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MELINDA  
LEIGH

BEYOND  
HER  
REACH

# BEYOND HER REACH

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MELINDA  
LEIGH





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First edition



*For Rosie.*

*I think Ladybug would approve.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

The perceived safety of suburbia was an illusion.

*Or maybe delusion is a better word. We believe what we want to believe.*

Sunlight glimmered on a few inches of fresh snow as Sheriff Bree Taggart drove her official SUV down Oak Street. The upstate New York neighborhood wasn't extravagant—average-size houses built on average-size lots—but the properties were well kept. It was quaint enough that Bree felt as if she were driving into a TV show. Half of the properties bore holiday decorations. Red ribbons waved from wreaths. Lighted reindeer adorned lawns. A thin layer of snow covered neighborhood imperfections. But the scene's idyllic perfection wasn't any more real than a Hollywood set, because Bree was responding to a report of a probable homicide.

Easing off the gas pedal, she rolled past two patrol cruisers that sat at the curb, lights swirling, sirens silenced. One of her young deputies, Juarez, stood next to his vehicle, interviewing a man in a navy-blue parka. A witness, Bree presumed.

She drove past them and parked. Exiting her vehicle, she stepped into two inches of fresh snow, but she didn't mind. In early December, she still enjoyed snow. In another month or two, she'd curse at every flurry in the forecast. She inhaled a lungful of damp air, as if imprinting the clean smell into her nostrils in preparation for the sensory onslaught to come.

Walking to Juarez's cruiser, she couldn't decide who was paler—her deputy or the witness. Juarez was one of her younger deputies. He'd seen some things since joining her department, but he didn't have the experience yet to compartmentalize the horror show that sometimes came with the job.

"Sheriff." Juarez gestured toward the man. "This is Antonio Santori. He found the victim."

Antonio, a lean man in his sixties, had thick, wavy salt-and-pepper hair. He exploded into a language Bree didn't understand. It wasn't Spanish. Calloused hands punctuated his speech with frantic motions.

Footsteps crunched on rock salt. Bree turned to see Deputy Renata Zucco crossing the street toward them from the direction of the house. Zucco calmed the man in what sounded like the same language.

Zucco glanced at Bree. "Italian. I'm good with languages."

Antonio took a long breath, then shuddered. He zipped his coat closer to his chin. "I'm sorry. I speak English, but when I'm upset, sometimes I forget." His words carried a slight accent.

"Understandable," Bree said. "Just tell me what happened."

Antonio gestured toward a dark-blue van emblazoned with the words THE TILE GUY parked on the other side of the street. "I came to meet with Mrs. Gibson. She didn't answer the door. I heard a voice inside, like maybe she was calling me. The door wasn't locked, so I went in." Antonio's breath caught. Then he blew out the words with a puff of steam. "The voice was the TV, and she was . . ." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. He stared at his hands for a few seconds, then lifted his eyes. The deep brown of them swam with horror and bewilderment. "Who could do such a thing?"

*Isn't that always the million-dollar question?*

Antonio shifted his weight from one work boot to the other. "May I go?"

"Not just yet." Bree sized up the exterior of the house.

Antonio pulled a phone from his jacket pocket and checked the time. "I have other jobs to bid on later today."

"I understand," Bree said. "We'll try not to keep you too long. If necessary, we can call your employer and explain."

Antonio shook his head. "It's my business, but I need to know if I should have my wife reschedule my other appointments for the day."

Bree glanced at Zucco's grim face. "I think that's a good idea. We appreciate your cooperation."

With a nod, Antonio raised his phone.



Bree lifted a hand. "I'm going to ask you not to give out Mrs. Gibson's name. It's better if the family hears about this"—she gestured toward the house—"from me rather than sees it on the news."

Antonio pressed a hand to his heart, as if the thought pained him. "Of course."

Bree took a step toward the house, then paused. "One more question. Did you touch the body?"

Antonio's eyes opened wide in revulsion. "No. No *no*."

"It's OK," Bree soothed. "We just need to know."

As Antonio moved toward his van, he crossed himself, muttering something that sounded like a prayer in Italian.

Bree turned to her deputies. "Zucco, you were first on scene?"

She nodded. "Juarez helped me clear the house."

Juarez blinked and swallowed. His pale face grayed, but he said nothing.

Bree motioned toward Antonio, standing next to his van and talking on the phone. "Juarez, stay with the witness. Zucco, show me."

Zucco turned and headed back toward the house.

Glancing sideways, Bree assessed her deputy's face. Deputy Renata Zucco had come from the NYPD. She'd worked patrol and vice, including some undercover work. Not much fazed her. Now, her cop mask shielded her expression. But beneath it, her eyes were hardened, and her lips were pressed into a thin, bloodless line. Keeping her mask in place appeared to be taking effort.

*She's definitely shook.*

Two trails of footprints marred the soggy slush in the driveway.

Zucco pointed toward the double track on the left. "Those are Antonio's footprints." The imprints going into the house were normal. The prints leaving were spaced wider and showed places where Antonio had slipped. Bree imagined him running, sliding, panicked.

"Did you get photos?" Bree asked. Already the prints were disappearing as the snow melted.

“Yes,” Zucco confirmed. Her finger shifted to the right. “Those tracks are mine and Juarez’s.”

Once a suspicious death had been noted, Bree’s deputies knew to minimize their impact on the scene. They’d stuck to one path through the snow to the house. The rest of the slush was unmarred. If there was a car in the garage, it had been there since before the snow accumulated.

As if following Bree’s train of thought, Zucco said, “There were no footprints in the snow on the grassy areas when I arrived. Not anywhere around the house. That single trail circling the property is mine. I have pictures of that as well.”

Bree was grateful her deputy had enough experience to recognize the precarious nature of the outside scene and had prioritized preserving the evidence at risk of disappearing as the day warmed and the snow melted. She thought about the previous evening. She’d checked the horses at eight thirty. The ground had barely been covered. “The snow started around seven p.m., but it was a slow storm and took a while to accumulate.”

“Still.” Zucco stepped onto the covered front porch. “The killer must have either arrived before the snow started or they left early enough for their tracks to have been covered.”

Bree donned gloves and reached for the front door handle.

Zucco stopped her with a hand on her elbow. With a grim look, she pulled shoe covers from her pocket and handed Bree two. “It’s messy. I’d put these on out here.”

*That bad . . .*

They slipped on the booties. Bree bent to examine the door lock and hinges but saw no sign of forced entry.

With a gloved hand, Zucco opened the front door. “The front door was unlocked and partially open when I arrived. Antonio says it was unlocked but closed when he got here. I assume he ran out so fast he didn’t shut the door. The body is in the family room.”

Bree stepped across the threshold. The smell of death drifted toward her, a foul blend of blood and other bodily fluids. The bowels and bladder

often evacuated upon death. Bree removed her coat, leaned out the front door, and dropped it on the concrete. Fabric absorbed the odors of death. She could change her shirt and trousers. She didn't have a second winter uniform coat.

Zucco led the way past a formal living room and a stairway. The hallway floors, a medium-toned hardwood, looked new. The walls were freshly painted in a buttercream color. They followed the same wood floor down the hall toward the kitchen. A cluster of framed photos hanging on the wall caught Bree's attention. Two kids, a boy and a girl, shown in their school pictures throughout the years. The photos ended with high school graduation pictures. Bree's heart ached. These two kids had just lost their mother, and they didn't even know it yet.

The foul smell intensified as they entered the room. The backsplash and countertops were not yet installed, and drop cloths covered the floor. Pendant light fixtures looked new. A manufacturer's label hung from a cabinet door. The appliances still bore the clear-blue protective strips. Folded sheets of clear plastic, a tool bag, and various power tools sat in front of a set of sliding glass doors.

The family room adjoined the kitchen. An old leather couch faced a TV mounted above a fireplace. On the screen, a loop of streaming previews played.

Bree stopped short. The body wasn't in sight yet, but arcs of blood streaked the creamy walls, disconcertingly reminding Bree of one of her artist brother's paintings.

"She's on the couch." Zucco showed no inclination to move closer.

Bree watched her step. Her boots were covered, but she didn't want to disturb biological evidence on the hardwood. And it was, frankly, everywhere. She rounded the side of the couch.

*Holy . . .*

The victim lay sprawled on her side. Her neck gaped with a deep slash wound, so deep that the neck's internal structures were visible. Bree scanned

the scene. No sharp instrument in sight or within reach of the victim. “Well, it definitely wasn’t an accident.”

The medical examiner had already been summoned. She would need to give the official declaration, but the damage was clear enough. Bree’s gaze was pulled to the blood-splattered lamp and ceiling. Separate from the arterial spray, these smaller spatters had been flicked from the bloody murder weapon after it left the victim’s flesh.

“That’s one nasty wound,” Zucco said from the kitchen. “And what’s the deal with the position of her head? It almost looks like they tried to rip it off.”

The victim’s head was tipped backward and twisted at an odd angle, as if the killer had tried to make her bleed more—or faster—or possibly tried to break her neck.

She was a petite brunette with shoulder-length hair. She wore pale gray lounge pants and a matching loose sweater. Blood had soaked her lovely outfit, run from the cushion, and dripped to the floor, where it had spread in a large puddle and dried. Her feet were bare, but a pair of sheepskin slippers sat between the couch and the square cocktail ottoman. A wooden tray on the ottoman held a single mug. A tea bag string and tag dangled next to the mug’s handle.

She spotted a possible smudge from a shoe at the edge of the blood puddle, but no bloody footprints walking away. Either she was wrong about the smudge and the killer had moved backward as the blood spread, or they’d removed their shoes before stepping out of the puddle.

Bree leaned forward to get a better look at the victim’s face. One cheek was pressed into the leather. Her face looked fine, but Bree wouldn’t want to show the remains to a family member for identification purposes, not with that wound. “Are we sure the victim is the homeowner?”

“The tile guy said it was.”

“Did you see a purse anywhere?” Bree glanced around.

Zucco jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “On the table by the glass doors.”

Bree backtracked to the kitchen. A folding snack table stood behind the power tools. The purse on it was black, medium-size, and appeared stylish to Bree, who admittedly had no sense of style whatsoever. Bree released the metal clasp. The contents were organized. She withdrew a black leather wallet and opened it to view a driver's license. "Kelly Gibson, age forty-five, brown eyes, five feet, three inches tall. Description fits." She carried the wallet back to the family room and compared the photo to the victim. Kelly's cheeks were a little thinner than in her license photo, as if she'd lost weight, but her features were the same. "Looks like her."

Bree looked through the rest of the wallet. "Cash and credit cards are still here."

"Purse was in plain sight," Zucco said. "Not a robbery."

"No." Bree retreated to the kitchen and returned the wallet to the purse. "The ME should be here soon. Chief Harvey and Investigator Flynn are both on their way."

Matt Flynn was Bree's part-time investigator. The rural sheriff's department budget didn't allow for a full-time detective, but Matt worked as a civilian consultant whenever a difficult case popped up. He was also her live-in . . . boyfriend? *Boyfriend* sounded casual—and young. What did people in their thirties call the man who shared their life and their home? They weren't engaged, but they were definitely in a committed relationship.

"Start recording the scene. I want pictures and videos of everything. Check all doors and windows for signs of forced entry."

Bree went outside and gulped the cool, damp air. Two more patrol vehicles had arrived. Her chief deputy, Todd Harvey, walked toward her. She summed up the scene. "The snow is almost gone. The yard is going to be a muddy mess in a few more hours."

"I'll get a couple of deputies to search the surrounding area ASAP."

"Include the whole block in case the killer parked in front of another house and walked over here."

Todd nodded. "We'll do a door-to-door too. Maybe a neighbor saw something or captured the killer on a home security camera."