

THE DEAD STONE

Chapter One: Emma Who?

Eight thirty a.m., and I was running late. My pumps clacked on the asphalt, as did Penny's nails. Even on three legs, she loped ahead of me, always on guard, ever vigilant. The door to Boston's Medical Examiner's office swung open easily, and I barreled into a wall of wet, hot air.

"Crap!" I said.

Penny stood poised, instantly alert.

"It's okay, girl." Not that it was. The Grief Shop's air conditioner in its "public" areas—the Massachusetts Grief Assistance Program's offices, Crime Scene Services offices, and the lobby—was on the fritz again. Backstage, where medical examiners slice corpses, and bodies wait patiently in refrigerated rooms and techs prep the remains of loved ones—those A/C units work beautifully. Since we had no A/C in MGAP on this unseasonably broiling June day, I could only hope that my coworkers and counselees were in exceptionally tolerant moods.

Not likely.

I tossed my backpack on the sofa in my office, zipped open the top of my Dunkin' Donuts iced coffee, and took a sip. I had the medical examiner's daily

meeting at nine, a group of homicide family survivors at ten, and, as MGAP's leader, a neverending pile of paperwork.

"Hoy, Tal," hollered Gert from MGAP's central office. For all the years Gert and I had worked together, my chief assistant's Brooklyn accent had not grown one whit softer nor had her colorful vocabulary become one ounce less flavorful. I was glad.

"Who's been in to check the A/C?" I asked.

"You kiddin' me?" She handed me a stack of phone slips. "Awl from yestaday aftanoon."

"Let's just burn them, huh? You see Kranak yet?"

She nodded, her platinum bangs bouncing. "Mr. Sergeant Grouch was in early. He's got his team workin' on some case that's got a rod up his butt. I'd avoid him."

"Will do. I'll soften him up later with a cheese pretzel." I checked my watch. "I'll be ready for the nines. No newbies at ten, right?"

"Not today."

I retreated to my office, where I sifted through the stack of pink phone slips. I sucked on my iced coffee as I read each one.

Harvester interview. Rip. Talk show, Harvester. Rip. Harvester book. With friggin' photos, no less. Rip.

The damned Harvester was still haunting me in more ways than I cared to think about. Months earlier, a killer had stalked Boston, taking body parts from exceptional women, and leaving broken homes and withered hearts. I'd helped stop the Harvester, and now the media were relentless.

They demanded interviews. They bugged me for talk shows. They popped flashes in my face as they took photos of me and my loved ones. They wouldn't leave me alone in trying to ferret out the real story. My boyfriend had found it too much, and so now we were back to being just friends. I couldn't blame him. All because of the Harvester.

I winnowed down the stack of two dozen to the three *real* messages. One was from a gal I'd counseled two years earlier, her husband a homicide. The second was from a fundraising organization, hoping MGAP, an organization I'd founded to counsel the loved ones of homicide victims, would contribute time and energy. Of late, I had little time or energy for anything but homicide counseling.

There are fewer than forty of us in the United States. Homicide counseling has yet to make the top ten list of professions. But I like it; it brings meaning to my life. And I'm proud to be a member of this small fraternity.

Penny clanked her dish. I refilled it with fresh water—she's fussy—and got myself a Poland Springs from the fridge. Damn it was hot. For the millionth

time, I wished my windows opened. There wasn't a breath of fresh air in the place.

I was tempted to check out an autopsy just for the chill.

I picked up the third phone message, read it, and sat down hard. The slip was addressed to an Emma Blake. Whew. Gert had scrolled a huge purple question mark. No wonder. There was a name I hadn't heard in years. In another life, before my nickname Tally had stuck, I *was* Emma. And Blake was my surname prior to a contentious marriage and an even more contentious divorce.

"Gert, did you take this?" I waved the slip as I walked into the central office.

"Yeah. Some guy. Low voice. Gruff. Breathless. He said to give it to Tally. 'She'll know,' he said. So do ya?"

"Do I what?"

"Do ya know?"

"I know the 'who,' but the 'what' is eluding me. He gave no hint of what he wanted?"

She blew a purple bubble, and sucked it back in. "Didn't say. He definitely sounded not all there. I figured it was somethin' to do with the Harvester."

My heart raced, and I nodded, aiming for cool. Gert knew something was

up. We'd been through a lot together. She blew another bubble and went back to her paperwork.

Emma Blake. I hadn't heard that name for almost twenty years. Who would be calling *her*? And why?

A week later. I went to court in support of a counselee whose parents had been slain in a drive-by and to dinner at my foster mothers' home, one of whom happened to be the Chief Medical Examiner for Massachusetts. I counseled, flogged paperwork, and romped with Penny in the park.

What I didn't do was get a phone call from Mr. Breathless about Emma Blake.

When it came, I was unprepared for it.

I checked my watch for the tenth time. Crime Scene Services Sergeant Rob Kranak was supposed to call sixty minutes earlier with a forensic report on a headless torso found in the Charles river. So when the phone rang, I was a wee bit exasperated.

"Rob, how come---."

"Emmmaaaaaaaaaaaaa," the voice said, drawing out the final 'a.'

"Who is this?"

"It's about your faaaather. He did not do what they say. You must come."

Geesh. This guy sounded like *Tales from the Crypt*. "What about my father?"

What are you talking about?"

"Things in Winsworth are being stirred up. Bad things. And your father did not do it. Come. Or worse will happen. You must come."

"Who is ----"

Click.

I dialed Star-69.

Your last incoming call cannot be reached in this manner. Please try again.

What the *hell* was going on?

* * *

Another week passed. I went to a gallery opening with Gert. I visited the Canine Corps in Stoneham with Penny, who romped with her old pals. I ended a ten-month counseling session on a very good note. I did lots more stuff, too, but mostly I stewed about one thing: that phone call for Emma Blake.

The caller knew me as Tally *and* as Emma. I chewed and chewed and chewed on that message. I saw no reason to return to Winsworth.

Winsworth was nostalgia for me: sailing with Dad, climbing apple trees with my two gal pals, going to summer camp on the Winsworth River, earning gold stars in school, shushing down Union Street during a blizzard, pigging out

on lobsters and steamers. A home unlike any other I'd had since, but one I left when I was twelve.

Everything Winsworth related to my dad, and he was murdered in Boston three years after we moved from Maine. I even had him buried in Winsworth, but he was long dead. What "worse things" could possibly happen?

Hell, I was a city girl, had lived in Boston for the past two decades. It was all I knew. The T, Newbury Street, Fenway. North End Italian festivals, Faneuil Hall, the Duck Boat tours. And the families of the dead. I knew those, too.

Okay—so I fished out West occasionally. Took trips. Went on hikes.

But that wasn't *living* somewhere.

"Right, Pens?" I said, stroking her neck. She lay sprawled on the couch in our apartment in the South End. "No point in going back. The call was from some nutcase or something. I have work here. Lots of it."

Hell, I hadn't been to Winsworth in twenty-some-odd years. I missed it, sure, but the way you miss a dear old doll you had as a kid. It's not something you want to play with as an adult, just remember with fondness.

Right.

The second time, Mr. Breathless found me at home.

"They will dig up his grave. They will destroy---"

"Who *is* this and what are you talking about?"

“Emmmaaaaa. He is *suffering*. You must come. He will...”

He hung up.

“Dammit, Penny!”

They will ‘dig up his grave.’ Geesh.

Mr. Breathless sure knew how to press my buttons. What false accusations could people be making about my dad? And the thought of someone suffering... Yeah, this guy was a real button-pusher.

I fixed myself a bourbon on ice and chose to put it from my mind. There were plenty of disturbed people out there. Mr. Breathless was just one of many.

But the truth was, our house had burned. We *had* escaped town in a strange and hurried fashion in the middle of the night. Not that I remembered much of it. That was the first time we left “on the run,” so to speak. I shuddered. It wasn’t the last. Since Winsworth, or maybe because of it, things had soured for my dad. Life was never simple again.

Absurd to go back, really. Why complicate it more?

But with some things, you have no choice.

I phoned Gert to tell her I was taking a little time off. She was expecting my call, and had everything in place.

So I put in for a month vacation, shocking all of Crime Scene Services, MGAP, and my foster mothers, I might add. I said I needed a rest after the

Harvester, which wasn't exactly a lie. I wanted to recharge my batteries, which was also sort of true. I longed for the sea. Absolutely.

I only told Gert and Kranak the true motive behind my mission. They both agreed—I was nuts. I made sure I had complete and excellent coverage, and gave my keys to Gert.

“Cawl if you need me,” she said. “I’ll come help out. You’re practically going into the wilderness.”

I chuckled. “Not really, Gertie. It’s just coastal Maine.”

“Oh, yeah? That *is* the wilderness.”

Kranak shoved his hands deep in his pockets and shook his head.

The following morning, Penny and I headed north for Winsworth, Maine.