

## Ashes in a Teardrop

### Chapter 14

When they heard Bob's voice. Jerry jumped, his feet slipping on the pebbles.

"Easy," Mario said, steadying his friend's arm.

Bob and Radcliff sat at the shore in an aluminum fishing boat. The deputy angled it upriver and let it drift back toward a willow tree while Bob leveled his Glock at them. "Just stay where you are," he said.

*Like we're going anywhere*, thought Jerry. There were about three feet between the cliff edge and the river. They could hardly make a jump for the boat — canoe, he corrected himself, as Mario had been doing all morning. He looked over at him, moving only his eyes, afraid to move anything else. They had avoided disaster today but had come close a couple of times when Jerry was first learning how to row.

Watching Radcliff negotiate the boat, Jerry blurted, "I thought you couldn't have motorboats on the river."

"So sue us. Now sit tight while we get organized." Bob glared at Radcliff, who ignored him and went about tying the boat to the tree.

Jerry continued to stare at Mario, hoping he was formulating a plan. They hadn't thought to bring a weapon. A shovel and a pick were in the canoe, which was just out of reach. Jerry had a brief sense of déjà vu, remembering Amy's fears the night before about the trip. He hoped she would get the chance to tell him "I told you so."

"How'd you find us?" Mario asked.

"Not hard when you're working with a cop," Bob said. "We planted a tracking device in the canoe last night then just motored on down when you stopped." His voice smacked

of satisfaction. “Now don’t get any ideas. The good deputy here is going to get out and open that door.”

Radcliff was edging his way along the thin strip of riverbank toward them.

“I see you brought some tools with you. Perfect. You, Jerry’s friend, get them out of the canoe.” Bob motioned with his gun for Mario to go over to the canoe.

Mario climbed carefully back in just as he had taught Jerry. He sat down in the same place he had been earlier, with the knapsack between his feet.

“Now, hand the tools to Jerry,” Bob said from the motorboat.

Jerry took the three steps over to the canoe and Mario handed him the shovel, followed by the pick.

He set them against the cliff, next to the entrance to the cave. He tried to see up into the cave but the stout iron door covered it completely. The entrance was set up the cliff a couple of feet and you could tell by the watermarks that the river didn’t usually rise that high. He wondered how high it had gotten during the flood that had washed the teardrop trailer downstream.

“OK, you two, you know I am not afraid to use this, so just do as you’re told.” Bob said, pointing the Glock directly at them. “Radcliff, you go in first and scout it out.”

The deputy pulled a small LED flashlight out of a cargo pocket on his pants and walked up to the door. It was secured with a heavy chain and padlock. “Need the bolt cutters.”

Keeping the gun leveled on Mario and Jerry, Bob hopped out of the motorboat and walked toward the cave with the tool. Radcliff snapped the lock easily and climbed into the cave. Jerry saw Mario slip something out of the knapsack and into his pocket while Bob’s back was turned.

“Get over there with your friend,” Bob ordered Mario. “Here is how we are going to do this. You two are going to be our labor, so thanks for bringing all the tools. Radcliff has a gun, too, so don’t get any ideas about being heroes.”

The deputy jumped down out of the cave just then. “It’s farther back than I thought but there’s a door back there, too. This one has a keyhole. Give me the key and I’ll open it.”

“Hold your horses,” Bob said. “You keep an eye on these guys and I’ll open the door. One step at a time, partner, one step at a time.” Bob motioned Jerry and Mario away from the entrance, then stuck the gun in the back of his pants and climbed into the cave.

Jerry tightened his hand around the pick but a nudge from Mario stopped him from lifting it. His friend nodded toward the deputy, who had just drawn his gun. Jerry thought that if he really were a hero he would pick up one of the baseball-sized rocks at his feet and bean Radcliff with it while Bob was in the cave. But he’d never been much of a baseball player and getting shot wasn’t on his to-do list today.

Bob jumped out of the cave, startling them. “OK, I unlocked the door. Ralph, go back and get the lantern set up. I’ll follow with these two. Looks like we have some digging to do and this may take awhile. X does not mark the spot.”

Jerry and Mario climbed into the cave with the tools, followed by Bob, who kept back far enough to be out of shovel range, his Glock at the ready.

The floor of the cave was gravelly and sloped up toward a cleft in the rock. Light emanated eerily from the back, where Radcliff had set the lantern. Jerry noticed that it wasn’t dry like he expected. Water trickled down the walls in places and there was a damp, moldy smell. When they got through the cleft, a room-sized space opened up. The remains of a fire pit were in the middle and trash littered the floor. One of the walls was painted with graffiti and a couple of lewd words.

“Jeez, you’d think people would have more respect,” Bob said, glaring at the debris. “This place could have some historical significance. OK, there’s the door. Get going.”

An alcove in the back of the cave was portioned off with an iron grate, part of it swung open. It reminded Jerry of the old iron jail cell that still sat in Knights Ferry. Maybe they were fabricated at the same time. Radcliff stood just inside the entrance, the lantern hung up on the bars. Mario started through the grate, dragging the shovel with a look of determination on his face. Again, Jerry hoped his friend was coming up with a plan for their escape, because he sure wasn’t. His only other thought so far had been to swing the pick at Bob when he wasn’t looking and grab for the gun, but he figured the odds of that working were poor.

“Ralph, where do they start digging?” Bob asked from behind them, poking Jerry in the back with the gun.

“I don’t know, could be anywhere.” Radcliff stood in the middle of the 12-foot space, scraping the floor with his boot as if he were looking for something.

“What’s back there?” Bob asked, pointing the gun toward a narrow space in the back of the grotto.

“Keeps going, gets real narrow though,” Radcliff answered. “Probably ends at some point.”

Bob walked to the back of the alcove, pacing out the length of the room as he went. Then he turned and measured the width. He pointed at a spot in the corner opposite the grate. “Dig there.”

Jerry and Mario looked at each other, then got to work. Mario swung the pick to loosen the rocks and Jerry scooped them out with the shovel. They had dug a hole about a

foot deep when Jerry paused and looked at Radcliff, who was standing over them with his gun.

“So what are we looking for?” he asked.

Radcliff looked at Bob, waiting for his response.

“Let’s just say we will know it when we find it,” Bob said.

“So you don’t know what it is?” Jerry seemed surprised that these two masterminds weren’t bragging about what they expected to find.

“I didn’t say that.”

“So what is it?” Jerry asked again. Mario just kept digging.

“Yeah, what is it?” Radcliff echoed.

Bob stared at them, like he was trying to decide what to say. “OK, what the hey. You won’t be around to tell. What is it they say? Dead men tell no tales.” He chuckled to himself. “This has been a family secret for more than 100 years.” He paused for a couple of beats to draw out the suspense. “It’s gold. Civil War gold.”

“Civil War? What would it be doing out here?” Jerry asked.

“You’re not a history buff, are you?” Bob reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack, then shook a cigarette loose. He struck a match against the sole of his boot and lit up, settling back against the wall, getting himself into storytelling mode.

“During the Civil War, Northern California sided with the Union and Southern California with the Confederacy. Some went back to fight and some supported the war effort in other ways. There was a lot going on in California then. Ulysses S. Grant was even stationed in Humboldt before the war. You probably know who he was, right?”

Jerry stopped digging and leaned on his shovel. “Of course.”

“Keep digging,” Bob said in a gruff voice. Taking a pull on the cigarette, he watched them dig for a bit, then started talking again. “Yeah, old Ulysses had a sister in Knights Ferry. Bet you didn’t know that. Anyway, when it looked like the South would lose, the Confederacy took all of its gold out of the Treasury and decided to hide it so the Northerners wouldn’t get it. They put it in different caches around the countryside, planning to go back for it when they needed it. Well, it was war, you know, so some of it disappeared.”

“What, it was stolen?” Radcliff asked.

“Not everyone is as honest as you would like them to be,” Bob said.

*That’s ironic, coming from a man pointing a gun at us,* Jerry thought.

“Anyway, family legend has it that some long-lost cousin was part of one of these treasure-trove details and got a hold of some of this gold. Hid it out here after the war.”

“So this is all just a legend? You don’t even know for sure it’s here?” Jerry asked, wondering why the cousin or some other family member hadn’t been back to retrieve it by now.

“It’s here. Keep digging.” Bob tossed the cigarette butt and ground it into the damp ground with his heel.

Turning back to the hole, Jerry and Mario worked into a kind of rhythm. The thump of the pick and scrape of the shovel were the only sounds except for the constant drip, drip, drip of water. Jerry was just about to ask for a break when his shovel hit something that looked different.

“Big rock here,” he said. “I don’t know if we can go any farther.” Jerry leaned on his shovel handle, stalling for time so he could catch his breath.

Mario looked into the hole, a funny look on his face. “Let me see that shovel.”

He scraped away some gravel, then squatted down and used his hand to clear more.

“Looks like concrete.”

“What?” Bob walked over and looked into the hole, waving the gun at Jerry to back away.

Radcliff peered over the three of them, trying to get a look. Jerry thought now would be a good time to try and get away but even if he made it out the door without getting shot, he doubted his friend could.

“It looks old,” Mario said.

“What is it?” Jerry asked, curiosity overcoming his fear.

“See if you can break it up with the pick,” Bob told Mario. He stepped back, gun in hand.

Mario lifted the pick over his head, getting ready to take a big swing at the patch of concrete. He slammed it down as hard as he could and the concrete crumbled. He swung again and it fractured further. His third blow punched a hole in the slab. The tip of the pick hit air this time. Mario used the pick to pull up a chunk of concrete, revealing a dark space underneath. “It would help if we had a pry bar,” he said.

“There’s one in the boat. I’ll go get it,” Bob said. “Ralph, keep your gun on these guys.”

Mario used his hands to scrape more of the gravel off what they now could see was a square of crumbling concrete. Jerry moved in to help him, both of them squatting in the hole.

“When Radcliff goes down, get his gun,” Mario whispered.

Jerry stiffened, not sure he had heard correctly. He saw Mario slide something pink out of his pocket and palm it. Jerry moved gravel around with his hand, clueless as to what

the hot pink object was. He didn't know what Mario would do but he was fairly sure that Bob had no intention of letting them out of here alive.

"Hey, Radcliff, can you give us a hand here?" Mario asked, his head down and hands out of sight.

"Just wait for Bob," the deputy replied.

"I think I can see something down there. Bring your light." Mario motioned over his shoulder with his other hand.

Radcliff pulled the flashlight out of his pocket and leaned over the hole. "Let me see."

Mario spun from his crouched position and jabbed the deputy in the thigh with the pink object. Radcliff's eyes bugged out and then he went stiff, jerking a couple of times before dropping the gun and falling to the ground.

Jerry jumped out of the hole and scrambled for the gun, which slid across the gravel. He grabbed for the barrel as it came to a stop against a rock. Radcliff was still twitching on the floor when Jerry stood up, fumbling to point the gun at him.

"What is that?" he asked Mario.

"A taser. Tracy carries it with her when she runs in the mornings. It's a special one for girls."

"Seems to work for boys, too. Now what?" Jerry held the gun in front of him with shaking hands.

"Only other way out could be back there," Mario said, pointing to the opening in the rock.

They were looking at the back of the grotto, where a tunnel headed deeper into the cliff, when they heard Bob's voice.



“OK, let’s get at it,” he said as he walked into the grotto, pry bar in one hand, gun in the other at his side. As soon as Bob was through the door in the grate, he saw Radcliff on the ground. “What the hell!” He turned toward Mario and Jerry, pulling his gun arm up.

Jerry took one look at the gun and pulled the trigger on the one in his hand.