

Ashes in a Teardrop

Chapter 3

“A diary?”

“You look surprised,” Amy said, undoing the band of her ponytail and fluffing her hair.

“I guess I expected camping stuff. I can see taking books on a camping trip – I mean for a person who likes to read. I didn’t realize there would be anything really personal in the trailer, and now we’ve got two things, ashes and a diary.”

Amy nodded. What had seemed like such an adventure was becoming a kind of responsibility.

“I guess we really do need to figure out who these people are.”

“Even if they want their trailer back,” Jerry added.

“Hey, um, honey bun? It’s fine if you stop for a beer with the guys sometimes. I shouldn’t have given you a hard time about it.”

He smiled.

“I know you don’t overdo.”

Amy gathered up her hair to start a new ponytail.

“You know,” she said, “I found myself getting greedy when we were looking through the trailer, and I don’t like that side of myself. I was hoping we’d find some jewelry or – oh, I don’t know. Money?”

“Yeah,” Jerry said. “Me, too. I didn’t even think about jewelry, but I got caught up in the idea of getting something big for free. I’d love to have the trailer for camping, especially when ...”

He gave her a little smile, and she knew he meant “when we have kids.”

She was the one who had set up their save-for-a-baby plan, and they were almost, but not quite, ready to start trying. Jerry knew how worried she was that they might get tangled up in the problems that some couples in their 30s faced these days. Sure, there were plenty of women who had babies in their 40s but her friend Susanna from work had been experiencing some difficulties and said her doctor told her it was harder for women over 30 and men over 35 to conceive. Maybe it had something to do with the foods we eat or our environment, Susanna had speculated, shrugging.

Would she and Jerry end up going to a fertility clinic, Amy wondered. Maybe they would decide to adopt. One way or the other, she was determined to have a family.

She brought herself back to the moment.

“The thing is,” Jerry said, “It’s not just the possibility of getting the trailer. It’s that the people who owned this trailer are real people.”

“I’m curious about them, too,” she said. “I wonder how old they were, how long they’d been together. Maybe it wasn’t even a couple, but I figure there was a woman in the equation if there’s a diary involved. Is that sexist?”

“Men don’t write in diaries,” Jerry said decisively. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“OK. I think I’ll start looking through the diary,” Amy said.

She settled at the kitchen table and held the diary for a minute, looking it over. When she opened it, some dirt fell onto the table. Some of the pages looked as if they’d been gnawed on by animals. The only explanation Amy could come up with was that the diary might have been thrown away, maybe just outside the trailer, since it was clean dirt, not the stinky stuff that would have come from a trashcan or dumpster. This led to a whole new thought. Maybe the diary was someone else’s – something the trailer owners had simply found. For some reason, Amy was convinced that Ms. Trailer Owner was the diarist. Maybe Ms. T.O. regretted throwing it away and later retrieved it. The fact that it had been wrapped in a quilt might mean that she had been keeping it hidden. Had Mr. T.O. known about the diary? Had he respected Ms. T.O.’s privacy enough not to read it?

Darn. Amy hadn’t thought about how she was about to violate the writer’s privacy. A diary is supposed to be a safe place for secrets.

She took a deep breath; she wanted to read it. It was probably mostly boring stuff, one reason she had never been driven to keep a diary.

Today I went to work and stopped at the store on the way home. Blah-blah-blah.

Amy reminded herself that the reason she wanted to look through the diary was to see if it would lead to the owner of the trailer. And really, after 17 years, what might have seemed like really personal, private stuff probably had been resolved long ago or the person had just moved on. If there were earth-shattering secrets

inside, she would tell Jerry it was too personal, try to forget what she'd read and put the book aside.

Yeah, right.

The first thing to do was not exactly flip through it, considering its condition, but turn the pages carefully just to see if any names, addresses or phone numbers were recorded.

But when Amy opened to the first page, she saw that the writing was not going to be easy to decipher. Almost every page had torn or smudged spots and what she could see she couldn't necessarily read. On Page 2, she was able to make out a passage about going to dinner at someone's house and how Ms. T.O. hated seafood. Apparently someone had gotten drunk and done something rude – here Amy encountered some smudges – that caused Ms. T.O. to consider turning down future invitations to Doug and Mar—'s parties.

Mary? Marie? Margie? Marta? Marguerite?

This was going to take a while.

She was surprised that she hadn't thought of it before, but Mr. and Ms. T.O. could be dead. That would make looking through the diary less intrusive, but it would be sad. Amy didn't want them to be dead, though she and Jerry wanted their trailer. This was turning out to be both a puzzle and surprisingly emotional.

“Jerry?” she called as she walked toward the closed bathroom door in the master bedroom.

“Do you think the people who owned the trailer are OK? I mean, do you think they’re still alive?”

Jerry flung open the door, a towel wrapped around his waist. He walked toward the bed, where he had laid out clean clothes.

“That’s the first thing I wondered about,” he said, “but I don’t know why. I mean, why is it any more likely that they’re dead than alive?”

“It must be the urn. It made us think about death.”

Nodding, Jerry stopped rubbing his hair dry and pulled a T-shirt over his head.

“I’m really into this diary thing right now,” Amy said. “I want to get Tracy over tomorrow to help me. It’s hard to read the handwriting, and since Tracy is a teacher, I figure she can read anything.”

“Works for me,” Jerry said. “They’re barbecuing for her family today, so why don’t we provide dinner? I’ll make my famous chili. Mario and I have some ‘bidness’ to conduct, anyway. I want to throw a few bucks his way for the tow.”

“He’ll probably say no, but it’s worth a try,” Amy said.

Mario and Tracy had been living pretty close to the vest since they’d had Bianca, one of several reasons Amy had planned to save 50 percent of her take-home pay for at least two years before they started trying to have a baby. Now they had only a few more months to go. The only reason it had been possible to save that much was that when the housing market bottomed out they bought an older house cheap. Jer was fixing up the house a little at a time, with some help from Mario. What they saved monthly with a low house payment and the tax deduction was

helping. Amy, who had grown up in west Modesto, worn thrift-store clothes and taken the bus everywhere, wanted the cushion of an entire year's pay, especially since lots of people were losing their jobs or getting their hours cut. When she became a mother, Amy would be OK with part-time hours if they had a cushion. She was willing to take it on faith that Jerry's 12 years at the hospital meant that he probably would be able to hang on to his job.

"Amy?"

"Uh?"

"You OK?"

"Yeah. I was into one of my baby daydreams," she said sheepishly.

Everywhere she went these days she saw pregnant women, babies and toddlers.

"I'll call Mario," Jerry said. "And then, how's bout we get takeout from Enrique's?"

Before the diet, they'd usually gotten takeout on Saturday nights. Now, after more than six months on a strict diet, Amy was craving something gooey and cheesy. She would make a big salad for tomorrow.

No, she should stick with the diet. She'd really trimmed down and didn't want to slip back, especially since she might be pregnant by Christmas.

"It'll go straight to my hips," Amy said.

"More of you to love," Jerry answered.

She stuck out her tongue at him.

"Aren't you on maintenance now?"

She nodded. What good was being on maintenance if you couldn't splurge once in a while? "Let's watch a movie," she said. "You get the food. I'll find the movie."

"Not a chick flick," Jerry said. That was always his only requirement.

* * *

Bianca sat in the corner of the kitchen on the floor. She had lined up several dolls and stuffed animals and was pretend feeding them. With her dark brown hair in long, tight braids, only the shape of her face resembled Tracy, who was a blue-eyed strawberry blonde.

"How do you fit all those critters in your bag?" Amy asked.

"It's not easy," Tracy said. "Since the menagerie can occupy her for a long time, I don't leave home without them."

"Let's get started, then," Amy said, knowing that "a long time" with a 3-year-old was not all that long.

Amy had all the supplies on the table, including the diary, a magnifying glass, notebook, flashlight and two pencils. She had assigned herself the job of note taker. Tracy was in charge of reading aloud what was in the diary, with Amy helping if she couldn't decipher a word or phrase.

After the first page, Amy congratulated herself that she'd been right about Tracy's "teacher" eyes. If Tracy couldn't read it, neither could Amy.

For the first five pages, Amy took a lot of notes. After a while, she drew a line on the notebook page and wrote “just summarizing unless noted otherwise.” If she did quote from the diary, she used quotation marks.

Twenty minutes later, they were about one-fourth of the way through when Bianca’s chatter with her dolls and animals stopped. Leaving them sprawled willy-nilly on the floor, she raced over to Tracy and hugged her legs. Tracy called it “checking in.”

“Want to see what we’re doing?” Amy asked, holding out her arms. Bianca came over and, without saying a word, allowed herself to be lifted onto Amy’s lap. “No, you can’t touch it because it’s so old, but look at the cover. It’s kind of pretty.”

“Where’s Daddy?” Bianca asked, shimmying out of Amy’s lap. Her Mary Jane shoes clunked as they hit the floor.

Bianca was now operating on “short attention span.”

“In the garage,” Tracy said. “Pick up your friends first.”

When the last stuffed animal had been shoved into the bag, Tracy took Bianca to the garage door.

“I’ll see what the guys are doing,” she said. “Power tools and curious children are not a good combination.”

“Mario? Jer? Can Bianca come see what you’re up to?”

“Sure,” Jerry said. “We’re just sitting here shooting the breeze.”

“This might give us another 20 minutes,” Tracy said when she got back to the kitchen table. “Then maybe she’ll be ready for a nap. Obviously, going through this diary is going to take a while.”

“I think Jerry’s got some big camping plans for us – all of us – if we get to keep the trailer,” Amy said.

“Five people are not gonna fit in that trailer.”

“True,” Amy said, “but that doesn’t mean you guys can’t use it.”

“Not sure I’d like camping,” Tracy said, “but it would be worth trying at least once.”

“OK, back to work,” her friend said. “After work and nap, we’ll stuff our bellies.”

* * *

The next day, on the way home from her job in Ceres, Amy turned right on I Street, as she did every day so she could drive under the “Water, Wealth, Contentment, Health” arch and past the Gallo Performing Arts Center, with its elegant facade. Her mother had been in plays in high school and had taken Amy and her brother to local productions. She had died 10 years before Gallo was built, but Amy thought of her every time she drove past it. Turning left at 14th and then right onto J, she drove past the statue of the teens from George Lucas’ *American Graffiti*. It marked the start of the J Street “drag,” where kids had shown off their cars, trying to impress each other.

Her mind drifted back to the diary.

Absently cranking up the air conditioner, Amy wondered if the trailer's owners had spent weekend nights on McHenry Avenue when they were young. Since time had stopped for the trailer in 1997, if the couple had been in their 20s or 30s, they would have been in high school in the 1970s or 1980s. Maybe they were even older. Maybe they had known George Lucas.

Ms. T.O. was not a teenager. There were no little hearts and doodles, very little slang, though there were abbreviations. There were no gushy-crushy entries about cute guys or agonized comments about snotty girls who had gotten on the diary-writer's bad side. Most of the daily stuff had to do with the kind of life a grown woman lives: errands, little problems at work (Tracy had offered up the possibility that she might have worked at a school, maybe as a secretary), some exploration of the kind of social life in which people sometimes partied a little hard, and a relationship that seemed to be generally satisfactory. A bit dull but also kind of sweet.

It was the entries on the last few pages of the diary that had stopped Amy and Tracy short. Unfortunately, they had been heavily smudged, so the sentences were fractured, requiring guesswork.

Something sad had happened to, or somehow involved, a baby. It could have been the trailer owners' baby. It could have been an unborn baby. A miscarriage? Maybe it was the baby of a friend or family member. There simply wasn't enough readable information for them to figure it out.

They had decided immediately that the urn didn't hold the ashes of a baby. It was too heavy and there was nothing in its design to indicate that the loved one had been an infant. Also, they believed, though they both knew that this was purely emotional, that most parents would bury an infant.

Amy had thought about this baby all day long at work, careful to double-check so she wouldn't make mistakes. A couple of her co-workers in the medical billing office had asked if she was OK, so she must have looked worried.

Now, as she stopped at red lights, turned corners and tried to block out the late afternoon sun that was peeking around her visor, Amy reconstructed what she and Tracy had pieced together. She couldn't quite remember what words had led her to worry about this baby. She would have to review her notes and see if Jerry wanted to put some time into putting the puzzle pieces together.

Yesterday she had said to Tracy, "Let's not tell the guys about the baby – at least not yet."

Tracy had nodded, obviously getting into the "we're detectives" thing.

The only thing Jerry had asked was, "Did you girls have a good time with that diary," a comment Amy thought was a little dismissive.

Still, marriage was about sharing, and she wanted to know what Jerry thought. Sometimes he had a way of cutting to the chase on things she had managed to complicate.

Of course, she would have to feed him first. He had cooked the chili yesterday, so it was her turn to make dinner, and Jerry came home from his hospital maintenance job tired and hungry.

After dinner, she would approach him about the diary and, specifically, about the baby. If he wasn't interested or thought she was doing her baby-obsession thing, she would take on this line of investigation by herself. She knew Tracy would help if she could, though her job and Bianca kept her pretty busy.

She wondered if Jerry had been thinking about their find – well, *his* find – all day at work the way she had.