

## Ashes in a Teardrop

### Chapter 2

"Kind of looks like a giant mother-of-pearl Parcheesi piece." Jerry rubbed his fingers over the smooth enameled surface at the base of the vase. His fingers touched the wax line and continued to the bulbous cap that sat atop the small spire-like neck.

"It's too heavy for me to keep holding up," Amy said and put it on the trailer floor.

Jerry picked up the vase and rotated it in his hands. "I wonder what this has in it. Feels like about 6 pounds," he said. "Red wax seal means whatever it is has been untouched by air."

He carried the vase back to the fold-up table, hunched over to protect his head from the low ceiling. Amy followed him.

"Maybe it's some rare liquor that's well aged. Wine, maybe. We might be able to sell it at an auction and make a tidy sum from one of those collectors," Amy said, brushing a strand of hair from her face with the back of her dusty hand.

"I don't think so." Jerry looked at the bottom of the vessel, which had "CB Memorial Home" neatly handwritten in blue ink. "It says it came from a memorial home. Probably someone's ashes."

"Ew, it's a body?" Amy asked, taking a step back.

"That's my guess," Jerry said, spinning the urn around again. "Look at this." He pointed at the wax covering the lid.

"What?"

"It has an embossing."

"A what?" Amy moved in and looked closely at the seal.

"Like they used on envelopes in the old days so you could see if anyone opened your mail," Jerry said. "They pressed your initials, a monogram, family crest or whatever into the

melted wax at the seal line. My dad had one of those kits from the '60's." He squinted and moved the urn to get the best light on the embossing.

"Looks like two R's in a mirror image," Amy said.

"Yeah, I wonder if it's someone's initials?" Jerry asked. "I've seen that somewhere before, though."

"Sure you have, Jer. Maybe you were at the services. What I do know is that your little project has an unidentified body involved with it. I think you need to call the Sheriff's Department."

"Why? I mean, no one's seemed to miss him since 1997."

"Or her," Amy said. "How would you like it if it was a relative of yours and some stranger had the remains?"

"If it was my crazy Uncle Lewis, more power to 'em."

"Seriously," she said.

"Maybe we can just take the urn to the coroner's office?"

"How do you explain where you got it?" Amy asked. "Come on, do the right thing. Call the sheriff out and give them the details."

"But what if they take my trailer?" Jerry touched the inside wall.

"That won't be the last teardrop you shed."

"That was bad, Amy," he said, putting the urn back on the floor against a magazine rack. He stared at it and shook his head. "You're probably right. I'll go in and call the Sheriff's Department and tell them the whole story."

"I didn't say you had to do it this instant. I mean, we can explore a little more," Amy continued with a mischievous smile.

Jerry returned her grin and nodded his head.

Amy pointed toward the bed where the urn had been. "You take the front and I'll take the back."

Her eyes darted to the urn then to the magazine rack. She pulled a paperback out and scanned the cover of John Grisham's "The Firm." She pulled out three more Grisham novels and set them on the table.

"Guy seems to be fascinated with the law," Amy yelled. "Four books by Grisham."

She found Sunset magazines from 1995, 1996 and 1997, with no address labels. Amy scanned the contents, hoping to find a common theme, but no luck.

"I remember now," Jerry called from the front.

"Remember what?"

"Hold on, let me..." He wrenched his body around, trying to get out of the little sleeping space. "Ouch," Jerry said, as his head hit the ceiling. The quilt the urn had been found in twisted around him. His feet got tangled up and he fell on the floor with a thud.

"Remember what?" Amy asked again.

"I said just a minute." Jerry rubbed his head and looked at his hand. He pulled the quilt from his legs and crawled to the back of the trailer with Amy.

"Did you find anything up there?"

"No," he said, "but I remember where I saw that embossing." He grinned at her like he had won the lottery.

"Where?" Amy asked, one hand tapping a Sunset magazine.

"The H Bar B," Jerry said.

"The what?"

"The H Bar B in Oakdale." Jerry's head tilted to the side as he looked into Amy's eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's an old cowboy bar. Been around forever," Jerry explained.

"So? What, the R and R stands for Rob Roy, a favorite drink at the bar?"

"I doubt that, in a cowboy bar," he said. "No, the walls are all wooden and covered with brands."

“All bars have neon signs and mirrors spouting brands of booze they sell. I don't remember any brand logo that looked like this,” Amy said, pointing at the urn.

Jerry shook his head. “No, brands like in branding cattle. You know, those big hot iron bars with artwork at the end that they burn onto...well, you get the picture. Only on the walls inside the bar. They're covered with brands from various ranches throughout the county. Burned right into the wood. You can almost smell the smoke.”

“And you just so happened to see a burn mark on the wall of a bar in Oakdale that matches our urn embossing?”

“I think so.” Jerry scratched the side of his face, leaving a trail of dirt across his cheek. “I mean, it was only a week ago and I'm ...”

“A week ago? When did you go to a bar a week ago?” Amy interrupted.

“Uh, Mario and I went on that bike ride from Knights Ferry to Oakdale down Orange Blossom Road last week, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. While I volunteered as an official on the 5K run for diabetes, you and Mario drove to the top of a hill, coasted down and called it exercise. Now I find out you guys wound up in a cowboy bar plowing down beers.”

“They sell sodas, too,” Jerry shot back.

“Did you have a soda?”

He turned his head and glanced around the trailer, avoiding eye contact. “They have a brand on the wall that looks like this embossing.”

“Why don't you go in and call the Sheriff's Department? I don't think there's anything else here of interest, but I'll keep at it until you come back.”

“OK.” Jerry moved toward the trailer's door. “Remember, if you find something, let me see.”

Amy looked under the cushions of the settee and saw a water storage tank. Its aluminum was cool to the touch in the hot trailer. She glanced back at the front and wondered if there was anything under the mattress that Jerry might have overlooked. She

ducked and crab-walked to the back of the trailer to avoid hitting her head. She pulled the quilt off the floor, where Jerry had unraveled himself, then folded it and stuck it out of the way.

Amy thought how great it would be to find a diamond ring or maybe a gold nugget. That would buy a dining room set or maybe a bathroom remodel.

The bed was in a solid wooden frame. Two small sheets of plywood atop the frame supported the mattress, leaving a storage cavity below. The thin mattress was covered in sheets that had been white but now were yellow with age.

Amy picked up a pillow and reached into the case to see if anything was hidden inside before tossing it to the floor. She scooted the mattress off of the frame and placed it on the floor, then climbed on top to access under the bed. She lifted one plywood panel off and peered into the half chamber below.

It was dark inside and hard to see but something sparkled in the dim light coming in from the window. *Payday?* she wondered, yet the thought of putting her hand into the dark space sent a chill up her spine. Amy hurried out of the trailer and into the garage to get a flashlight.

Back inside the trailer, she turned on the light and peered toward whatever was shining down there. It was just the glass surround from an old lantern. There were small shovels, jacks and tools laid neatly under the bed and Amy spied a coil of rope and carabiners tucked into a corner. The operation manual for the stove sat atop a small wooden box.

She pulled the box out and flipped it open, hoping to find something worthwhile. Old socket wrenches and sockets, a few screwdrivers and some Allen wrenches were inside. *I don't know why I expected to find treasure all of a sudden*, she thought. *I didn't even want Jerry to bring this home.* A twinge of guilt hit as she realized she was feeling greedy.

Amy went to put the wooden box back under the bed when she saw a small leather-bound book, a leather cord holding the covers closed. She picked it up and set it to the side while she replaced the box.

Amy replaced the half sheet of plywood on the frame and removed the sheet from the other side. The flashlight showed light bulbs, fuses, a canteen, a rolled-up tent or canopy and tent stakes and cord. She pressed on the fabric but didn't feel anything inside.

She replaced that piece of plywood and focused on the book. The dark tan leather felt dry and the cover was cracked from age. Amy could make out three barely visible letters etched in gold on the cover: Di\_\_\_y.

She pulled on the cord that held it closed but it broke in her hand. Amy opened the book.

"The police will be here in about 15," Jerry's voice sounded suddenly behind her. "Did you find anything else?"

Amy recoiled, then quickly shut the book and held it against her.

"No, just some old tools and stuff. I'll put all this back in place. Why don't you take the urn and set it in the garage?"

"Will do."

The trailer bounced as Jerry climbed in and grabbed the urn. Amy set the book to the side and quickly replaced the mattress, then opened to a page at random. She saw a date and writing in flowing script. *A woman's hand for sure*, she thought, but as she touched the edges of the pages, they disintegrated. She closed the book before there was any more damage, thinking, *someone's journal or diary*.

Amy hid the book between two of the Sunset issues and climbed out of the trailer.

Jerry set up a table next to the little teardrop and started sorting what they'd already thrown out. Amy walked toward the house.

"What you got there?" he asked.

“A couple old Sunset magazines. I saw some recipes that looked good. I doubt the sheriff needs them.”

“I jumped the gun throwing all this stuff out,” Jerry said. “Maybe they need to see some of this stuff.”

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“When you said you found a body in a trailer, I mean, you could have explained the body was ashes, Mr. Curtis,” Deputy Radcliff said. He held a clipboard and jotted notes as he glanced around the dilapidated little teardrop trailer. Radcliff was 6 feet tall, sported tree trunks for arms, and his uniform shirt was a size too small and showed off his physique. His hair was short and spiked with gel. The handcuffs, gun, baton and other items on his utility belt jingled when he moved. “I didn't need to get here this quick.”

“If your dispatcher had given me some time, I would have,” Jerry said.

“You say you found the ashes in this trailer?”

“Yes.”

“And you bought this trailer from who?” Radcliff asked.

“We found it and brought it home.”

“And where did you find it?” The deputy's eyes widened as he waited for an answer.

“Out at Tuolumne River Regional Park, buried in the brush next to the river,” Jerry said, glancing at the trailer's flattened tires and the vegetation lodged underneath it.

“You know,” Radcliff said, “you should have reported this to the Modesto Police Department, since it's a vehicle and all and it's their jurisdiction. Still, I'll make a judgment and figure that perhaps the value of this isn't worth the MPD's time.” He stared at the tires' cracked sidewalls and algae patina.

“Now, back to the urn,” Radcliff continued. “You assume it has someone's ashes in it?”

"It says 'CB Memorial Home,'" Jerry said. "I mean, it's printed in ink on the bottom. And look, it's got these embossed letters in the wax seal at the top. I think I've seen that same logo on the wall at the H Bar B in Oakdale."

"Do much drinking, do you, Mr. Curtis?"

"No. I've hardly ever ... wait a minute. I'm just trying to help. Amy, tell him," Jerry urged.

"He doesn't do much drinking, officer," she said, turning toward her husband, lips pursed and shaking her head. "Based on what we've seen in this trailer, it appears that nobody's been inside since 1997. What if a relative of the deceased has been searching for the ashes?" Amy asked.

"Well..."

"What if it was one of your relatives, officer?" she interrupted.

"If it was my loony Aunt Mabel, I never would have said a word," Radcliff replied. "But, I understand your concern. I'll take the ashes back to the coroner's office," he said. "Try not to disturb too much in the trailer for the next week or so. The coroner might want to take a look at where this was found." He looked at the urn.

Amy and Jerry nodded.

"Here's my card," Radcliff said. "If you find anything that you think might help with the identification of the remains, give me a call."

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Jerry followed Amy into the house. She sat at the kitchen counter and tapped on the Sunset magazines, motioning him into the chair next to her.

"That cop was kinda pushy, huh?" Jerry said.

"Not to me," Amy answered. "You need to present an air of authority. They'll get the message."

"Last time I tried to do that, the cop decided a speeding ticket wasn't enough and that my tires were a tad too worn. Cost me a bunch to be authoritative," Jerry said.



"Maybe it's a woman thing. You're lucky you have one of the best on your side."

"I'm so glad I married you," Jerry said, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

"I didn't show you this earlier," Amy said as she lifted the magazines off the book.

"But I think this is the diary of someone who maybe owned that little trailer."