix." He shut the metal door and flipped off the light. "I don't suppose you know where the outside connection box is, do you?"

Valorie shook her head. "Probably on the side of the house. If it's in the back, I'll secure the dog."

"Yeah. They should put them in the back, but most of the time they get as close to the panel as they can. I'll check the garage side first."

Donny whistled as he danced back through the house. At the front door, he tried to open it. Glancing at the lock, he shrugged, unlocked the bottom bolt, and opened the door. "I'll be back. You can stay inside if you want."

She considered following him for a moment, but her cell phone pinged. "I'll get this call. If you find anything, go ahead, and fix it."

"Will do, and I'll let you know what I discover."

She grabbed her phone to check the text and reengaged the bottom lock.

Mitch.

Hi babe. Checking on you this morning. Everything ok?

No. The alarm's not working.

I saw that text you sent. Did you check the breakers?

The tech did.

Oh.

He's outside now, checking the connection box.

K. Let me know what he finds. Gotta run. Meeting's starting back up.

Valorie sighed, praying this trip got Mitch the promotion he wanted. At least then he'd be home more than working out-of-town. She sipped coffee, drumming fingers against the bar. To pass the time while Donny worked on the system, Valorie texted her mom to check on the kids. No answer, of course. More than likely, they went to the beach early. They spoiled her kids too much. After the beach, they'd go get burgers and fries, then ice cream. Same thing every time. At least they planned to keep

the kids for most of the week, so Mom and Dad could deal with the sugar-rush fallout.

Before long, the doorbell chimed. Valorie peered through the peephole. Donny. She opened the door.

The young man held up a piece of wiring. "I found your problem."

Valorie leaned back, not sure what the wiring told her.

"Someone cut it. Shut down your entire system."

"What? Cut?" Valorie's heartbeat quickened. Tingles coursed through her body.

Donny shrugged. "Probably a bunch of kids. It isn't the first time I seen it in this area."

Valorie winced, the aches pushing to the surface. She knew better. The man in the van. Somehow, the dream didn't feel as surreal.

Could it have happened? No! Not possible.

Donny continued. "I replaced the wires, reconnecting the system. This time, I encased it, so for someone to cut it again, they'll have to work harder. Someday, they'll figure out a better way to connect everything so we don't have this problem. No one should be able to disarm your system from outside the house."

"No. They shouldn't." Valorie clutched the door frame, shallow breaths coming faster.

"You okay?"

She nodded and took a deep breath, held, and released it. "Yes. I didn't expect to hear that someone cut the wires."

"I know. Scary, eh? It won't happen again." The tech paused. "Um-mm... Can we check your panel now? Get you up and running again?"

"Yes, please."

He dropped his clipboard on the bar, went to the panel, and turned the system back on. Lights blinked, flickered, and went steady. "Green. All good to go."

“Thank you.” Maybe she should ask him to check all the closets for her. Or not. He seemed okay, but... Not a good idea to invite a stranger into your bedrooms. She shivered.

Instead, she sent a text to Mitch while Donny finished the paperwork,

Someone cut the wires!

She tapped the phone, waiting for a response. After a minute, her phone pinged.

What?

Cut, Mitch. I swear that man in the van did it.

Nah. Couple of neighbors had the same thing happen. Kids. One guy saw them running away. Couldn't ID them.

I don't think so.

Val, you're paranoid.

She clenched her teeth. Counted to ten.

Sorry, babe. I should've encased it. The guys warned me.

Not OK.

I know. I'm sorry.

LISA BELL

Valorie rolled her shoulders, taking and releasing another deep breath.

I forgive you. This time.

I'm wrapping up here early. Does that make it better?

Maybe.

LOL. You're tough.

You called me paranoid. Again.

Well...

Don't.

Maybe sometimes you get overanxious.

Maybe.

I'll be home soon. It'll be OK.

OK.

Gotta pay attention now. Getting funny looks.

OK.

Love you, babe.

Love you too. I miss you.

No response. She knew better than to interrupt meetings, but she wanted to tell Mitch about the dream. Or did she? He'd tell her that explained her super-hyped fear the next morning.

She didn't need his admonition. He'd remind her she needed to lighten up and quit letting fear take control. To trust God instead. She hated that one. Easy to say, but she didn't see God keeping intruders out of her house. Fear ruled her and had since high school. But she didn't have a clue how to quell it—make it leave her alone.

Her mind drifted back to high school. She didn't date much but that one time—with the local college football star. Every girl wanted to date him, and he picked her. She wished he hadn't. Big, strong. When he made a move on her, she couldn't fight him off. The pain—the shame as he stole her virginity. She never told anyone. Not even Mitch. Years of therapy helped her cope, but it never removed her fear of someone assaulting her again.

Donny shoved the clipboard in front of her, interrupting her thoughts. "All done. Please sign here."

Valorie sighed, disregarding the amount. She didn't care how much it cost. "Thank you, Donny. I appreciate you coming out this morning and taking care of everything."

"No problem, ma'am." He turned to the door and stopped. "By the way, if they call back to check my service, I'd 'preciate a positive review."

"Of course."

As Donny climbed into his van, Rita crossed the driveway. "Hey, Valorie. Are you alright?"

"Rita! Hi. Better now."

"Girl, this morning Tim told me he saw cops at your house last night. Now I see the alarm company. What's going on?"

Valorie hugged her next-door neighbor, thankful for their friendship. "Come on in. I'll fill you in over coffee." She locked every deadbolt behind Rita.

Rita shook her head. "Girl, when I'm here, I sure don't worry about being attacked."

“That’s the point, my friend.” Valorie bit her bottom lip. “Would you go with me to check all the closets? I just want to be sure everything’s clear.”

Rita raised her eyebrows. “Is that really necessary?”

“For me to feel safe—yes.”

Rita grabbed the poker from beside the fireplace. The two drifted through the house, checking closets, beneath beds, and behind curtains. Nothing. More relaxed, Valorie led the way back to the kitchen, rolling her head and listening to tiny pops in her neck. Definitely better.

Armed with coffee and cookies, the women retreated to the living room, where Valorie detailed the previous night for Rita. As she shared the story, her hands quivered, sloshing coffee on herself. For thirty minutes, they chatted about the previous night.

Finally, Rita set down her coffee and placed a hand on Valorie’s arm. “That sounds absolutely terrifying. I went to visit my sister and got home late. I’m sorry you went through it alone.”

“Thank you.” She rubbed her forehead. “I don’t know, Rita. Sometimes, I think maybe Dad and Mitch are right. Maybe I’m too anxious—of things I shouldn’t fear at all. I mean... It’s not like they broke in. At least I don’t think so.”

“Wait. What do you mean you don’t think so?”

“Well, that’s the crazy part. In this vivid dream, the man from the van came into my bedroom, kidnapped me, and took me to a dungeon. There for days...” Valorie shuddered. “I don’t want to describe all he did. Not only to me, but he had other women there. He used them to hurt us. One fed us poison, and he gave another a knife. She cut herself and grabbed my arm, slicing it several times. I jerked away. Then she cut the others, even attempting to kill one. In my dream, the evil man sauntered down the stairs, laughing. He acted like it was all one big game.”

“Wow! How terrifying! But only a nightmare. Right?”

Valorie nodded. “Except...”

“Except what?”

"I told you how I kept bumping into things, so these bruises all over my body didn't surprise me. I'm such a klutz, anyway." She held out her arm. "But these thin, fresh marks. I can't explain those away."

Rita gasped. "Like in the dream."

"Yes. And to top it all off, I woke to no alarm and cut wires."

"That doesn't mean he did it. I mean, how would he re-bolt the door from outside?"

"I don't know." Valorie inhaled and swept a hand over her mouth before exhaling. "See that stool near the coffee table, lying on its side?"

"Yeah."

"Before I went to bed, I placed it in front of the door. If anyone came in, they might trip over it and wake me up. Despite two—maybe three—melatonin and a glass of wine."

"That makes sense." Rita reached back and rubbed the base of her neck. "But you didn't move it?"

"No. I found it there this morning."

The friend's eyes widened. "Maybe Bruce knocked it over."

"Are you kidding? You think I dared open that back door with prowlers on the loose? I left Bruce outside. And before you say it, remember the kids are at my parents' house."

Snapping her fingers, Rita twitched her mouth. "That's it. Your dad came by to check on you. He has keys, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"So after the neighborhood hooligans cut your wires, he came over, worried about you, and unlocked the door. Then he didn't trip, but he accidentally kicked the stool. He left and locked everything up behind himself, knowing if he didn't, you'd be terrified this morning."

"Maybe." Valorie chewed a nail. "I mean that would account for the stool. But why didn't I hear anything?"

"Girl—THREE melatonin with a glass of wine? If someone tried to kidnap you after that, he wouldn't even have to drug you. Get real."

Both ladies chuckled, although Valorie questioned the logic. Would her dad drive across town late at night instead of calling? And did she give him keys for all the locks? Maybe, but she didn't remember. She should ask.

Rita changed the subject, moving on to lighter topics to ease Valorie's stress. When her phone chimed, she looked at it. "Oh, my goodness. Where did the time go? I gotta get home and finish up the laundry. I'm glad you're safe." She rose and crossed to the door. "I'm home, so if anything else happens this afternoon or tonight, call me. I'll come over and kick that crazy man's butt."

Valorie laughed. "I bet you would, too."

One more hug and Rita crossed the lawn. As Valorie closed the door, a white panel van eased down the street, robbing her breath.