

## BODY PARTS

### Chapter One

My ancient Grand Wagoneer skidded as I hooked a right into the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's parking lot. I skated across the lot, the wind snaking beneath my down coat, as I fantasized about hiking flower-filled hills on a steamy summer day. That got me through the side door and into the warm.

I was late. I'd missed the daily staff meeting at nine, the MGAP meeting I'd called at ten, and the autopsy I'd planned to attend, which was scheduled for eleven.

Starved, I chomped down on a pistachio muffin while I shrugged out of my coat and slipped off my Bean boots.

I tossed Kim Ito's file on the desk. She was the reason I was late. Meeting with her had been worth it—had it ever—but I'd play catch-up for the rest of the day.

I freshened Penny's water. She's my pal, my bud, my confidant, and a three-legged German shepherd who's a former Canine Corps police dog. I gave Pen a pat and a treat, waved at the MGAP counselors in our central office, and flew into my noon group session.

"Hey," I said.

Arlo pulled his harmonica from his pressed overalls and blew a melancholy tune. Like always, Christy waved "hello" with one of her red braids. Mary and Donna, our two associate counselors, looked relieved, probably because Roland Blessing was being a pain in the ass, per usual. Blessing glowered before he gave me his back.

"How goes it, all?" I said to the group.

"Why do you always start with that?" Blessing said.

"I'm open to suggestions, Roland."

Blessing sat soldier-straight, face tight with anger, running a hand across his thin pomaded hair. "Ya know, I'm the only bloke that's forced to be here. It sucks."

He'd joined our group made up of people who'd lost loved ones to homicide in December—required by the courts to participate because he'd threatened the woman he believed killed his daughter. It was either us or jail.

"Moira's dead three years," I said. "Maybe it's time to mourn, instead of being so angry."

He began flipping his ubiquitous Sacagawea golden dollar. Reminded me of those '30's mobster movies. He knew it annoyed me.

He was filled with fury and full of attitude, yet he was such a sad, sad man. Perhaps that's why I gave him more rein than most.

"Roland?" I repeated, trying to infuse my voice with compassion.

He jabbed a finger at Arlo. "I'm sick a that harmonica shit."

"And you're an idiot," Arlo said.

"Why you fu----"

"Roland! Arlo!" I barked. "You guys know the rules. Attack me, swear at me, whatever. But you don't go after anyone else in the group."

Arlo played a trill on the harmonica.

Blessing snared my eyes. "Fuck you."

"Big whoop," I said. "Anybody can swear, Roland. It's harder being real, digging deep into those feelings."

He shook his head. "You're a pisser, Ms. Tally."

"So I've been told. Can we move on now?"

Blessing leaned close and whispered. "The harmonica really does stink."

"Does it maybe remind you of Moira?"

His eyes grazed the floor. "Maybe."

I put a hand on his back. "Aw, Roland."

MGAP's assistant director poked in her head. "Sorry to interrupt."

"Let's talk about it later," I said to Blessing. "What's up, Gert?"

"I got a newbie here. Ms. Jones, meet Tally Whyte."

In walked a lithe, mahogany-skinned woman who carried herself like a jock. I was jolted by a moment's familiarity. I knew her from somewhere, but couldn't catch the "where." Damn, I hated that.

We shook hands, and she stared me fiercely in the eye

"Who did you lose, Ms. Jones?" I asked.

"Sister."

"When?"

"Found out yesterday."

The room rippled with surprise.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Your grief is so fresh. Wouldn't you rather talk one-on-one with Gert?"

"I want *you*." Jones' hazel eyes glinted with anger and hurt. They held secrets, too.

"Sure," I said. "As soon as we're finished here."

Blessing flipped his coin. "Are you done with this chick yet?"

"*Chick*?" Ms. Jones said.

"You heard me."

"Roland," I said, waving Ms. Jones to a seat. "Lose the attitude."

"Sorry," he mumbled. "It's the damned police. They haven't done squat about questioning the bitch that killed my kid."

"It's hard," Mary said in her soft Southern lilt. "I know. But our group is all about moving on."

"My Moira, she..." replied Blessing. "Forget it."

"You know we'd like to hear," I said. "We care, Roland."

*"Forget it!"* he shouted.

Christy rolled her eyes. Arlo was trying to keep his laughter in check. Joking, laughs—they were Arlo's medium for dealing with his child's death.

*"Talk to us, Arlo,"* I said.

*"They had him."* He chuckled, shaking his head. *"And there I am, sitting on the edge of my courtroom seat, watching the creep go down. Cheering to myself, mind you. And then they messed up the chain of evidence. We were almost there. Inches, you know? So who knows what'll happen now? He left the courtroom wearing a big grin and giving his lawyer a thumbs-up. Good old Mr. Jolly. I'd like to ---"*

*"I'll talk to Kranak, Arlo,"* I said. *"I'll get his take."*

*"Thanks. But you can't fix this one, Tally. Not this time."*

No, I couldn't. Ideas and suggestions, sympathy and empathy volleyed around the room, then we segued to Christy's obsession, a year after her father's murder, with cleaning up the long-gone blood on her living room floor.

*"I can't stop."* Christy rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue—her goofy face. People laughed. So did she.

*"I'll spot a speck of something,"* she continued. *"A stain, even a shadow, and then I have to go at it with the Lysol and brushes."*

*"What about laying new carpet?"* Mary said. *"Like we talked about a couple weeks ago?"*

*"I... I did,"* Christy said. *"But yesterday I ripped it up. Maybe I should've picked some color other than red, huh?"*

Everybody laughed.

Blessing jumped to his feet. *"You people are idiots! How can you flap your mouths about cleaning and Christmas and fricking carpets when folks you loved were murdered?"*

"Because we've all been there," Mary said, her eyes sad and remembering. Blessing's laugh was sour. "Yeah, right. And you deal by smearin' enough make-up on to cover a pig? No way you been where I been."

"Why attack Mary, Roland?" I said. "Everyone here has that pain."

"My ass." Blessing smiled. It wasn't pretty. "My baby, she was a flautist. Real promising, or so they said. And some bull-dyke bitch killed her and raped her with her own fucking flute after she was dead. Then the bitch took my baby's hands as a goddamn trophy and dumped her in Boston Common, right by the fucking Frog Pond. Who the hell do you think you people are?" Blessing muttered *pussy*.

*Damn him.* I began to stand.

"It's okay, Tally." Mary turned to Blessing. "It took me a long time to live with the fact that my mom's killer got away. The newspapers forgot her. So did the legal system. The police moved on ages ago. And you know, it makes me feel all sick inside."

"So *do* something about it," he said.

Mary worked her hands in her lap, her nerves showing. "What matters is that Mom's gone. She won't ever be back. I *want* her back, Mr. Blessing. So much."

Tears burst from Blessing's eyes. "I didn't even get to say goodbye to my girl. Not once."

"Say it now," I said. "It'll help. Promise."

"Yeah, right," Blessing said. "All you do is sit around and whine."

"Sounds like you're doing all the whining," Ms. Jones said.

"You don't know nothin'," he said.

"Really?" Jones strutted over to Blessing, whom she topped by a good five inches. "I know your type. Your thing is to cause problems. Asshole."

"Who you callin' asshole, bitch?" he hollered.

I flew between them. "Stop! We're trying to do work here."

I looked from face to face.

The air sizzled.

The Jones woman winked at me and sauntered toward her seat. *My God, Jones was my old friend Chesa!*

Blessing lunged after her.

I grabbed his shoulder. "Leave it!"

He balled his hand into a fist. It started to tremble. His face slackened, while his fist shook harder.

"Roland," I said. "Why don't we ---"

His arm fell to his side. "I'll leave it. For now." He made for the door.

"Stay," I pleaded. "Let's focus on Moira."

The confused look he gave the group settled on me. "She's all I think about."

"I'm not buying that one," Chesa Jones said.

Blessing gave her the finger. "Fuck you!" He slammed the door.

"You were out of line, Ms. Jones." I ran after Roland Blessing.

"Mr. Blessing! Roland!"

He stopped mid-stride by the side doors, arms waving, eyes wild. "Where are her hands? I want her hands. I just need to hold my baby." He sobbed.

I reached to embrace him.

He searched my face, and I saw hope on his, and a terrible misery. "Roland."

He shoved my arms away. "You can't help. No, you can't."

He banged out the side door, and I was left cradling a grief more familiar than breath.