

WINTER WITNESS by Tina deBellegarde

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

Thursday, December 15

She could have been sleeping, were it not for the gaping gash in the back of her head and the bloody stone next to her limp body.

Sheriff Mike Riley stood alone on the shore of the near-frozen lake. At his feet, Sister Elaine Fisher lay face down, ice crystals forming around her body where it met the shoreline. The murmuring water of the nearby stream imparted a peacefulness at odds with the scene. In the waning winter light, he paused ankle deep in the snow illuminated by the beat of red strobe lights.

Murder seemed so extreme. The villagers would be baffled. Murder didn't happen in sleepy Batavia-on-Hudson. An occasional stolen bicycle, some were paid off the books, but that was hardly worth mentioning. Lately, there had been a handful of amateur burglaries. Murder was another story altogether.

But there was no denying it. Elaine's body was there before him, lifeless on a cushion of snow at the edge of the lake.

Sheriff Riley ran his chapped hands through his salt and pepper hair. A knowing person might have noticed that he used this motion to disguise a quick brush at his cheek, to eliminate the one tear that slipped through.

He feared this day, the day his lazy job would bring him face to face once again with the ugly underbelly he knew existed even in a quiet place like Batavia-on-Hudson. Mike Riley wasn't afraid of death. He was afraid of the transformation a village like this was bound to go through after an act of murder.

He cried for Elaine; though he barely knew her. But also, he cried for the village that died with her that morning. A place where children still wandered freely. A village that didn't lock doors, and trusted everyone, even the ones they gossiped about. Now, inevitably, the villagers would be guarded around each other, never quite sure anymore if someone could be trusted.

He thought he could already hear the locks snapping shut in cars and homes as word of the murder got out. Mothers yanking children indoors, hand-in-hand lovers escaping the once-romantic shadows of the wooded pathways, and old ladies turning into shut-ins instead of walking their dogs across the windy bluff.

Sheriff Riley steeled himself not just to confront the damaged body of the first murder victim of Batavia in over seventy years, but to confront the worried faces of mothers, the defeated faces of fathers and the vulnerable faces of the elderly.

He squatted in the slush, wincing as his bad knee rebelled, and laid his hands on Elaine's rough canvas jacket, two-sizes too big—one of her thrift shop purchases, no doubt. As reverently as was possible in the muddy snow, Mike Riley turned over her body to examine the face of a changing village.

Sister Elaine had no one left, she had no known siblings and of course, no spouse or children. Only Agatha Miller, her childhood companion, could have been considered next of kin. How Elaine had tolerated her grumpy old friend was a mystery to everyone.

The sheriff knew that Elaine's death would rock the community. Even a relative outsider like Mike understood that Elaine had been an anchor in Batavia. Her kindness had given the village heart, and her compassion had given it soul. No one would be prepared for this.

Mike knew from experience that preparation for death eases the grief. You start getting ready emotionally and psychologically. You make arrangements. You imagine your life without someone. But Mike also knew that when the time comes it still slaps you in the face, cold and bracing. And you realize you were only fooling yourself. Then somehow, in short order, work becomes demanding, bills need to be paid and something on the radio steals a chuckle right out of your throat. For a brief second you realize that there are moments of respite from your grief and perhaps someday those moments will expand and you may be able to experience joy once again.

But for now, Elaine's death will be a shock. No one had prepared for her death, let alone her murder.