

ASHES IN A TEARDROP

CHAPTER 12

Jerry and Amy collapsed on their ruined couch after the ambulance left and they'd given their statements to the police. They had Chuck's blood on their hands and on the pile of towels by their feet, but they didn't seem to notice.

"Do you think Chuck will live, Jerry?" Amy asked, her ears still ringing from Andreas' gun.

"Don't know. He lost a lot of blood."

Andreas banged a hand against his clogged ear as he shuffled back and forth across their living room. "A person could suffer a horrific death when shot in the gut. The stomach, as you know, is filled with hydrochloric acid and when blood mixes with it, a painful toxemia —"

"*Andreas!* Spare us your Dr. Gerald role. We have enough to deal with, like how to get out of this mess we got ourselves into," Jerry said, lifting his hand to his neck. He stopped when he saw his fingers. He looked at Amy's. "Geez, we've got blood all over us."

Amy snapped out of her daze. "Eck!" She rushed into the bathroom, slamming the door. Jerry and Andreas heard the shower running full steam.

Jerry started to follow her out of the living room, forgetting about Andreas. He had to protect Amy. He still couldn't believe what had happened—the three of them had nearly bought the farm—and Chuck might be buying his right now. Jerry tensed at the thought of no kids, no future, all because of a little trailer. He was tempted to haul it back to the park.

"Jer, I don't know if I'd trust the fuzz," Andreas said. "Remember what that nutcase Bob said about them and this Deputy Radcliff? Who knows if they're really putting an APB

out for those turkeys? We've got to do our own detective work. Find out what he wants so bad he'd murder for it." Andreas flip-flopped over to the door leading into the garage. "The teardrop; we gotta search it right now before the cops do."

Jerry whipped around. "Whoa, there, neighbor! *We?* What do you mean, *we?* I think you need to go home, Andreas. Rose must be looking for you."

Andreas hung his head low as he did an about face. "Yeah, you're right. See you around, Jer. Keep the Smith and Wesson in case that weirdo comes back."

Jerry closed his eyes, trying to get a grip on his emotions. "Hey, wait a minute, Andreas. That was no way to speak to the man who helped save our lives." Jerry walked over and stood in front of his neighbor. "I'd give you a hug but," he held up his bloody hands, "as you can see, I'm not able to do that right now."

Andreas grinned. "I'll take a rain check, Jer."

Jerry grinned back as Andreas opened the door and left. He'd never complain about his nosey neighbors again.

After his shower, Jerry found Amy sitting on their bed, wrapped in her robe, staring into space.

"Get dressed, honey, and pack a few things. I'm taking you over to Mario and Tracy's to stay. It's not safe here until they catch those bad guys."

Amy didn't look at him when she asked, "What about you? You're not staying here by yourself, are you?"

"Yeah, but I'll be OK. The police said they'll have a patrol car cruise by every few hours."

"Then I'm staying. We're in this together, Jerry." Amy eyed the corner of the bedroom where she'd stacked the photos and papers from the library and museum. "It's my fault you

almost got killed today. I kept pushing this research stuff,” she said, pointing at the pile. “I should have left it alone.” She broke down, sobbing into her hands.

Jerry sat down next to her and drew her to his chest. “No, Amy, it wasn’t your fault. I was as eager as you to find out about the teardrop and the urn. But it was all those darn long hours at work that made me less than energetic. And don’t forget, I’m the one who had the blame thing hauled here.”

She pulled away, rubbing her swollen eyes. “OK, let’s stop the blame game and take a couple of days off work. We both need the rest.”

“Sounds good. It’ll be payback time for Randy.”

“Let’s try to get some shut eye,” Amy said. She and Jerry lay back on the bed and fell into an exhausted sleep.

At 3 in the morning, Jerry woke, wide-eyed and worked up. Amy snored softly next to him. He slipped quietly from the bed and threw on some clothes.

Jerry went into the garage and stared at the troublesome teardrop, questions rattling around in his head. Was Andreas right? Should they search it again before Bob, the cops, or that crooked deputy got to it? But surely Bob didn’t have control over all the deputies or officers in the county. He had to be lying. Bob was definitely short a few. Whoever heard of a bad guy holding a gun to somebody’s head while spouting off about ugly floral patterns?

Jerry swung the teardrop’s galley open and began to search.

“Bob, you *monkey-brained idiot!*” Deputy Radcliff yelled into his cell phone. “You’ve ruined everything and if I wasn’t your long-suffering cousin, I’d sink my fist into your fat gut!”

“Uh...listen Ralph, I lost my temper and got desperate. Calm down. We’ll work something out,” Bob said, not sounding as confident as his words.

“Oh? Tell me how we’re going to *work* it out? The cops already have an APB out for your home invasion, taking hostages, and attempted murder of four people. And here’s a newsflash—Chuck’s going to live and you know what that means? He’ll tell the cops everything. My unit is already searching for me. I’m hiding out in Keyes. Where are you?”

“I’m not saying. You’ll come over here and beat on me.” Bob’s hands shook when he heard Ralph grunt into the phone. His big cousin was pretty scary in a temper. “If only Aunt Clara had left my uncle’s teardrop to me after she died, none of this would have happened. I told that dumb lawyer 17 years ago it should have gone to me, but he wouldn’t listen. Said Aunt Clara left everything to Mary and I couldn’t do a thing about it. Just because my snooty sister loved going to those stupid gatherings with our aunt and uncle. They were all a bunch of jerks.”

“You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, Bob.”

“Why not? Mary, her husband, my aunt and uncle all thought they were too good for me.”

“Quit your whining and think for a change.”

“I am. Like I’ve been telling you for years, before my sister and her husband died in that car crash, she admitted Aunt Clara’s teardrop held the answer to our family’s hidden treasure.” Bob ground his teeth. “Then she took pleasure in telling me that the trailer and everything in it, including the urn holding Uncle Richard’s ashes, and a key, were lost in the flood. But she wouldn’t tell what the key opened and what else was hidden in the teardrop. We have to get to that trailer—the answer’s in there.”

“So, what’s your plan? I know mine. Find the money or whatever it is and get out of Dodge.”

“Don’t worry, Ralph. I figure that annoying duo won’t give up on their *research*. I’m keeping tabs on them, from a distance, of course. I figure they’ll do the work for us by taking the teardrop apart until they find our missing piece. Then we strike.”

Ralph grunted again. “You better make sure you keep your distance until you know for sure. We don’t have much time, remember,” he said before ending the call.

Amy ran out of the bedroom when she woke to find Jerry gone. “Jerry! Jerry! Where are you?”

“I’m out here, honey,” he answered.

She sprinted into the garage, skidding to a stop. The teardrop’s door, some of its siding and the fenders lay on the garage floor. Jerry’s feet stuck out from under the trailer. She bent over and looked at him. “Jerry, why are you tearing our teardrop apart?”

“I’m glad to hear you still refer to it as ours because I definitely feel the same. Bob is not getting it. Even if he asks nice this time,” Jerry said, his voice muffled.

“But why are you tearing it apart?”

“Looking for anything that might tell us what he wants so desperately. And don’t worry, I’ll put it back together once I...ouch!” Jerry rubbed his head as he slid out. Pieces of weeds covered his T-shirt and hair. “Amy, where’d you go?”

“I’m over here. You know we never looked inside this ice chest. I don’t know why. Maybe because it seemed so ordinary.”

Jerry stood and dusted himself off. “Go ahead and open it. I’m done searching here—didn’t find a single thing. Oh, and I called work and after telling them what happened they said to take the rest of the week off. What about you? Did you call?”

“No, but I will. Jerry, come over here.”

He went to the other side of the teardrop. "What's up?"

Amy held out a small book. "I found this under a piece of cardboard in the ice chest and ... it looks like another diary, a newer one."

Jerry's shoulders fell. "Oh, I thought maybe you found a stash of diamonds or something."

Amy scanned the pages. "This may be better than diamonds. I can understand everything written here. It's not old and tattered like the other one they stole. A different woman wrote this. The writing's not the same." She gasped when she got to the last page. "Jerry, this last entry is dated."

"Oh, yeah, what's the date?" Jerry tried to look interested, but he didn't think another diary would help much.

"January 1997."

Jerry sucked in a breath. "Whoa, now we're talking."

Jerry and Amy hurried into the house, avoiding their shot-up couch, to sit at the kitchen table.

"Wait a minute while I call work. Then I'll read this page out loud," she said.

"My ears are waiting, so make it fast."

When she returned, Amy took a couple of deep yoga breaths before beginning.

January 1997

I can't believe we found it! It's a cave right by the river. The map was true, just like my beloved Uncle Richard had told Aunt Clara it would be. It's on someone's private property, but luckily no one's around. We pulled my aunt's teardrop, mine now, down here with our Jeep. We'll be spending the night. Wish the weather was better. We've had nothing but rain and more rain since before New Year's.

It's comforting to know Uncle Richard's ashes are with us while we uncover my family's hidden treasure. And here we all thought it was just a family legend handed down for generations. No one knew Aunt Clara and Uncle Richard kept the old map hidden in their teardrop all this time. I'm honored she picked me to find this secret spot. Though we're not sure what's in the cave—money, gold perhaps?

Aunt Clara knew I'd share whatever it was with the family, unlike Bob and his greedy soul. He's not speaking to me and I consider that a blessing. I'm tired of being bullied.

We didn't bring enough supplies and are heading out in the Jeep before we get started with our treasure hunt. We've unhooked the teardrop. Won't be gone long, it'll be fine. And then we'll open that cave's rusty iron door with the key.

As soon as Amy finished reading, Jerry jumped up and raced back to the garage.

"Hey, wait for me." Amy held tight to the diary as she ran after him.

She found him staring at the teardrop. "Where do you think they'd hide a map?"

"Guess it would depend on how big it is."

Jerry scanned the side of the trailer; stopping at the rubber-lined cap Andreas had said wasn't standard. "See that cap? Do you think the map could be hidden in it? Would have to be small and thin."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Take it out."

"OK, let me see if I can pull it off." The cap wouldn't budge. "Amy, could you get me a screwdriver from the work bench?"

"Coming right up."

She ran back with the screwdriver. "Hurry; the anticipation is killing me."

"I'm trying," Jerry grunted as he twisted and pried on the cap with the screwdriver.

Finally it popped off, landing on the garage floor.

“Bingo!” Amy pulled a rolled piece of animal hide out of the cap. “Oh, it’s old and a bit cracked.” She unfurled it carefully. “Holy cow, look at this, Jerry. It’s like a *Treasure Island* map. You know, pirates searching for a buried chest.”

“Let’s see that,” Jerry said, taking it from Amy. His heart thumped as he looked down at a inked drawing of a river with dots pointing to a riverbank with a sheer cliff. At the bottom of the cliff a door was drawn into the rock like the entrance to the cave Mary described in her diary. The writing was small and hard to read. “Amy, you still have that magnifying glass you use for your stamp collection?”

“Yes, I’ll go get it. Meet me in the kitchen where the light is better.”

“OK.” Jerry’s knees wobbled so much he could hardly walk. They’d found the missing piece. Unbelievable.

The magnifying glass helped them make out the name of the river and the town in which the cave was located — the Tuolumne River in Hickman.

“That explains how the teardrop ended up in Tuolumne River Park. The 1997 flood must have washed it downstream for miles,” Amy said.

Jerry, still peering through the glass, said, “Hmm, the cave won’t be that easy to find. We wouldn’t be able to get to it by car, like Mary did. She must have known the area really well. The road she took might not even exist anymore after the flood.” Jerry sat up straighter. “But if we went on the river, we could travel downstream and scan the shore.”

Amy laughed. “Right. Like we’re actually going on this treasure hunt.” She studied the back of the map with the magnifying glass. “Oh, boy. Look at this, there’s a date—1870. Wasn’t that the year the urn was stolen?”

“Yeah, it was. Weird, huh?”

“You know what’s even weirder?” She pointed to the corner of the map. “Look at that.”

Jerry squinted through the glass, spotting two tiny Rs in a mirror image, just like on the urn. “Wow, this is getting more and more interesting.”

Amy pushed away from the table. “I think this whole thing is getting way too creepy.”

“I’m calling Mario,” Jerry said.

“Now? What for? They’re probably just getting home from work.”

“I know, but this is important.”

He tapped out his friend’s number on his cell.

“Hey, Mario, it’s Jerry. Do you still have that canoe? Yeah, yeah, I know you asked me a dozen times to go canoeing, but I never had the time. Do you think we could go on a little jaunt down the Tuolumne on Saturday? Like maybe launch the boat at Roberts Ferry and go downstream to the Waterford Bridge?”

Amy waved her hands wildly at him. “*Jerry! What are you thinking?*”

He put a finger to his lips, shushing her. “I know this is a weird request coming from me, but I’ll explain when you pick me up. So, will Saturday about 9 work for you?”

“Great! Thanks buddy, see you then.”

Amy’s face grew red hot. “You are *not* getting in a canoe to search for that cave. You know how you hate being on the water. What if you fall in the river and drown? You can’t swim worth a darn. And besides all that, you can’t take someone else’s family treasure. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I’ll be fine. Mario won’t let me drown. And I’m not keeping Mary’s treasure. I just want to see what all the fuss has been about. Serve Bob right if I find it first. I’ll turn it over to the authorities and they can find the owners of the treasure.”

“What about me and Tracy? Are we supposed to sit home and worry about your fool heads?”

“No, you’ll be our pick-up. After we unload the canoe, you, Tracy, and Bianca can take Mario’s SUV and go have breakfast. Then meet us at the Waterford Bridge. Simple, right?”

“Simple, my eye. This whole scenario sounds dangerous and crazy. What if Bob and Radcliff are at the cave?”

Jerry waved the map in her face. “Who has this?”

Amy slapped it away.

“Hey, be careful. This is very old.”

Amy grumbled, trying to think of more reasons to stop Jerry. Sure, it’d been fun researching the teardrop’s history and finding the map, but that was the end of the treasure hunt. She couldn’t let Jerry take this risky trip, on a canoe no less.

“Maybe there’s nothing in that cave. Or it could be haunted or cursed.”

Jerry rolled his eyes. “Come on, Amy. You sound like Andreas. It’ll be an adventure. Get into the spirit. We need to finish this mystery we’ve spent so much time on.”

Amy got a smug look on her face when she thought of her final argument. “You don’t have the key to open the iron door. I’m sure Bob has it now. So what would be the point in finding the cave? A total wasted trip.”

Jerry grinned. “Nice try. No worries on that score. The door to the cave is probably so rusted it’ll fall in when we push on it.” He leaned over and kissed Amy on her tightened lips. “Easy peasy, sweetheart.”