

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

MELINDA
LEIGH

HER

A
SHORT
STORY

SECOND

DEATH

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CHAPTER ONE

Detective Bree Taggert ducked under the yellow crime scene tape and greeted the uniformed cop holding a clipboard. A pair of sawhorses blocked the street. “What’s happening, MacDonald?”

“Corpsicle.” MacDonald wrote Bree’s name and badge number on the crime scene log.

He wasn’t being disrespectful. Cops used gallows humor to cope with the violence and despair they witnessed on a daily basis.

He looked around Bree at the car she’d just exited. “Romano’s your new partner? I hear she’s a hard-ass.”

Bree shoved her hands into the pockets of her wool peacoat. “Better than a dumbass.”

“This is true,” MacDonald agreed.

Bree had been transferred to homicide a couple of days ago and paired with Detective Dana Romano, a twenty-one-year veteran of the Philly PD. Just forty-eight hours into their partnership, Bree would agree that Romano was indeed a hard-ass. Bree felt like she was back in the academy, which was ridiculous. She had plenty of investigative experience, even if that experience was mostly in burglaries and property crimes. But Romano had years of homicide experience. The call they’d responded to the day before had been ruled a suicide. This was their second death investigation as partners, and Bree already knew that Romano was also one of the best. Given a choice between smart and sociable, Bree would take the smart partner any day.

Romano slid out of the Crown Vic and tugged a black knit cap over her short, tousled blonde hair. Long and lean, the forty-six-year-old dressed almost entirely in black—pants, boots, jacket—except for her bright raspberry lipstick. To be fair, Bree also wore mostly black. City road grime was rough on clothes.

Bree stepped off the curb and joined her partner in the center of the street. Her boots were clunky, waterproof with knobby rubber treads. Last week's snow had melted, leaving an occasional lump of ugly gray snow and random patches of black ice.

Three patrol vehicles were double-parked, lights flashing in front of a brick warehouse that spanned most of the North Philadelphia block. Graffiti covered the rolling overhead doors along the loading dock. Tall chain-link fencing topped with razor wire surrounded a parking lot full of commercial trucks and vans.

Rowhomes on the adjacent block varied from well tended to boarded up. Parked cars lined the streets. Despite the frigid December wind, die-hard weeds sprouted between the concrete slabs and in the cracks of patched blacktop. Bulging black garbage bags had been piled at the curb next to a discarded rusted bicycle frame.

Another uniform gestured toward a vehicle twenty yards away, an old blue Ford Escape with a huge dent in the front fender. "The body's inside."

At thirty-one years old, Bree had been with the Philly PD for nine years, first in patrol, then as a detective. She recognized most of the uniforms. "Reilly."

"Taggart." He nodded, then greeted her partner. "Hey, Romano, you still dating that lawyer?"

He said *lawyer* like he meant to say *serial killer*.

Romano shook her head. "Nope."

"You should have known you can't date a lawyer." Reilly frowned. "Cops and lawyers shouldn't mix. It ain't natural."

"From your lips, Reilly," Romano said in a knowing voice.

Reilly fell into step beside Bree. "You still dating Ben Harris from the twelfth?"

"What are you, the district matchmaker?" Bree rolled her eyes.

He patted his well-rounded belly. “I just want to see all my fellow officers as fat and happy as I am. Besides, my brother-in-law is in town. The wife wants to fix him up.”

Bree laughed. “Harris and I broke up. The only thing worse than dating a lawyer is seeing another cop.”

“No kidding.” Reilly snorted.

“But I’m not interested in a blind date.” The only male Bree was currently keeping company with was her tomcat. “Too soon.”

Reilly gave Romano a questioning look. “Help a brother out?”

Romano held up a hand. “No fucking way. Not happening.”

They approached the Ford. The driver’s door was open, and a figure slumped over the wheel. “We responded to a call from a passerby who spotted the body.” Reilly motioned toward a man hunched against the cold on the sidewalk. Dreadlocks spilled out from under a black watch cap. “The vehicle doors were unlocked. We opened the door to assess the victim’s condition.” He didn’t need to go on. The victim’s condition was evident.

Bree fastened her top coat button. The dampness cut right through to her bones. Despite MacDonald’s corpsicle reference—and the frigid feel to the wind—overnight temps hadn’t gone below freezing.

Romano leaned over to peer into the vehicle. “Messy.”

Bree looked over her new partner’s shoulder into the Ford. Blood and brains splattered the interior. A bullet had entered the side of the man’s temple. The entry wound was the size of a quarter. The bullet must have tumbled and fragmented inside his skull because it had made a bigger hole on the way out.

Romano stared at the body, her crow’s feet deepening as she assessed the scene.

Bree stepped back and glanced through the rear window into the back seat. The floor was covered in fast-food

wrappers, empty kid's meal boxes, and a couple of discarded sippy cups. A child safety seat was strapped into the middle seat. She tamped down the small punch of emotion. "He's got a kid."

Reilly stamped his feet. "The vehicle is registered to James Tyson."

"Did you run him?" Romano asked Reilly.

"Yeah." Reilly consulted a notepad. "Twenty-seven years old. He's got a rap sheet. Mostly old drug possession charges. No recent arrests."

Romano glanced back at Bree. "Check the glove box."

Tugging on gloves, Bree rounded the vehicle and opened the passenger door. The cold might delay decomposition, but the vehicle still smelled nasty. Muscles relaxed upon death, releasing the contents of the bladder and bowels. There was no dignity in dying.

Ignoring the blood-and-gore-spattered interior, she used one finger to open the glove compartment. Inside, she found the normal paraphernalia: vehicle registration, a dog-eared Ford manual, a flashlight, and a box of crayons. "Nothing interesting."

She removed a wallet from the center console and opened it. The driver's license of James Tyson showed through the plastic window. Bree leaned into the vehicle and tilted her head until she could see the victim's face and compare it to the license photo. "Looks like him."

Pulling her head out of the compact SUV, she took a deep breath of cold, exhaust-tinted air. Glancing down at the wallet, she read off an address less than a mile away from the scene. She opened the billfold. "Forty-three dollars and two credit cards."

So, probably not a robbery.

Ducking back into the vehicle, Bree picked up the cell phone in the cupholder. "Passcode protected."

“Leave it for the CSU geeks.” On the other side of the vehicle, Romano stared at the body. “The window is down, and it’s thirty-eight degrees.”

This was a *roll 'em up* kind of city block. “He was a local. I’m sure he knew plenty of people,” Bree said.

“Probably a drug deal gone sideways, or a gang hit.” Reilly knew his turf. A good percentage of Philadelphia homicides—especially shootings—were drug and/or gang related. “How long do you think he’s been dead?”

Romano shrugged, stepped back, and scanned the area. “With the window down, he’s visible from outside the vehicle. In this neighborhood, people would have been walking by. He couldn’t sit here, dead, for very long without someone noticing.”

“Doesn’t mean they would have reported it.” Reilly rocked back on his heels.

Bree sorted through crumpled receipts on the passenger-side floor. Smoothing them out, she read the date and time stamps in faded print. Two were recent. “He bought gas and a kid’s meal yesterday. He was alive at 8:06 in the morning.” She checked her watch. It was nearly eight a.m. “He’s been dead less than twenty-four hours.”

Romano looked up and nodded toward a medical examiner van approaching. “ME’s here.”

They stepped away from the vehicle and waited.

Romano gestured at Reilly. “Let’s get a few uniforms knocking on doors. See if residents will admit to seeing or hearing anything last night. Also, look for doorbell or front-porch cameras on the houses facing this direction.”

Reilly grabbed another patrol cop, and they turned toward the rowhomes across the street.

Bree eyed the houses. She had no doubt someone had heard the shot. But in this neighborhood, residents weren’t likely to call the cops. They’d go inside, lock their doors, and shut the fuck up. Gangs owned the blocks. Rattling on them proved hazardous to one’s health.

Bree turned in a circle. “I see surveillance cameras around the warehouse parking lot. I’ll go talk to management about getting copies of the videos.”

“I’ll take a statement from the witness.” Romano started toward the man with the dreadlocks.

Bree pulled off her gloves and tucked them into an evidence bag. She crossed the street and strode to the old brick building. She showed her badge at the entrance and explained what she needed. As she stepped into the warehouse, her breath fogged. The chill seeped from the concrete floor through the soles of her boots. It felt colder inside than outside.

“No problem.” A skinny security guard escorted her to a back office, where he opened the previous night’s surveillance footage. Bree pulled up a wheeled chair and watched him locate the correct camera and fast-forward through the video.

On the monitor, Bree spied the Ford cruising down the street. “Stop.”

The crime scene was in the periphery of the camera’s focus. With the darkness and distance, the film was too grainy to read the license plate, but the make and model were clear. The Ford disappeared behind a furniture truck. Bree assumed it parked, because it didn’t emerge on the other side of the truck and was in the same location it currently sat.

The guard advanced through the frames. About fifteen minutes after the Ford disappeared from view, a figure slipped from behind the truck. It crossed the sidewalk behind a pile of garbage bags and disappeared into a shadowed alley. The shooter? Where did he come from? “Can you go back?”

“Sure.” The security guard replayed the video.

The figure was visible for only a few seconds. Bree could see a hoodie-clad head above the garbage bags. Suspect number one. Unfortunately, the footage was too dark to see any detail. “Can you print that?”

With a nod, the guard clicked his mouse.

Bree studied the screen. A few minutes later, a shadow shifted on the edge of the video. “What’s that?”

“Looks like someone approaching from the south.” The guard shook his head. “He’s staying in the shadow of the truck.” He froze the video and zoomed in on the figure.

The second suspect appeared to be male due to his general size and build. He turned, and Bree could see his profile. “Stop! Can you print that as well?”

“Sure.” The guard clicked the mouse again, then returned to fast-forwarding the video. No one else appeared. He made a copy of the entire video and downloaded it onto a thumb drive.

She stuck the thumb drive in her pocket. “Thanks.”

“Good luck.”

She left the building. Outside, she walked up and down the sidewalk but spotted no additional surveillance cameras, then headed back to the Ford. The ME was leaning into the vehicle. His assistant manned a camera.

Romano turned as Bree crossed the street. “Witness didn’t see anything. He works on the loading dock. Saw the body when he was walking from the bus stop to the warehouse.” She paused. “No luck with the canvass. Everyone on the block was sleeping soundly all night long.” Sarcasm rang in her voice.

Bree called bullshit, but what could you do? She summarized what she’d seen on the surveillance video and showed Romano the printed photo of suspect number two.

“Let’s get a copy distributed to the uniforms. We can check with the Gun Violence Task Force too. If he’s a local gang member, someone will recognize him.”

The Gun Violence Task Force was a joint effort with the attorney general, the Philly PD, state police, and the ATF.

“Suspect number one looks smaller, but we only have a back-of-the-head picture,” Bree said. “The video *does* give us a window for potential time of death.” She pointed to the time stamps on the two pictures. “Tyson arrives a little after one

a.m. Both suspects are seen on the video between 1:11 and 1:30 a.m.”

“It’s a start.”

Bree stabbed at the photos. “Either one of these suspects could have arrived in the Ford with Tyson . . .”

“Or were waiting for Tyson here.” Romano finished Bree’s thought.

“We can’t say for certain that no one else was there,” Bree added. “Too much of the camera view is blocked.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Bree agreed. “Fuck.”

The ME had a body like Santa. He pulled out of the Ford’s interior. “No rigor yet. Livor mortis isn’t fixed yet either. Cold would slow decomp, but he’s relatively fresh. Died very early this morning.” He closed his eyes and his jowly face screwed up as he did the mental math. “Six to eight hours ago, roughly between midnight and two a.m.”

Which matched the times on the surveillance video.

“Detective Romano?” Reilly called. “CSU is here.”

As soon as the ME removed the body, the crime scene unit would take over.

“Do we have a next of kin for the victim?” Romano asked.

Reilly nodded. “He’s married to Kelly Tyson.”

“Let’s go notify Mrs. Tyson.” Romano turned back toward their vehicle. Once behind the wheel, she rubbed her palms together, then pulled a pair of leather gloves from her pocket and tugged them on.

In the passenger seat, Bree blew on her freezing hands.

Romano peeled away from the curb.

“Wasn’t a robbery.” Bree rolled the facts around in her head. “They left cash in Tyson’s wallet. Also, they didn’t take the car. Drug deal gone sour?”

“We have no idea what happened, other than a guy got shot.”

“You don’t like any of those theories?” Bree asked.

Romano shot her a direct look. “I like evidence, not theories.”

Bree could have run the mile to the victim’s residence faster than they drove in morning rush-hour traffic. Romano pulled to the curb in front of a block of rowhomes that directly fronted the sidewalk. They stepped out of the vehicle.

Bree studied the crumbling brick facade. Thick utility wires hung overhead. She scanned the doors for numbers. “Looks like she rents the basement apartment.”

Cracked concrete steps led to the lower unit. A freshly painted robin’s-egg-blue front door made the rest of the block look older and more worn. They went down, and Bree knocked on the door. She heard footsteps on the other side. A curtain shifted in the window next to the door. A few seconds later, the door opened, and a young woman eyed them with suspicion.

According to Kelly Tyson’s motor vehicle records, she was twenty-three years old, but she could have passed for early thirties. She was tall and bony, with sallow skin that said she didn’t get outside much. Her shoulder-length blonde hair sported three inches of dark roots. Worry lines etched the corners of her mouth and eyes.

“We’re Detectives Taggert and Romano.” Bree opened her badge wallet and turned it toward the young woman. “Are you Kelly Tyson?” she asked, even though the woman matched her driver’s license photo.

Nodding, Mrs. Tyson crossed her arms and chewed on her thumbnail. Her fingernails were bitten far below the quick, and her cuticles looked like they’d been through a meat grinder. In a heavy sweatshirt and yoga pants, she shivered in the doorway.

“Are you married to James Tyson?” Romano asked.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t live here anymore.” Mrs. Tyson stepped back and grabbed the door, preparing to close it.

“May we come inside, Mrs. Tyson?” Bree asked.

“No.” Mrs. Tyson lifted her chin with a defiance that seemed permanent. “Whatever James did, it’s got nothing to do with me.”

“May we please come inside?” Bree asked. “It’s freezing, and we’d rather not have this discussion in public.”

“A’ight.” Mrs. Tyson stepped into the house.

Romano and Bree followed her into a tiny living room–kitchen combination. The apartment was long and narrow. The air held the permanent chill of a basement. Off the main living space, a door opened into a small bathroom. Behind that, it appeared as if there were two bedrooms the size of walk-in closets. Despite the cramped quarters, there was an obvious attempt to keep the place tidy. The worn couch was draped with blankets. A stack of milk crates in the corner contained children’s toys and books.

“Mrs. Tyson,” Romano began.

“Call me Kelly.” But Kelly didn’t sit down or relax. She stood just inside the apartment, barely giving Bree room to close the door. Kelly knew something was wrong.

“Do you want to sit down?” Bree asked.

Kelly shook her head. “Just say it. What happened?”

“I regret to inform you that James was killed very early this morning.” Romano gave her the news straight up. Bree appreciated her new partner’s no-bullshit attitude.

Mrs. Tyson just stared, as if she didn’t know whether she should believe them. “What?”

“We’re sorry for your loss,” Romano said.

The color drained from Kelly’s face as she absorbed the news. “Lena was with James overnight. Where’s my daughter?”

CHAPTER TWO

Bree's gaze snapped around the room and fell on some framed snapshots on a side table. Most of the photos focused on a little blonde girl. Bree's heart kicked against her ribs.

She'd known homicide would be challenging. Instead of encountering only the occasional dead body, death would be her focus on a daily basis. She'd come to terms with her new reality, but kids . . . For most cops, it was the child victims who broke them.

"Lena is your daughter?" Romano asked.

"Yeah." Kelly's eyes went wild. "You gotta find her."

Bree studied the photos. "How old is she?"

"Five." Kelly covered her mouth with one hand. She wrapped the other around her own waist.

"Is there anyone James could have left Lena with?" Romano's voice remained calm, but the tone had shifted. There was a layer of urgency under the quiet words.

"Maybe his father. That's who he lives with." Kelly raked a hand through her limp hair. She pulled out a phone and jabbed the screen. She turned on the speakerphone and held the cell in front of her mouth.

A man answered in an angry voice. "Why are you calling me?"

Kelly ignored his question. "Marty, where's Lena?"

"I don't know. With James, I guess," the man said. "James said I'm not supposed to talk to you. Everything has to go through the attorney."

"James is dead," Kelly snapped.

Bree winced. This wasn't the way a father should learn about his son's death, but Kelly was—understandably—focused on finding her daughter.

Three heartbeats of silence ticked by, then the man said, “What?”

“Two cops—detectives—are here right now. They said James is dead. Lena was with him last night.” Kelly’s breaths came quicker, as if she might hyperventilate. “Are you sure she’s not there? Can you check the bedroom?”

“James can’t be dead,” Marty said.

“Please, just see if Lena is in her room.” Kelly closed her eyes.

“OK, but he wouldn’t leave her here without telling me.” The sound of heavy footsteps came across the line. A door opened, and Marty said, “She’s not here.”

Kelly’s eyes snapped open, and she cried out. “Where is she?”

“I’ll be right over.” Marty’s words broke, as if the reality of his son’s death was sinking in.

Bree waved at Kelly and shook her head. “We need to see James’s living space,” she said in a soft voice. “Tell him we’ll come to him.”

Kelly repeated the message. It sounded as if the father was crying when Kelly said goodbye and ended the call.

“When was the last time you saw James?” Romano asked Kelly.

“Yesterday.” Kelly paced, her hands clenching into fists at her sides. “He came to pick up Lena in the morning.”

Romano stepped into the kitchen area and began making calls. A minute later, she lowered her phone. “Kelly? We need a description of Lena, a recent photo, and something that carries her scent.”

They were bringing out a K-9.

“She’s three and a half feet tall and about forty pounds.” Kelly hurried into one of the back bedrooms. Bree followed her, stopping in the doorway to scan the room. Discarded clothing littered the floor. A stuffed elephant lay nestled in the

unmade bed. Kelly snatched a small pink pajama top from the floor. “This is the last thing Lena wore before going with James.”

Bree went out to their vehicle for an evidence bag. Back inside the bedroom, she put the pink top in it. “A recent photo?”

Kelly nodded and opened her phone.

“Text it to me.” Bree recited her number. When the pictured arrived, she forwarded it to Romano.

Her partner went outside to make arrangements for a unit to pick up the pink shirt and put out a BOLO. A *be on the lookout* would be sent to all area law enforcement with a description and photo of Lena, along with the known details of her disappearance.

Bree returned to the living room and the snapshots of Lena. The little girl was blonde, long-limbed, and bony like her mother. In each photo, Lena smiled but didn’t look at the camera. Her attention was on the stuffed elephant she clutched. The first picture was Lena at the zoo, in front of the giraffe exhibit, holding the stuffed elephant, staring at the floor. Another picture showed her in a classroom, with the same elephant in tow.

A flashback popped into Bree’s head. Her little sister, Erin, in the kitchen. Like Lena, Erin had been skinny, and she’d dragged a stuffed animal everywhere. Erin’s had been a bunny. When had Bree called her sister last? More than two weeks ago. More like three. She was a terrible sister. But she really hated to be reminded of her childhood. Every memory brought the horror and sorrow flooding back. It amazed her that grief could be so fresh more than twenty years later.

Bree shook off the memories. Her own personal horror show could wait.

“She hates having her picture taken.” Kelly picked at a scab on her arm.

“Why did Lena go with your ex yesterday?” Bree asked.

“We have an agreement. James takes her two days a week. He picks her up in the morning, takes her to school, then picks her up in the evening. She stays overnight at his place. I pick her up at school the next day after work.”

“Is James a good father?”

Kelly lifted a shoulder. “He loves her, and she loves him.”

But Bree sensed Kelly had reservations about her husband. Bree picked up a photo: Lena in James’s arms. The little girl wore the same smile, but again, she wasn’t looking at the camera. “Did anything happen when James picked her up yesterday?”

“We had a fight. James was late, as usual. Lena needed to go to school. I had to get to work at the coffee shop.” Kelly tore a piece of fingernail off with her teeth. “Plus, he was mad that I scheduled a doctor’s appointment for her on his day in a few weeks. I told him I have to take the appointments they give me. Of course, he wouldn’t trade days with me.” She jerked her hand away from her mouth. “That’s why I kicked him out. He wasn’t reliable.”

“Where does she go to school?” Bree set down the photo.

“Brighton Learning Center,” Kelly said. “I’ll call them in case James dropped her off before . . .”

She stopped before finishing the thought: *he died*.

Bree didn’t tell her that James had been dead since one in the morning. Kelly made the call. Then, with tears in her eyes, she said, “They haven’t seen her since James picked her up at five thirty yesterday.”

“There isn’t anyone else James could have asked to watch her today?”

Kelly shook her head. “No. Lena can’t just stay with anyone. Me, James, and Marty are the only ones who can handle her.”

“Handle her?” Bree didn’t like the sound of that.

“Lena is autistic. She’s nonverbal. She doesn’t do good with a break in her routine.” Kelly wiped a tear from her

cheek. “If someone took her, she’s gonna freak out.”

“What will she do if searchers are calling her name?”

“I don’t know. Hide, maybe.” Kelly looked up, her eyes brimming with anger through her tears. “This is all James’s fault.”

Bree waited.

Kelly’s mouth set in a flat, bloodless line. “He wasn’t supposed to be doing drugs anymore. He promised, but I know he was.”

“How do you know?” Bree asked.

“I just do. He always gets short-tempered when he’s using.”

A patrol unit arrived and collected the pink top. Two more units showed up. Bree and Romano left an officer with Kelly and assigned the other three to canvas the block. Maybe a neighbor had seen Lena.

“We’ll be back after we talk to James’s father and get an update for you.”

Kelly wrapped her arms around her waist. “I’d rather go look for Lena.”

“You need to stay here in case she comes home,” Bree said. “We have no proof that someone took her. She could have simply wandered off. She might come home. The scene isn’t far from here.”

Bree and Romano went outside. They stood on the sidewalk, the cold wind pelting their faces. Bree spotted a movement of the curtain in the window of the house next door.

“We informed the usual alphabet agencies and issued a BOLO,” Romano said. That would notify everyone from the local cops to the FBI. But Amber Alerts were not typically issued without sufficient information on the abductor and/or captor’s vehicle.

“Here’s hoping the K-9 picks up her scent at the scene.” Bree updated Romano on the conversation she’d had with

Kelly. The curtain shifted again.

“A nonverbal child could be hard to find.” Romano rounded the vehicle.

Bree pointed to the next house. “Give me two minutes. I want to ask the neighbor a question.”

Romano squinted. “While you’re doing that, I’ll try the unit on the other side.”

Bree jogged to the stoop and knocked on the front door. A tiny old woman answered. The tops of her gray curls barely reached Bree’s collarbones. She showed the old woman her badge and introduced herself.

“I’m Mina Lawrence. Hold on.” The old woman adjusted her hearing aid. “Now go ahead.”

“Mrs. Lawrence, the little girl next door has gone missing.”

“Lena is missing? Oh, no!” Mrs. Lawrence cried.

“Yes, ma’am. When did you see her last?”

Mrs. Lawrence looked at the sky. “Yesterday morning, I guess, when her daddy came to pick her up.”

“You noticed?”

“They had a huge fight, and they weren’t quiet about it. They never are.” She touched her ear. “There are times it’s good to be able to dial down my hearing.”

“Did you hear any sounds from the Tysons’ place later in the day or during the night?”

Shivering, Mrs. Lawrence closed the front of her heavy sweater. “No, but I go to bed early.”

“Do you know what the Tysons were fighting about?”

Mrs. Lawrence’s mouth puckered. “No. Even with this”—she pointed to a small, flesh-colored device in her ear—“my hearing isn’t that great.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us to help us find Lena?”

Mrs. Lawrence shook her head. “That poor child. I’ll pray you find her.”

“Thank you for your time, ma’am.” Bree hurried back to the vehicle.

“Well?” Romano asked.

“The neighbor confirms the Tysons had a fight yesterday morning, but she didn’t hear the details.” Bree fastened her seat belt. “How about on your side?”

“No one is home.” Romano turned on the lights and siren to cut through traffic.

Bree directed her partner toward James’s father’s house. “Marty Tyson has lived at the same address forever.”

It wasn’t unusual for Philadelphia natives to stay in the same neighborhood where they were raised. Parents sold or left their homes to their children.

Marty Tyson lived just ten blocks from Kelly. He opened the door before Bree and Romano had even reached the stoop. Marty was a big man, with heavily calloused hands the size of whole hams. Devastation lined his craggy face.

He led them back to a warm, tidy kitchen that smelled of fresh coffee. He eased into a chair as if his bones ached. “My son is really dead?”

“We’re sorry for your loss, Mr. Tyson.” Romano unzipped her jacket and sat across from him at a round oak table.

He nodded and appeared to be fighting tears. “I didn’t even see Lena yesterday. James said he was taking her out for pizza, and I went to bed early.”

Bree wandered a circle around the kitchen. She unbuttoned her coat to let the heat in.

“You wanted to see James’s room.” He pointed to the stairs. “Top of the steps. On the left. Help yourself.”

“Where did Lena sleep when she stayed here?” Romano asked.

“The room next to James’s. It’s small.” His face cracked in a bittersweet smile. “But so is Lena.” He turned watery blue eyes on Bree, then Romano. “You have to find her. She’s not like other kids.”

“We understand she’s autistic and nonverbal.”

Marty nodded. “Doesn’t talk, but she gets her point across.”

Bree headed for the stairs. She heard Romano asking more questions. “In what way?”

“She gestures.” He exhaled. “She knows what she wants. She might not talk, but she’s smart.”

“Sounds like you love your granddaughter.” Romano’s voice faded.

Bree climbed the stairs and went into James’s room. A basket full of folded clothes sat on the bed. Pulling on gloves, she searched every inch of the bedroom. No guns. No drugs. No illegal substances of any kind. The room didn’t smell of pot. If James was doing drugs, he hadn’t kept any at home.

She moved into the little girl’s room. It was small, but cozy and neat. Built-in shelves overflowed with picture books and stuffed animals.

Bree went back downstairs. She caught Romano’s eye and shook her head.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Tyson.” Romano stood and zipped her coat.

Mr. Tyson was putting on his own coat.

“Where are you going?” Bree fastened her coat buttons.

“I’m going with you to look for Lena.” He grabbed a pair of heavy gloves.

Bree glanced around. Marty’s house was warm and welcoming. “What if Lena comes here? Shouldn’t someone be here?”

Marty went out onto the stoop and knocked on his neighbor’s door. A tiny old woman in a fuchsia tracksuit

opened it. “Marty, what’s wrong?”

“Lena is missing.” Marty didn’t mention his son’s death. Maybe he was blocking it. Maybe he just couldn’t talk about it. “I’m going to go look for her. Would you stay at my place in case she comes back here?”

“Of course.” She nodded, her head of white curls bobbing.

Marty gave Romano a *problem solved* look. “Lena won’t go to just anyone. She might hide.”

Wonderful.

A dog will still find her.

Bree and Romano shared a Look. They’d only been partners for a couple of days, but they already communicated pretty well.

“You have to stay behind the barriers, Mr. Tyson,” Romano said.

He didn’t promise, just turned left on the sidewalk and got into a battered pickup truck.

Standing in the wind, Bree blinked as a second flashback hit. Bree, her little sister, and her baby brother hiding under a porch on a winter night long ago. Fear crawled up her throat just as it had that night. A gunshot blasted. Bree flinched.

“Hey, you OK?” Romano paused and stared at Bree over the roof of the vehicle.

“Sure. Just thinking.” Embarrassed, Bree slid into the passenger seat.

She and her siblings had survived their abusive father and traumatic childhood, but they’d been left with scars, both physical and emotional. Had Lena seen her father killed? How would she cope?

“About what?”

“You know my background.” Bree was convinced almost everyone on the Philly PD knew that at the age of eight, she’d hidden her siblings under their porch while their father shot their mother and then himself.

“I do,” Romano said. “Will it affect your job performance?”

“No.”

“Then it doesn’t matter.” Romano glanced sideways at her. “Can’t pick your family.”

Except Bree understood childhood trauma. She could put herself in a frightened child’s place all too well. Normally, she tried not to think about it, but today she might have to.

“Let’s take a fresh look at the surveillance footage.” Bree pulled out her phone. “I don’t see a kid leaving with the suspect. I don’t see a kid at all.”

Romano leaned across the front seat and squinted at the screen. “You can’t see into the back seat of the vehicle, and there are plenty of shadows.” She started the engine and drove back to the scene, parking behind a K-9 unit.

The handler was working his big German shepherd around the vehicle. They got out of the car and stepped onto the sidewalk.

Romano approached Officer Reilly. “Any luck with the dog?”

Watching the dog, Bree hung back. Sweat dripped down her back. Though the bite scar on her shoulder was more than twenty-five years old, it itched. She knew the symptom was psychological, but she couldn’t stop it. She knew what it was like to have a big dog’s teeth sink into your flesh. But she was at no risk from this dog. He was a well-trained K-9. If Lena was nearby, the dog would find her.

Unless Lena was afraid of dogs . . .

Reilly shook his head. “The dog isn’t picking up a trail. He keeps going back to the vehicle.”

Romano walked back to Bree. “Did you hear?”

Bree nodded. “So, Lena probably didn’t walk away from the Ford. Either she wasn’t in the car last night, or she left by vehicle.”

She could be anywhere.

Romano moved away to answer a call. Bree checked the time. Almost ten o'clock. The child had been missing for at least nine hours.

Romano hurried back and waved toward their vehicle. "We've got a lead. A thumbprint from the Ford. Belongs to Dillon Brown, a suspected drug dealer. He's currently out on parole after serving six months on a narcotics possession charge."

Bree compared the surveillance photo with Dillon Brown's driver's license picture. "Looks like him. Maybe he was James's supplier."

Bree rushed to the passenger seat.

Romano slid behind the wheel. "BOLO already went out looking for Brown."

Maybe Dillon was also the killer.

CHAPTER THREE

In the passenger seat of their unmarked car, Bree reviewed Dillon Brown's criminal record and studied his photo. He was short, with unkempt brown hair and a bushy beard. "He drives a 2002 F-150. No evidence of gang affiliation, though it's always possible."

"Reilly said Brown is small-time scum." Romano started the engine.

Based on the exigent circumstances, they'd already performed a warrantless search of Dillon's apartment. They'd found plenty of weed—which they ignored—but no gun and no child.

"Does he have a job?" Romano asked.

Bree checked her notes from her phone conversation with his parole officer. "Dillon works at Brown's Building Supply, which is owned by his father." She read off an address on Front Street.

Romano cruised past St. Christopher's Hospital for Children and the Ronald McDonald House. A few blocks farther north, two big chain-link gates marked the entrance to Brown's Building Supply. She drove through and headed for the office, a small cinder block building painted white. The parking lot was surprisingly full of vehicles.

"There." Bree pointed to a white pickup. "That looks like his ride."

Romano drove past it, slowly.

Bree confirmed the license plate. "That's Dillon's."

"Then he's here." Romano parked.

A blue warehouse the size of a big-box store loomed behind the office. The double doors were open, and Bree could see rows of lumber and other materials. They got out and went into the small building.

The office smelled like sawdust and mold. Decor leaned to the 1970s.

“Can I help you?” A dark-haired woman in her midfifties sat at an old metal desk.

“We’re looking for Dillon Brown.” Romano showed her badge.

The woman sighed and didn’t even look at the badge. “What’s he done?”

“We just need to speak to him.” Romano put her badge away. “It’s important.”

“The little jerk is in the warehouse.” The receptionist gestured vaguely toward the wall facing the warehouse. “He drives a forklift.”

“Thank you.” Romano spun on her heel.

“Good luck.” The woman returned her fingers to her keyboard.

Bree and Romano left the office.

Outside, Bree asked, “Do you think she’s calling him?”

“She didn’t seem to be a fan.” Romano quickened her pace and they hurried to the open warehouse doors.

They stepped onto the cold concrete. Workers were loading lumber onto a flatbed truck. They followed the beeping of heavy equipment down an aisle until they spotted a forklift at the other end.

Bree recognized Dillon. “That’s him.”

Unfortunately, Dillon pegged them as cops from twenty yards away. He leaped down from his forklift and sprinted for the back door.

Bree dashed after him. “Stop! Police!”

He glanced over his shoulder, but he didn’t slow down—not that Bree expected him to. She cranked up the speed.

Clearly, Dillon didn’t get up every morning and run five miles like Bree did. She gained on him quickly. He shot her

another panicked look, then wrapped a hand around the back doorframe and used the motion to make a hard right on his way through it.

Two seconds later, Bree burst through the opening into a weedy, wet field. She shouted “Police!” one more time, then saved her breath for running.

The ground squished under her boots as she raced across the dormant grass to a gravel lane. He jumped a fence and raced down an alley. Bree vaulted the fence and kept after him.

In three more strides, she’d almost caught up to Dillon. Just ahead, he obviously heard her because he suddenly stopped, spun, and pulled a knife from his back pocket. His face was flushed and moist. Waving the knife at her, he panted. “Get away.”

“Drop it!” She slid to a stop and drew her service weapon. “I’m a cop.” Cold air pumped in and out of her lungs like bellows. In her peripheral vision, she saw industrial buildings, no windows.

No help.

She wasn’t as out of breath as he was, but the hard sprint had left her winded. “I’m going to get my badge out.”

“I don’t give a fuck about your badge,” he yelled, fighting to catch his breath. “I can tell you’re a cop.”

Bree’s pulse hammered in her ears. She kept her gun aimed at Dillon. “Don’t you want to know why I’m here?”

He wheezed and gulped. “I know why you’re here!”

She waited.

“I didn’t do it!” Color flooded his face. He talked with his hands, the knife waving as he gestured.

Bree didn’t want to shoot him. “Do what?”

“Kill James.” His voice cracked.

“OK.” Bree kept her voice calm. “Drop the knife, and you can tell me everything.”

“No!” He held the knife up and slashed the air between them.

Bree wished she carried a Taser. She didn’t want to shoot him.

An engine roared, and the Crown Vic came hurtling down the alley. It screeched to a stop inches from Dillon. He spun, but Romano opened the car door, smacking Dillon with it and knocking him off his feet.

Dillon’s knife went flying, and he face-planted on the asphalt.

Romano stepped out and drew her weapon. “Get on your knees. Hands on top of your head.”

Dillon obeyed.

Bree moved forward and cuffed his hands behind his back. She hauled him to his feet, turned him around, and pressed his back against their vehicle.

“What are you arresting me for?” he whined.

Romano gave him an exasperated look. “Your apartment is full of weed. You’re on parole. You’re carrying a concealed weapon, and you just brandished it at a police officer. That’s at least three felonies.”

He shook his head hard. His eyes were bright with fury. “You can’t send me back to jail. It was just some weed. Fucking cops. You’re out to get everyone.”

“I can’t make any promises,” Bree said. “But personally, I don’t care about your weed. I’m trying to find James’s kid. Where is she?”

“What kid?” Dillon tilted his head.

Bree watched his eyes. “The little girl who was with James.”

“There was no kid.” He didn’t blink or look away. His gaze was full of genuine confusion.

“No kid in the back seat?” Romano asked. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Dillon gave them an exaggerated shrug. “I would have noticed a kid. Please, you can’t send me back to jail.”

“Tell us what you saw.” Bree leveled him with a gaze. “No bullshit. You tell us everything.”

“James wanted to buy some weed. Just a little. He was trying hard to stay off the Oxy. He thought a little weed might smooth him out. His old lady gave him shit constantly. She’s a crazy bitch.” His head shook slowly. “You don’t know.”

“Where were you supposed to meet him?” Bree hurried him along.

He gave the street where they’d found the Ford and James’s body. “Near the warehouse.”

Romano rolled a *wrap it up* hand in the air.

“We were supposed to meet at one. I saw his car. The window was down.” His mouth flattened. “But when I went up to the window, James was dead.”

“You’re sure he was dead?” Bree asked.

Dillon paled. “His brain was splattered inside of the car.”

“And you’re sure there was no kid inside?” Romano pressed.

“I’m sure.” He nodded.

Romano put him in the back of the car. Bree grabbed an evidence bag and picked up the knife.

“Hey, I thought you were going to let me go if I told you everything.” He sounded indignant.

“I never said we’d let you go.”

“And we’re not so sure you told us the truth.” Romano closed the car door, put her back to the vehicle, and asked Bree, “You think he’s lying?”

“I wish I did.” But Bree hadn’t gotten any lying cues from Dillon.

They slid into the vehicle.

“Shit.” Romano punched the steering wheel. “Me either.”

“Let’s get a warrant to search the building supply company property, just in case he stashed her there.”

“I didn’t take any kid!” Dillon shouted from the back seat.

They ignored him.

Romano put the vehicle in reverse and backed out of the alley. “Maybe next time, we could coordinate? I hate it when my partner gets stabbed, and I don’t even know where they are.”

Heat burned Bree’s cold cheeks as she filled out the evidence bag label.

Romano continued. “If you get yourself stabbed, I am not doing that paperwork.”

“Sorry.”

Romano shook her head. “I will say that you’re a lot faster than my old partner. He was a great detective, but the only thing he could run was his mouth.”

They went back to Brown’s Building Supply. Two patrol cars were parked in front of the office. They transferred Dillon to one of the uniforms. Mr. Brown agreed to let them search the premises without a warrant. Normally, they’d prefer to wait for the paperwork, but with a child missing, they took advantage of his offer.

More uniforms arrived and searched the buildings. The city was turning out every available body to find Lena.

But they didn’t find her.

“Now what?” Frustration tasted bitter in Bree’s throat as she climbed back into the Crown Vic. Only about an hour of daylight remained.

“Now we go back to Kelly, ask her more questions, and give her an update.”

An update on how her daughter was still missing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bree's heart ached as Kelly broke down sobbing.

"Where is she? Where is Lena?" Kelly hunched on the sofa, her shoulders caved in, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen. "Please tell me you're still looking for her."

"Yes," Romano assured her. "We have alerts out to every officer on duty in the city and surrounding counties."

James's father, Marty, came through the door. A few hours of searching the neighborhood around the crime scene had left his cheeks and nose red from the cold. "What can I do?"

Kelly cried harder.

Romano started asking pointed questions. "When did James go back to using?"

"He wasn't using. Well, maybe he smoked a little pot," Marty conceded. "But he wasn't doing anything hard."

"You don't know that," Kelly cried.

Romano gestured to Marty. "Can I talk to you outside?"

"Sure." Marty followed her out onto the little concrete patio that constituted the backyard.

Bree picked up one of the snapshots of Lena, the one with her holding her stuffed elephant at the zoo.

Romano's voice sounded muffled through the back door. "Did James have anyone he might have trusted with Lena? Maybe a new girlfriend?"

"I don't know." Marty didn't deny the possibility that James had been seeing someone.

Bree carried the framed picture into the little girl's bedroom. Kelly had cleaned up. She'd probably wanted something to keep her occupied. Nervous energy didn't like to be contained.

Standing in the center of the small space, Bree let her eyes drift. They fell on the stuffed elephant, now in the middle of the nearly made bed. Instead of seeing Lena's room, Bree was transported back to the run-down farm in upstate New York where she'd spent the first eight years of her life. She rarely returned to her hometown. The memories were too painful, but today's mental trip was unavoidable.

There were too many similarities.

A sad little girl with a stuffed animal friend, a friend she'd taken everywhere to help her cope.

A sound in the doorway caught her attention. Kelly leaned on the jamb.

"I just want my little girl back." Kelly sniffed.

Bree turned back to the room. Something didn't feel right, but she couldn't identify the source of her unease. "Does Lena have any special friends? A neighbor, maybe. Someone she might go to if she were scared."

"No. She isn't good at making friends."

"Can you make a list of people Lena sees on a regular basis? Her teacher, her doctor, anyone who interacts with her frequently. Also, are there any new people in her life?"

"No one new." Kelly turned away. "I'll make a list of the rest."

Bree left the little girl's room. She could still hear Romano and Marty on the back patio. She walked through the house and went out the front door. On the sidewalk, she turned and stared at the block. She spotted Mrs. Lawrence looking out her own window. Bree turned to the neighbor on the other side of Kelly's unit and knocked. The light was on.

The man who opened the door wore pajama bottoms, day-old stubble, and dark circles under his eyes. "Sorry. I work nights." He rubbed his eyes.

Bree showed him her badge and explained that Lena was missing.

"That's terrible. She's a cute little thing. Quiet."

“When was the last time you saw her?”

The bridge of his nose wrinkled. “A couple of days ago. I work nights at the hospital as an orderly. I usually get home around nine in the morning.”

“Did you hear Mr. and Mrs. Tyson fighting recently?”

He rolled his eyes. “Like every time he comes over here. I wish she’d just divorce him already.”

“When did you hear them fighting last?” Bree asked.

“Last night.”

Bree straightened. “Do you mean yesterday morning?”

“No. It was definitely last night. I was getting ready to leave for work. It was after eleven. Closer to midnight.”

“Did you hear what they were fighting about?”

He shook his head. “I went to work.”

“And you’re sure it was James?”

“Yep. His blue beater was parked at the curb. Can’t miss it, with that huge dent in the front fender.”

“Thank you.” Bree left the stoop. If James was at the house last night, then Kelly was lying. She marched back to the Tyson house. Bree went inside, looking for her partner.

Kelly had lied about when she’d last seen James. If he’d been here last night around midnight, where was Lena? Where was she now?

From the hall, Bree spotted Romano and Marty still on the patio. She glanced into Lena’s room and saw Kelly smoothing the bed comforter. When she heard Bree enter the room, she froze. Their eyes met.

And the pieces began falling into place.

“I have a little sister.” Bree gestured toward the stuffed elephant on the bed. “When she was young, she took a stuffed rabbit with her everywhere. I mean everywhere. It used to sit on the closed toilet when she took a bath. She wouldn’t let that thing out of her sight.”

“Lena is like that with her elephant. Marty bought it for her at the zoo.”

Then the answer to Bree’s doubts dinged in her head like a fucking bell.

If Lena had packed for her normal weekly trip to her father’s house, why hadn’t she brought her elephant?

Kelly’s eyes went cold, and Bree knew in her bones that Kelly had shot James. Why was Lena’s elephant here on her bed, when she had supposedly been at her father’s place for her normal visit? Why would Kelly lie about when she’d last seen James and when she’d fought with him? Innocent people rarely lied about critical information. James had been at Kelly’s house just before he’d been murdered.

Do you know who lies in a murder investigation? Killers.

But who killed James and why wasn’t the most important question at that moment.

Bree narrowed her eyes at Kelly. “Where is Lena?”

“I don’t know.” Kelly’s gaze sharpened. “You’re supposed to find her.”

“You lied about when you last saw James. He was here last night just before midnight. Where is Lena, Kelly?” Bree took a step forward.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Kelly inched backward.

“Don’t you?” Bree pushed.

“No.” Kelly stood and brushed past her, leaving the bedroom. “Why would you think James was here last night?”

Bree followed her into the hallway. “Your neighbor saw him,” Bree lied. *Saw* was an overstatement, but whatever. “He heard you fighting.”

Kelly turned, a gun in her hand. “Don’t move.”

Fuck.

No wonder they hadn't found the gun. It had been on Kelly's person the whole time.

Bree's hand inched toward her own weapon. "What are you doing, Kelly? Drop the gun. You can't get away."

Kelly's eyes darted to the back door. Romano and Marty were still on the patio. Was Kelly going to try to run? Without her daughter? Unless she knew where Lena was . . .

"Where is Lena?" Bree asked.

"I don't know!" Kelly shouted. "You were supposed to find her, but the whole police department is so fucking stupid, they can't find one five-year-old."

"What happened, Kelly? Why did you kill him?"

"I didn't say I did." Kelly put her back to the wall.

Bree gave her a Look. "Give it up, Kelly. I know."

"I didn't mean to do it." Kelly's eyes narrowed with hate. "But I don't feel bad. He wanted to take Lena away from me. He said if I wanted a divorce, he'd go for full custody. Said he wasn't paying child support. No fucking way. He'd take Lena and the money I get from the state. If I fought him for the money, he'd kill me."

"Why not call the police?"

"And what would you do?" Kelly snarled. "Have me file a restraining order? That's worth nothing. He would still kill me." She snorted. "I did the only thing I could to protect myself and my daughter. I killed him first."

"Did Lena see you shoot James?" Bree shifted sideways, trying to turn her body so Kelly wouldn't see her draw her gun.

Kelly looked horrified. "Of course not! I'm not a monster. James brought Lena back so he could go buy drugs. Lena was already asleep. I put her to bed, then I followed him."

"You left her alone?" Bree asked.

Kelly sniffed indignantly. "She was sleeping, and I didn't have a choice. James would have killed me, but I had no proof

and no other way to protect myself.”

“Where did you get the gun?” Bree asked.

“I’ve had it for years, for protection. This is the first time I’ve needed it.” Kelly shook the pistol in her hand. “Put your hands up!”

Bree assumed the classic surrender pose. “Did Lena know about James’s threats?”

Kelly exhaled. “Lena doesn’t know what’s going on.”

“But she does.” Marty stood at the end of the hall. They hadn’t heard him come inside. “Just because she don’t talk don’t mean she don’t understand.”

Bree knew that children comprehended much more than adults realized. Maybe Lena had seen her mother argue with her father. They’d yelled loudly enough to be heard through the walls of the rowhome. Maybe she’d heard the threats they’d uttered—maybe she’d been scared and she’d run away.

Bree empathized all too well. “Where is Lena?”

“I don’t know!” Kelly spit. “When I got back, she was gone.”

Nausea rolled through Bree’s stomach. “You didn’t call the police when you first noticed Lena was gone.”

“And tell them she ran off while I was shooting her father?” Kelly barked out a grating, incredulous laugh.

“You shot James.” Marty’s voice went flat.

“He said he was gonna kill me!” Kelly shouted. “I looked all over for her. I don’t know where she went.” Her mood abruptly shifted from wild anger to despair. “Do you know how hard it is to raise an autistic child?” Kelly waved the gun at the child’s room. “She don’t talk, but she can scream until your eardrums bleed.” Kelly put her other hand to her temple, as if she could hear the screams in her head.

“Put down the gun, Kelly,” Bree said in a firm voice.

“Fuck you.” Kelly sneered.

“Are you going to kill me? What about my partner and Marty?” Bree asked. “You can’t get away. Everyone knows what you did.”

“Where *is* your partner?” Kelly looked around frantically.

“She’s right here.” Romano said from the doorway. She held her own service weapon, and it was pointed at Kelly. “Put the gun down, Kelly.”

Instead, Kelly spun, whipping the gun around toward Romano.

Bree lunged forward and knocked her arm upward. The gun went off. The bullet struck the ceiling. Bits of plaster rained down. And then Bree had Kelly’s arms behind her back. She snapped on the cuffs. “Kelly Tyson, you are under arrest for the murder of James Tyson.”

Once Kelly was restrained, Bree turned to Romano. “We need a K-9 team over here. If Lena ran away last night, the dog should be able to track her.”

More units arrived. Bree secured Kelly in the back of a patrol car. The K-9 arrived within twenty minutes. The dog led them across the tiny square of cement behind the Tyson’s rowhome, to the gate that led into Mrs. Lawrence’s patio space. A board under Mrs. Lawrence’s back steps was broken.

The K-9 approached the steps and began to bark. Bree moved ahead, putting aside her fear of the big dog to crouch next to the steps. She shone her flashlight into the darkness. A wide-eyed little girl crouched, shivering in the shadows. Bree recognized the trauma in Lena’s eyes. The little girl had seen her parents fight, possibly overheard their shouted threats. Her response had been to run and hide.

Bree knew all this because she’d lived it.

Some children were afraid of the dark, while others sought it out, hoping it could protect them.

Thankfully, Lena had had the sense to put on boots and a coat. Bree’s vision dimmed. She was transported back more than twenty years. She saw darkness, felt the shaking bodies of her siblings as they huddled together under the porch. The cold

penetrated their thin pajamas. A gunshot went off. Bree flinched.

“Taggert?” Romano’s concerned voice broke the flashback.

Bree shook it off. “I’m OK.”

Romano gave her a disbelieving stare. “Whatever.”

Bree turned back to the small hole under the neighbor’s back stoop. The little girl hadn’t moved. Bree reached out. “Hey, Lena. I’m Bree. You’re going to be OK.”

Marty ran out of Kelly’s house. “Lena!”

The little girl scurried out of her hiding place and into her grandfather’s arms.

Bree breathed and rocked back on her heels. If she tried to stand up, she’d probably fall flat on her face.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” Romano asked.

Bree didn’t lie and say *fine*. Being a partner required some actual honesty. So, she said, “I will be. Just give me a minute.”

Romano nodded. “You did OK, Taggert.”

Bree stood, refusing to let her emotions make her weak. “Call me Bree. If we’re going to get guns and knives drawn on us together, I think we should be on a first-name basis.”

She watched Marty scoop Lena up and carry her toward the house.

Romano said, “Then I guess you need to call me Dana. That was the weirdest case ever.”

“We found the kid.” Bree brushed the wrinkles from her slacks.

“That we did.” Romano gestured toward the house. “Let’s clean this mess up, partner, before we get called out again.”

Before there was another death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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#1 Amazon Charts and #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Melinda Leigh is a fully recovered banker. Melinda's debut novel, *She Can Run*, was nominated for Best First Novel by the International Thriller Writers. She's garnered numerous writing awards, including two RITA nominations. Her other novels include *She Can Tell*, *She Can Scream*, *She Can Hide*, and *She Can Kill* in the She Can series; *Midnight Exposure*, *Midnight Sacrifice*, *Midnight Betrayal*, and *Midnight Obsession* in the Midnight novels; *Hour of Need*, *Minutes to Kill*, and *Seconds to Live* in the Scarlet Falls series; *Say You're Sorry*, *Her Last Goodbye*, *Bones Don't Lie*, *What I've Done*, *Secrets Never Die*, and *Save Your Breath* in the Morgan Dane series; and the Bree Taggart novels, *Cross Her Heart*, *See Her Die*, *Drown Her Sorrows*, and *Right Behind Her*. She holds a second-degree black belt in Kenpo karate, has taught women's self-defense, and lives in a messy house with her family and a small herd of rescue pets. For more information, visit www.melindaleigh.com.

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