

Ashes In A Teardrop

Chapter 10

Amy felt as if she might shoot out of the car into space with excitement. Her heart was beating in a crazy, out-of-control cadence.

"There really *was* another child!" She gasped. "A boy. Possibly a lost heir to the McHenry fortune!" She studied Jerry's reaction.

"You're on crack," he said with a chuckle, keeping his eyes on the road.

"Jerry!" She smacked his arm and he rubbed it with a forced whimper.

"Seriously, an obituary in Special Collections. This child might be related."

"Might?" He sighed. "You mean you're not sure?"

"No, but I *feel* it. The article said there were twins born to an Elizabeth Rose the year of that devastating flood — near Rolling Ranch, Brewster's homestead. It just said the babies were born in a barn. One of the little boys didn't survive." She drew in a long breath and squeezed Jerry's hand. "What if there was a love story here that we just don't know about?"

"Wow," Jerry said. "One mystery at a time! The map we found in the archives shows that the McHenrys and Brewsters were neighbors, or as neighborly as you can get along the river. Bald Eagle and Rolling Ranch's lines nearly crossed," Jerry said. "Too bad they weren't on the same river where we found my trailer."

"*Our* trailer!" Amy said in a high voice.

His eyes darted over to hers. "So now it's *our* trailer?" He beamed that infectious lopsided smile.

"I wonder if whoever owned that diary could have known about these babies," Amy said, "or could just be protecting a secret love affair." Her face went serious. "Maybe the barn was..."

Jerry interrupted her, patting her knee. "You don't know that for sure. I have a website I need to check out that may have some more answers but I think I'm going to take a break tomorrow for just a bit. Too much information for my brain for one day. All these names, dates and numbers are making me want a donut or a Marie Callender's lemon meringue pie.

"Tomorrow is Sunday. I'm sleeping in before I take on more of the Great Teardrop Trailer Caper," Jerry said. "I'm losing hairs by the minute."

Amy's throat tightened as she walked up to their porch. Sleeping in did sound amazing, but the break-in was still on her mind and something else was nagging at her. That night, before switching off her bedside lamp, she settled under the covers with one of the Better Homes and Gardens she'd found in the trailer. *Who* was Mrs. T.O. and *what* did she know? It was possible that the diary was missing some pages and all the answers were lost with them. She tucked the magazine beside her and drifted off to sleep.

Amy sat up in bed with a jerk and rubbed her belly. The dream had felt all too real. She'd sell her soul to erase the memories of that day many months ago. It was getting harder and harder to keep her own secrets even though she'd been pretty successful these last few months, and she did feel better about it since she and Jerry had decided it was time to start a family. This diary mystery had taken on new life since its disappearance because now she *really* felt drawn to understand the person whose suffering was evident in its pages — the keeper of secrets.

She had felt her own loss of a child; a failed pregnancy that Jerry had never known about. She had gotten pregnant despite the endometriosis and the timing was all wrong back then. He was working so much and the baby fund wasn't big enough. He'd said in a year or two it would be better, but she thought *well, maybe*. If she handed him a box with the pregnancy test and a pair of booties inside, she thought maybe Jerry would be excited. But she miscarried a week later. It was a blessing in disguise, she supposed, but she still couldn't shake the emptiness she felt every time she dreamed of a little girl with flaxen hair and a crooked smile, pieces of both of them smiling back at her.

She hadn't even told Tracy, who she was sure would have helped her muddle through the weeks of mourning with trips to Vintage Faire Mall and Starbucks for a sympathy Mocha Frappuccino. She just wasn't in the mood for all the talking that would require. It felt safer to suffer in silence.

What more could there be? Who was the true owner of that trailer and urn? Amy scrunched up her face and balled her hands into fists. An idea kept nagging at her so she snatched her keys off the counter and ran to her car.

There must have been a weekend run at Legion Park because cars were lined up out of the parking lot, almost to the road. She knew the deserted trail she and Jerry had ridden along a few weeks ago would be crowded. *Crap*, she thought. How could she get down to the spot without looking like a weirdo foraging through the brush and digging in the dirt when there were tons of high school kids training for cross-country teams? Luckily, her running shoes were in the trunk.

Amy paced herself so she wouldn't be worn out by the time she found the spot where they'd found Jerry's prized teardrop. *Blend in like a ninja and try not to drop dead.*

"Hello," she panted each time a runner passed her. She felt inadequate because it was still at least a mile more down the path. *More bike rides, more salads, less Heineken. And definitely no lemon meringue pie.*

The spot hadn't changed a bit. The brush was just as dry and crispy as it had been the day they pulled *her* out of the hard dirt. Amy bent over to catch her breath, then slowly made her way down to the spot. She began picking up rocks and weeds and tossing them to the side. Maybe another clue would jump out at her — the rest of the license plate would be nice. Maybe the diary would appear suddenly out of thin air. *Crazy talk.*

Amy heard the sound of feet pounding the ground every few minutes. She thought she was hidden in the brush when a voice from above made her flinch so hard that the tree behind her shuddered.

"Did you lose something?" It was a young man's voice.

Amy struggled to stand up. With the help of a dead tree, she pulled herself back up to the trail.

"Hi." She cleared her throat. "My keys flung out of my pocket, but I found them." She pulled them from her shorts pocket and jingled them.

"Awesome!" The man jogged in place for a few beats and then stopped. "You know there was something out here once but now it's gone. Some weird, old-fashioned trailer thing, I guess.

"Oh yeah?" Amy answered, her throat dry.

"There was a man poking around here just a few minutes ago," the jogger said. "He stopped me in the parking lot to ask if I'd seen it or anybody looking over here."

"Was he from the Police Department? Maybe it was stolen and dumped."

"No," he said, wiping his forehead with his wrist. "I don't think so. Maybe a rancher. He took off in a small red truck. He looked upset."

Amy stared off over the jogger's shoulder and wondered how fast she could get to her car and try to find the truck. She felt her throat tighten.

"What makes you think he was a rancher?"

"Had a double R brand sticker in his window."

Amy shifted her feet, her mind whirling.

"Well, got my keys," she said. "Gotta finish my run before I'm out of steam!" She forced a smile, waved at the man and started running toward her car.

Her head pounded as she pressed down on the gas pedal. She felt so frustrated. Jerry wanted that trailer. No, he *needed* that trailer, and she'd been so testy with him lately. Chuck's eagerness to take the urn off their hands had made her uneasy and she felt overly protective of the diary. *It fell into my lap for a reason*, Amy thought. She worried about it as if it were crying out for her help, as silly as that seemed. But after all, her Nana had said if something was loved once then it had a soul — even inanimate objects. Whoever was in that urn should be placed in his or her final resting place if they could ever figure out who it was. But the vessel might get a pretty penny at auction.

Selfish, she scolded herself, pushing her sweaty bangs off her face. How dare she think of monetary gain at a time like this? Her tattered little book of secrets knew who was in that urn and whoever stole that diary knew it, too. Was there something else inside the trailer that they hadn't found? Maybe the thieves suspected that she and Jerry had it. *Who* did this and what was their motive? And where in the name of God was that red truck?

Amy whizzed past the slow cars in front of her, taking care not to exceed the speed limit *that* much. She looked around at every red light to see if she could spot the red truck. *Nothing*.

Instead of going straight home, Amy decided to drive by the cemetery. She slowed down as she approached Acacia Memorial Park with its bumpy rock walls and nicely manicured lawns. She smiled when she thought of the majestic old trees standing watch over the dead, including her grandparents. Amy's grandmother had chosen a plot next to the grandest tree that made Amy think of her Nana in her false eyelashes, glitzy clip-on

earrings and sparkly hats. *Thank you*, she thought to the spirits in the air, *for giving me a reason to smile when I drive by this place.*

Then she saw it. Parked along one of the roads in the cemetery sat a red truck with a sticker on the back window. A man was hunched down next to a grave. Amy turned right into the parking lot of the clinic across the street and headed back to the cemetery. Her heart was beating fast.

She slowed down when she entered, avoiding four cats that scurried into her path. Amy wondered why so many cats wandered the cemetery but then realized there was a house at the entrance.

Sadness washed over her as she remembered Nana's funeral, but then she shook it off. *Focus*. Which road was it? She drove through the cemetery but saw only a small blue car and a man on a riding lawnmower.

"Excuse me," Amy called, straining to be heard over the racket. "Sir?" This time she waved at the gardener. He turned off the mower and said, "Yes, ma'am?"

"Did you see that red truck parked right here?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you know whose grave site he was visiting?"

The man dabbed his neck with a handkerchief. "No I don't, and even if I did it wouldn't be my business to tell you."

He looked around and then hopped off the seat. "These plots over here don't all have stones, but you can take a look right about there." He pointed his finger to an area near the exit onto Scenic Drive, close to the Pioneer section of the cemetery.

"Thank you so much, sir," Amy said. "You've been a great help." She pulled her car up a few yards and turned it off. She walked past the graves with dried-up carnations in faded colors of red, white and blue and felt sorry to see many with *no* flowers. Others had fresh lilies and narcissus in plastic vases, ribbons flitting in the breeze. These were the dead who were not forgotten.

As Amy approached a small plot with only a tiny metal numbered marker, her hands flew to her mouth. A small cow sat next to the marker. It wasn't like the Fisher-Price farm animals she and her cousin Jack had played with when they were kids. This toy was older.

She looked around and then bent down beside the grave and tenderly picked it up. An "R" was scratched into its underside.

So many thoughts buzzed inside her head it started to ache. Amy got back into the car and clenched the steering wheel tightly. She dumped the contents of her purse onto the seat, rummaging for her cell phone as she tried to slow her breathing and control her trembling.

Before she could make her call, the phone rang.