

## THE BONE MAN: CHAPTER ONE

By Vicki Stiefel

More than 365 days had passed since Veda died. One whole year had flown by since my foster mother, the only mother I'd ever known, left this earth. I still didn't understand her death. Not at all.

Where had she gone? How could that vibrant a person just vanish, poof?

A friend said that energy never disappears. It just takes another form. I liked believing that. On good days, I did.

In the past year, I'd left MGAP, the Massachusetts Grief Assistance Program I'd founded. I'd ignored the invitation to create a grief assistance program in New Mexico. I'd also tabled a similar position from the state of Maine.

Instead, I'd hung out.

Ah, you're thinking that I was so sunk in grief that depression held me prisoner.

*Wrong!*

In fact, with the substantial sum of money and property left to me by Veda, I'd traveled to Greece, visited New Zealand, and driven my way across country, with my faithful former Canine Corps dog, Penny, at my side.

I'd scuba dived and sky dived and parasailed and sailed. I'd ballroom danced and fly fished and skeet shot.

At the moment, I'd gotten off my merry, merry-go-round and begun to look for a place to buy, an expensive one in Boston. For now, I still lived in my rented first-floor Brownstone apartment in the South End. My apartment was

nice. Very nice, in fact, But what the hell? Why not, right? Go for the gusto. Spend the filthy lucre. Live it up.

I had no homicides to deal with. No weeping families . No revenge-choked husbands. No newspapers chomping for a “ blood and guts” story. No watching victims sliced and diced during autopsies. No helping families ID the bodies of their loved ones. No cops, no killers, no lawyers, no rapists, no rampaging crazies. No nasty Acting Chief Medical Examiner Fogarty nipping at my heels. None of it.

How would I not love this life? Except I didn't. Everything felt hollow as hell after the dozen years I'd counseled the families of homicide victims. Boring, too. Tough to trump that one. True, normal people wouldn't have a problem with this stuff. Me? I found it bizarre living what others might call a traditional life.

I should love it. My problem was that I missed my former life. All of it. Which was really messed up.

I had to face reality, a reality I found deeply disturbing: I was *not* a carefree-type person.

I couldn't decide between Maine or New Mexico. Certainly Penny was no help at all. I wasn't much in the mood to ask anyone else.

Which was why I was now stood in Harrisville, New Hampshire, near the site of my last case—face-to-face with Charlie Paradise and beside his wife Laura—while a fiddler fiddled and a caller hollered out near incomprehensible steps of a contra dance.

I liked it. When I was sweaty, I didn't have to think about much at all. And, believe me, I was good and sweaty. It oiled my forehead, dampened my

armpits, and sheened my forearms. The hall was roasting even here in New Hampshire in late September. Indian Summer was in full bloom, and I felt like a barbecued chicken.

Charlie, with his black curly beard, flannel shirt, and red suspenders, grinned across from me as the steps quickened. He wanted me to pick up the pace, and I did. Oh, yeah. The music grew louder, the dance faster and faster, and I was breathing hard, watching Charley's feet and arms flail away, and when I glanced at Laura, in her cool cotton shirt and whirly skirt, she winked.

I tilted my head back and laughed. Damn, this was fun.

And suddenly, just as Charley took my hands and twirled me around and around and around, I sensed that something was coming, something important. I was certain my stress-free life was about to end.

For no good reason, it scared the hell out of me.

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We stood around the punch bowl—fifty-cents for a cup, a donation for the town's latest fundraiser—and sipped tart lemonade made with fresh lemons. Divine.

"Penny needs a pal," Charley said.

"No," I said. "She doesn't. I'm her pal."

"You should see these pups," Laura said.

"You gotta see 'em," Charley added.

I wasn't stupid. They were trying to lure me in. I was not going to be lured. "I won't see those puppies. I do not want to hear about those puppies. Those puppies do not exist for me."

"What a chicken." Charley ladled us each a punch refill, then offered a

shot of vodka from his sterling flask.

“Not for me,” I said. “But thanks. And, yeah. I’m a chicken.” I gulped down my punch. “Basset puppies are easily the cutest creatures in the entire world. If I see one, I’m done.”

They both laughed, and as I headed to the ladies room, their laughter followed behind me.

I took one look in the mirror and scared the hell out of myself. My Medusa hair had reached new heights. Coils? Dreds? I didn’t know what to call the halo of blond curls that wove toward the ceiling. I splashed some water on my face, and just as I was drying my hands, my cell phone chimed.

I flipped open the phone. “Gert?”

“Hoi, Tal! How *you* doin’?”

Gert’s Brooklyn-ese combined with her Joey Tribiani imitation made her near incomprehensible.

“You’ve got to get over Joey,” I said. “So what’s up?”

“Ya don’t sound so good. You okay?”

“I’m great. I’ve been dancing.” Sounds of the fiddle danced into the bathroom. My feet started moving. “I don’t have much time, kiddo.”

“You there with a fella?” she said in a way-too-hopeful voice.

“No, Gert. Get to the point. I’ve been contra dancing. You don’t even need a partner.”

She snorted. “Perfect for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nevah mind. We got some late breakin’ news here. They’ve just appointed the new Chief.”

My heart sped up. I knew what was coming, and I hated it. “Thanks for calling, hon. But I knew it’d be Fogarty. What can I say? It sucks. I’ve gotta run.”

“Holdit! Holdit! It’s not Fartin’ Fogarty.”

Shocker. Tom Fogarty and I had a long history of aggravation, grudges, and spats. I was sure he’d segue from acting chief to chief. Except for all our friction, I admitted that he was a fine ME. “Now I’m feeling guilty that Fogarty didn’t get it.”

“Well, don’t,” Gert said. “He’s still onboard to drive you crazy. Thing is, the new chief says she knows ya.”

I leaned against the beadboard wall. “She?”

“It’s some chick named Adeline Morgridge. She knew Veda, right?”

Addy Morgridge. An old buddy of Veda’s and a fabulously talented medical examiner. Veda. I couldn’t get away from it, could I? I missed her every day.

“Addy Morgridge is great. Simply great.” So why wasn’t I overcome with the urge to cheer?

My voice sounded tentative, my breath, short. “Yes, Addy’s an old friend of Veda’s. Right.”

“She needs to see ya in the morning,” Gert said. “Pronto like. And on the QT. She’s got a problem and needs you, Tal. You.”

Swell. So this was why I’d been feeling that sense of dread. I wasn’t eager to find out what it all meant.

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The following morning, I sat on my tiny back deck that overlooked my teensy backyard and even teensier garden. Small it might be, but I loved such

greenery in the heart of Boston. Penny sat beside me, her large German Shepard ears pointed forward, on alert. She knew something was up.

I sipped my coffee, relished the warm breeze as summer said its final farewell. All too soon it would turn to fall's damp chill.

I was stalling. I didn't know if I would go into The Grief Shop or not. Addy had summoned me. She might now be the Chief Medical Examiner for Massachusetts, but that didn't mean I would do her bidding. I was obligated to no one and nothing.

Geesh, that sounded hollow.

For so long...for forever...I'd been the founder and director of the Massachusetts Grief Assistance Program. Although MGAP rented space at OCME, we were a private, non-profit organization. Our job was to aid the bereaved when their loved one was the victim of a homicide. We walked with them during the aftermath of their devastating loss, we counseled them—often for many, many years—and we also helped them deal with more practical stuff, such as legal matters, the courts, the press and the cops.

We made a difference, and that compensated for the sorrow we lived with each day.

Fewer than sixty professional homicide counselors existed in the United States. I'd always been proud to be one of them. At least, I used to be.

Dr. Veda Barrow, my foster mother, had pulled me into the profession after the murder of my father. She'd been Chief Medical Examiner for Massachusetts longer than I'd run MGAP. Her death rocked my world.

If I went into The Grief Shop today, I'd see Kranak and Fogarty and Didi and all the others I'd worked with for countless years. I'd brush into old feelings,

both good and bad. But that wasn't it. Not at all. I would come face-to-face with the absence of Veda. The emptiness. Her *lack* of presence, that was the worst.

Veda had called Adeline Morgridge "Addy M." She'd liked her an awful lot. If I thought about it, Addy was a lot like Veda. Even tougher, in fact. No nonsense Addy. Right.

And I just couldn't take it.

I flipped open the phone to tell Gert I wasn't coming. Except just then the front door buzzed over and over and over. Even on three legs, Penny easily beat me to the door.

When I looked through the peephole, I saw... *Damn*. "I'm not home!" I shouted through the door.

"Yeah, you are," Gert hollered back. "C'mon. This taxi's meter is workin' ovahtime. Hurry up." She crossed her arms and blew an immense purple Bazooka bubble. She popped it. She didn't smile.

I swung open the door. "Dammit, Gert!"

She wagged a finger made more powerful by the fake nail manicured with the stars and strips in honor of 9/11. "You comin', all right. Yes, you are."

"This isn't defeat," I shouted as I scrambled for my purse. "Just a minor setback." I slipped on my sandals and hooked up Penny to her leash. "Let's go."

She popped another bubble. And smiled.

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I sat across the desk from Addy Morgridge in the office once occupied by Veda. I'd met Veda here a thousand times. Except for the art Addy had hung on the walls, everything was pretty much the same—carpet, desk, drapes. Yet I was okay with it. Veda didn't live here, anymore than she lived at the house in

Lincoln.

But she was with me, all right. Every second of every day.

Addy handed me a mug of coffee. "Smells divine," I said.

She smiled, and the warmth reached her soft brown eyes. She had the look of that marvelous actress Alfre Woodard, wise and knowing and rich with history.

"The coffee is divine," she said. "Because I brew it up myself. No Starbucks for this woman."

I chuckled. "Same ol' Addy. How does it feel?"

She leaned forward, her tented hands tapping her lips. "Good. It feels damned good. It's been a long route, Tally."

"I know it has, Addy."

"Becoming chief means the world to me."

I nodded. "I know that, too. Fogarty's your chief assistant, yes?"

"He was with Veda. He is with me." She straightened some papers on her desk, tapped the folders twice. "And that's why I need you. Here."

"Pardon?" I shook my head. "I can't. Don't want to."

Her lips tightened. "We need balance, Tally We need your firm, intuitive hand."

I laughed as I shook my head. "My dear---

The jangling of the phone interrupted us. Addy snatched the phone off its cradle. "Hold my calls, I said." She listened, nodding, then held up a finger to me. "Put him through." And to me she mouthed "One sec."

Her expression hardened to one of fierce annoyance. "I am so sorry, Governor Bowannie, but it is not our fault here at OCME if the *Boston Globe* calls

the skull Anasazi. I know you don't care for that name. I understand, and I am sorry, but we have no control over what they print. We really do not. Dr. Cravitz will be a few more days at least."

More nodding from Addy, then "Until then."

She placed the phone on the receiver with such feigned gentleness I thought it might explode.

"That damned skull," she said.

Boy, was I interested. I was dying to see what was left of the ancient pot from Chaco Canyon. "I read about it. The one found in the smashed Anasazi pot, yes? The Southwest is a passion of mine, but I've never heard of a skull being inside an ancient pot. It's highly unusual."

"Don't I know it, dammit." She opened a desk drawer and slid out a cigarette and lighter and small plastic ashtray. "You?"

I shook my head. "I wish."

She lit up and inhaled deep and long, and then exhaled out her nose. "The whole thing has given us a raft of problems we don't need. First off, it's not PC to call them Anasazi, since that name was given to the Old Ones by their enemies, the Navajo. Or so they say. Who knows? I haven't told the Zuni governor that I'm half Navajo. That would really rip him up."

"If he's a Zuni governor," I said. "I'm sure he can handle it, Addy. I take it Didi's working on the reconstruction. Is it done yet? I'd love to see it and the pot."

"Let me check with Didi." Addy shook her head and flicked her ash into the tray. "Everybody's having a festival with this ancient skull thing. Who owns it? The Smithsonian's salivating. So are a bunch of other institutions, not to

mention the Zuni. The Hopi have gotten into the act, too. And National Geographic. It's slowing Didi down."

I smiled. "Right up your ally, kiddo. Listen, I've got to run."

She took a drag. "I want a commitment from you and I want it today."

Cripes! She looked like some indignant Afro-Indian princess. OCME didn't know what it was in for. "Sorry, Addy. It's a no-go."

"Without you, the program dies."

"Without me," I said. "It'll be just fine. Gert's amazing."

"She is, but she's lost heart. They all have. They miss you terribly."

I tried to shut out the violins. "I've had offers from Maine and from New Mexico. Lots of money. Carte blanche. All the bells and whistles. I've put them off, too." I stood to leave. I walked around the desk to give her a hug.

"I'll call down," she said. "See if Didi can see you."

"Great."

She blew out a stream of smoke and stubbed out the cigarette. "I've got some news on your boyfriend. He is your boyfriend, right?"

That stopped me short. "You mean Hank?"

She winked. "Don't count the Grief Shop out, yet. That's all I'm asking."

"What about Hank? C'mon, Addy."

"So what do you say?"

"Okay, fine," I said. "I won't close the door on Boston."

She stood and hugged me. "Good thing."

"You smell like smoke."

"Perfume works wonders."

"You're a terrible blackmailer," I said. "What about Hank?"

She smiled, and there it was again, that Alfre Woodard look. Whew. I couldn't help smiling back.

"Word is," she said, "might be just a rumor, but they say that your Sheriff Cunningham has taken a position with the AG's office. State Police homicide investigator."

"Holy shit."

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I wanted out, and I wanted out fast. Addy's buzzer sounded. Perfect timing. I waved "bye" and turned to go.

"Hold on!" she said. "Hold on, Tally!"

I sighed. "Sure."

While Addy talked into the intercom, I tried to picture what the hell Hank Cunningham was up to. He was the sheriff for Hancock County in Maine, so why rumor said he was taking a job as a state homicide investigator made no sense to me.

Cripes, Hank and I talked almost every day. What Addy said was crazy.

She hung up, and I said "I've really gotta race." As much as I wanted to see the Ancient Ones pot, I wanted to find out about Hank more.

"Of course you do," Addy said. "But that was Didi. She'd love for you to stop down and see the reconstruction."

I shook my head. "I know I said...but....well. I'd better get home."

She began walking me to the door. "She's been working like a dog on this thing. She's like a proud parent. She's dying to show it to you. C'mon, girl. No matter what your sweetie's up to, a few minutes won't make a different."

Of course, she was right.