

The Grief Shop: Chapter One

By Vicki Stiefel

I hate going to the vet and Penny hates it worse than I do. I practically have to drag my three-legged former Canine Corps dog, leash taut, coaxing her all the way with doggie treats through the infirmary door. Then I feel guilty when I tug too hard and ...

But this time was different. This time, I was scared. Penny had a lump, a giant one that seemed to have sprung up overnight. The thing was round and hard and the size of a golf ball. It sat right on the elbow joint of her front leg.

What if...? No. My three-legged pooch had been through enough. This had to be nothing, a cyst or from a cat scratch or an abscess.

My Penny couldn't live with two legs.

"C'mon, Pens," I said.

I turned the cold knob that led to Dr. Joby's waiting room. The large room smelled of piney woods, and the linoleum floor gleamed from the sun streaming through the high clerestory windows. Screw that. I wanted the day as gloomy as I felt.

I moved forward. Penny dug in her nails and didn't budge. Her chocolate eyes regarded me with profound sadness, a touch of guilt, and grim resolution.

"You like Dr. Joby, Pens. You do. She's associated with Angell Animal Medical Center right here in Boston. You know, the people who took care of you when your leg was..."

My voice trailed off to a whisper. Why was I saying these stupid things?
“*Ke mne,*” I said in Czech. “Come.”

She raised her head proudly and walked forward on her three legs.

Inside, we shared the room with two pugs and a Boston terrier whose rear end wagged like crazy at the sight of my huge German Shepherd.

When I sat, the terrier stretched on his leash toward Penny. Oh, my — Pens and the terrier began sniffing and licking and bouncing in the typical doggie mating dance. I laughed out loud, as did the terrier’s owner, a WASPy-looking fella in a tweed jacket. We shared a smile, and he beamed a come-on. He really was a good-looking guy.

Didn’t matter. My curmudgeonly Maine Sheriff, with his faint Buddha belly and bristly mustache, had it all over Mr. Terrier. Mr. Terrier’s smile widened. Good God, he winked!

“Tally?” said the vet’s assistant. “We’re ready for Penny.”

I inhaled deep and exhaled long and slow. *Please let her be okay.* Then we followed.

Dr. Beth Joby scooped in front of my shivering dog.

“Hush.” The doctor smiled at Penny. She brushed a wing of gray hair away from her face. “Good girl.”

“How does she look, Beth?” I said.

Beth Joby nodded as she ran her hands down each of Penny’s strong thighs. She pressed a gnarled hand to Penny’s belly and lifted paws and examined teeth and shined a light on each eye. She scratched Penny behind the ears.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. “The lump?” I sounded desperate.

“In time.” The doctor closed her eyes and gently felt Penny’s front stump, then her good leg, home of the lump. She twitched a frown. A tech entered with a tray of syringes. She held Penny, cooing at her, while the doctor drew a vial of blood. She took a second syringe and pulled a vial of fluid from The Lump.

“Beth, I...” I’d run out of things to say.

Beth Joby raised a hand to the tech, who leaned down, and the doctor whispered into the tech’s ear. The tech nodded.

I swallowed, but my parched throat caught, and I coughed. “Beth?” I croaked out.

The doctor massaged Penny between her shoulder blades, slapped her thighs and stood. “She seems to be fine, Tally. We’re just going to do an X-ray of that leg.”

“Where the lump is.”

The doctor nodded.

“Why?”

“Just makes sense.”

“That’s not saying why.”

“No.” She slipped Penny a treat. “I’m not sure I like what I’m feeling there.”

“No?”

She shrugged. “It’s most likely nothing, but you know what a cautious person I am. “

I knew, but all I could think was that Beth Joby was lying to me, that Penny had a death sentence, that she would leave me—way too young—and I would... “How long will the X-ray take?”

“Maybe a half hour, forty-five minutes.”

I whooshed out a breath. “I’ll go in with her.”

“You’re too invested,” she said. “We’ll take care of her. You know we will.”

I nodded. I’d said the same words to countless grieving parents of homicide victims as they viewed their loved one’s body at The Grief Shop, aka the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for Massachusetts and the place where I worked.

I knew all about grief. I *got* it. But I still wanted to go with Penny anyway. “Okay,” I said. “The waiting room.”

I crouched down and explained it all to Penny. Her eyes said she wished I’d stay with her. I hugged her hard. “I’ll just be outside.”

The doctor hitched on Penny’s leash and began to lead her out. Except Penny didn’t budge.

“Come!” the doctor said.

Penny remained an oak planted on the linoleum.

Beth Joby twitched an exasperated smile. “I thought Penny knew English commands by now. “

“She does,” I said. “But she prefers her native Czech. That’s what they used with her in the Canine Corps.” I turned to Penny. “*Volno!*” I said. “Go ahead.”

Penny looked back at me. I gave her another swift hug. She licked my ear, my cheek, my nose. “I love you, Pens,” I whispered. “*Volno.*”

Penny walked forward, and the tech closed the door behind her.

[LINE BREAK]

I flipped pages in some dog magazine, pretending I was interested, terrified for my beloved dog. Stupid. I was acting stupid. Overreacting, in fact.

Mr. Terrier was gone, thank heavens. The sun blazed in, and I slipped off my jacket. Of all April days for the weather to pretend it was June, I wished it wasn't this one.

They should be done by now with the X-rays. I checked my watch. Five minutes. It had only been five minutes.

I pulled out my cell phone to call Hank, tell him...

My phone chimed and the screen read the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. The Grief Shop's call wasn't unexpected. The extension read the Massachusetts Grief Assistance Program, my bailiwick.

I'm MGAP's director, with a staff that's second to none. Although we rent space at OCME, we are a private, non-profit organization. Our job is to aid the bereaved when their loved one is the victim of a homicide. We walk with them during the aftermath of their devastating loss, we counsel them—often for many, many years—and we also help them deal with more practical stuff, such as legal matters, the courts, the press and the cops.

Fewer than sixty professional homicide counselors exist in the United States. I'm proud to be one of them

The phone chimed again. Gert, my assistant director, could handle it. So could Donna or any other staff member. I looked up and caught the receptionist staring. She knew what I did for a living, and her expression said she wondered if the call was another corpse.

Pretty much everyone found my career choice weird.

Another chime. Damn, the office again. I flipped open the phone. "Tally Whyte here."

"S'me," Gert said.

"Wazzup? I'm with Penny at the vet's and ---"

"Ya gotta come back. Now."

"You can handle it, Gertie. You can handle anything that I ---"

"What's wrong with Penny?" she said, her voice an octave higher.

"Nothing. Not really. Just...procedure."

"You're lyin'," she said, her Brooklynese thickening. "You still gotta get your butt over here. We got a real problem."

"Believe me, Gert, you're up to any challenge."

"Mostly, I guess. But it's not MGAP. Something Twilight Zone's going on with OCME."

I started pacing. "I don't get it. What do you mean, Gert?"

"I dunno what I mean," she said. "We're in lockdown, like some prison. Nobody'll talk ta me. We got crime scene tape over the doors. Nobody's allowed to come in or leave. And the lobby's fillin' up like a cop convention."

"Where's Veda?"

"I dunno. Dr. Barrow isn't here. Nobody'll say squat. It's creepy. And we got some poor couple whose kid got knifed trapped here like sardines."

I looked at the receptionist, who held my eyes. "I will call you," she said. "The minute Penny is out of X-ray."

"Okay, Gert, I'm on my way."

[LINE BREAK]

The Grief Shop houses the administrative offices and operations for Massachusetts medical examiner system.

We're on Albany Street in a bland, three-story brick building dwarfed by the campuses of Boston City Hospital, Boston University Medical Center, and Boston University Schools of Medicine, Dentistry, and Public Health. We're also smack at the crossroads of Boston's South End and Roxbury neighborhoods.

Medical pathologists, a forensic anthropologist, administrative staff, and an elite State Police Crime Scene Services unit work out of the Grief Shop, as does Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Veda Barrow, who also happens to be my foster mother.

The ME's office includes a forensic pathology center, a large and a small autopsy theater, the large cooler and a small decomp cooler, a trace evidence room, and MGAP's suite of rooms for family counseling and identifying human remains.

The Grief Shop sounds scientific and unemotional. That's only part of the story.

[LINE BREAK]

When I blew through OCME's doors, I met chaos. The lobby's pervasive calm was percolating with people milling about, some detectives and a bunch of Crime Scene Services guys. One of the MEs was racing around, white coat flapping. I didn't see Veda, who had to be out back where the real action of the ME's office took place.

In the twelve years I'd worked out of that office, I'd never seen anything like it.

I made it down to the hall to MGAP's offices, found the tearful couple with Gert, and offered them my office to make any calls they wished or arrangements for their deceased son. I left them in Gert's excellent hands.

I then skirted the lobby crowd and coded my way through the touch-padded door into the recesses of the building.

The back corridor was bizarrely crowded, too. I spotted a hulk of a man in a rumpled blue suit— Sergeant Rob Kranak, the CSS officer in charge at OCME. He waved me over.

"What the hell is going on, Rob?" I said.

"We got a corpse."

"Gee, that's odd for the medical examiner's office."

"Yeah, well it is." He cocked his head, and I followed him to a bend in the corridor. He turned his back on the chaos and leaned toward me. "It's bad shit, Tal."

"So where's Veda?" I said. "She'll handle it."

"Who the fuck knows where our esteemed chief medical examiner is?"

Kranak brushed a hand across his flattop. "She isn't here."

That bothered me. "She's always here. Whatever. What's with the odd body?"

"Nothing odd about her. She's in the cooler. What's odd is how she got here. One of the techs discovered her this morning."

"Discovered her?"

He rocked back on his heels. "A-yup. She's an extra. We never logged her in, never saw her before. No toe tag. No record. No nothin'. Looks like

something bad. From the signs, we're seeing suffocation, maybe drugs. Too early to tell."

"So you're saying a homicide, one who just appeared in our morgue."

He nodded. "That's what I'm saying."

"Holy moly."

"It gets worse. The corpse is a kid."

[LINE BREAK]

Kranak's words goosebumped my arms. A murdered child was bad enough, but one who'd materialized at OCME by magic felt infinitely worse.

He shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "The damndest thing. A little girl...a kid...someone just fuckin' noticed her this morning. I can't tell ya how much this sucks... I've been in there for a couple hours, taking snaps and all sorts of samples, everything and anything. Never thought I'd see the day when I treated the cooler as a crime scene."

"I'd like to go in and see her," I said.

"Yup. Once Fogarty's outta there."

"What's El Creepo up to?"

Kranak's bloodhound eyes slid to the stainless steel door, behind which lay a nameless child on a gurney. "We couldn't reach Veda this morning. Fogarty's second in command, Tal. Accept it."

I snorted. "Never. Veda may be my foster mother, but I will never understand what quality she sees in him. How long's he been in there?"

"Ten minutes maybe." He grinned. "Get this. Fogarty's at some frou-frou brunch or other. He had a fit when I called. See, I didn't tell him exactly what

was what. So he comes in all pissed off and the cameras got him with a puss on his face. He almost crapped his pants.”

“Not nice, Rob.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, well now he’s lovin’ it. Big smiles for the press, then looking all solemn about this little one that he could give a shit about. Look, soon as he’s done, I’m gonna wrap it up in there. I’ll get ya inside then. As soon as I’m set, they’re gonna wheel her into the suite. So lemme tell ya about her.”

I rested a hand on his arm. “Don’t. You know I’d like to see her with fresh eyes. That’s the best way.”

What did she look like? White or black? Brown hair or blonde or red? Short or tall or in between? Was she a child with a sense of humor or a serious soul? Did she want to be an astronaut or an artist? Was she... God, who would murder a child and stick her in the morgue? And *how* did he get her there?

Just then, the cooler door opened and Fogarty stormed out, pausing to give me a disapproving look. In his wake, another white-jacketed ME followed. Dr. Judy Ethridge, Fogarty’s sycophant, who banked on his being the next Chief Medical Examiner for Massachusetts. I hoped not in my lifetime.

Kranak mouthed “come on,” and we threaded our way through the dozen people crowding the door.

Fogarty turned. “Not her. Not now.”

I started to spew words, but Kranak touched my shoulder and said “Yes, her. Tally has different eyes than we do, Fogarty.”

And in we went.