

Ashes in a Teardrop

Chapter 4

Jerry had taken the country roads home from Turlock instead of the freeway, something he often did after a rough day. He had been having plenty of those ever since Emanuel Medical Center opened its new cancer center. The expansions at the hospital had been happening so fast that they outpaced the maintenance personnel, which meant Jerry and his crew had been putting in a lot of overtime. He didn't look forward to the conversation tonight when he would tell Amy about having to work Saturday – his third Saturday in four weeks. He didn't look forward to telling her why the seat of his car was soaking wet, either.

He pulled onto his street and noticed Andreas at the community mailbox. Andreas, a 68-year-old Greek who had lived in the United States since he was 3, waved. Jerry waved back and then hit the button on the garage door remote. When he pulled into the driveway, he could see Amy's car and the teardrop – he would have to park in the driveway today. He clubbed the steering wheel and grabbed his tools.

As he was getting out of the car, he heard Andreas' flip-flops. Jerry didn't have to turn around to picture Andreas' shuffle, the pseudo-run he did when trying to catch up to people.

“Jer. Jer?”

Jerry wished he had stopped at the store to buy milk or ice cream, but he didn't have an excuse to cut off the conversation today. He sighed, put on a smile and turned to face his neighbor. "Hi, Andreas."

"Jer, I'm so happy to see you. Rose and I saw the police the other day and thought for sure you were being arrested. It's always the quiet ones."

"Sheriff's deputy. And I'm not that quiet."

Andreas raised his eyebrows.

The only person Jerry knew who liked to talk more than Andreas was Andreas' wife, Rosalie. By comparison, Jerry was the quiet neighbor, but so was everyone else in the world. "Tell Rose I'm just fine. We found that trailer near the river a few days back and needed a coroner —"

"You found a body? Ahhh..." Andreas' hand went to his mouth, touching the grey stubble of his short beard.

"No, not a body, just an urn."

"And you kept the trailer? Have you seen any ghosts coming out of it?"

"No."

"Out of paintings in your house?"

"No."

"Any portals to heaven, hell or other worlds?"

"Andreas, come on. I've had a long day."

"If you need a paranormal investigator, I'm your man."

"Was that before or after you were a Navy SEAL?"

“Um, let’s see. I was at the Gaslight Theater when I was a paranormal investigator, but —”

“Great, it wasn’t even a recent part.”

Andreas had acted in various groups that worked out of the Gaslight Theater in Denair early in his career before he joined traveling guilds. A few years before he retired, he’d been accepted into the Townsend Opera Players in Modesto, back in the same area from which he’d started. Jerry had thought Andreas wanted to be here because of family ties, but in the two years they had been neighbors, he never had seen Andreas go anywhere or anyone come visit him.

“I did a lot of research for that. I could practically do the job. No respect for my dedication.”

Jerry didn’t say that he thought paranormal investigators were actors to begin with – he knew that would open a whole new line of discussion. “Look, I’m wet; I’m tired; I really want to get cleaned up.”

“Did you find out who it is, was, whatever? I bet there were a lot of clues inside.”

Jerry sighed and put down his tools. *Come on Amy, come save me*, he thought. “No, we haven’t figured anything out.”

Andreas took a few steps toward the garage, and Jerry regretted setting down his tools. *It wasn’t an invite*.

“Are you keeping the trailer?”

“I think so,” Jerry replied. There was a slight pause, with Andreas staring at him as if he were waiting for more details. “We’re trying to.”

“You should really find out who owns it – and who’s in the urn.”

“We’ve been trying,” Jerry said. “The trailer has no license plate, no VIN —”

“Well, it wouldn’t have that, would it?”

“Why not?”

“It’s a kit. Pretty sure.” Andreas walked into the garage and scoped out the teardrop. “Definitely a kit. Probably late ‘40s, but they made this kit through the ‘60s, I think.”

“How do you know?”

“Oh, I used to go to gatherings, at least the local ones. I went to one near Año Nuevo as well, so I guess it wasn’t only local ones, but mostly around here. Actually, Año Nuevo is pretty close. Been there? They have elephant seals.”

“Gatherings?”

“Yeah, there used to be pretty big teardrop clubs all over the U.S., probably other places, too. Every now and then there would be a big campout, and they called it a gathering. Rose and I had a teardrop back in the ‘90s, well, we shared it with a couple of other Opera Players, and we went to a few of them, the gatherings. Let’s see, there was a pretty big one at Don Pedro Reservoir and an under-advertised one at Turlock Lake. And the...”

Andreas was counting the events on his fingers when Jerry held his hand up. He went back to describing the gatherings instead of naming them. “Sometimes it

would only be one or two clubs going, but more often it was open to everyone. I don't know what happened to the one at Turlock Lake, but it was a disappointment after the Don Pedro gathering. I mean it was as if..." Andreas stopped midsentence, this time of his own accord, and nodded toward the house.

Jerry turned to see the door from the garage to the laundry room open and Amy standing there. She looked good, hair done and makeup freshly applied. "Jer, dinner's ready."

"OK, hon. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"It's hot now."

The aroma of teriyaki sauce and rice hit him and made his stomach growl.

"Just give me a few minutes."

Amy looked at both of them before going back inside. Jerry would have to explain later. With all of Andreas' "actor" knowledge, he was surprised his neighbor had real experience with something Jerry was trying to investigate. He knew Amy would be, too.

"Oh, I shouldn't keep you," Andreas said. "You know what they say about women and a hot meal? Well, it was Ford who said it: 'Tell the truth, work hard and come to dinner on time.' I'm not really sure it was about women, come to think of it, but it makes the most sense to—"

"No, it's not a problem." *Great, Jerry thought, the one time I'm interested and now he's willing to go home, and Amy's made something nice.* "Tell me more about the teardrop clubs."

“Not much to tell. They’re all over the place, or at least they were. A whole bunch of people with similar vehicles sharing about exciting things they’ve discovered and work-arounds to common problems – just like the PT Cruiser club Modesto used to have or the RV clubs. What was the name of the PT club? Highway 99 PT, or something like that?”

Jerry shrugged. “And someone in one of these clubs would be able to tell me who owned this trailer?”

“If the owners were part of a club, maybe. I know that’s a kit and there were lots of people with kits, so it would all come down to the year of the kit and customizations on the inside.”

“We had an urn inside – that should narrow it down.”

“You mean, *they* had an urn inside.”

“Yeah.”

“I doubt that would be well known to club members. However, people who did customizations were always showing those off. The Golden Generation guys were always doing stuff,” Andreas said.

“Customizations?”

“Yeah, like storage solutions. Storage was always a big talking point since there wasn’t much of any in the trailer.”

There was a pause in the conversation, a true pause. It felt strange. Andreas knelt down to examine the hitch, tires and fenders. Jerry moved next to him, trying to figure out what he was thinking.

Andreas pointed at a rubber-lined plastic cap in the side of the trailer. "See this, here? This isn't standard, not on the models I saw. If you take the cap out, you might fit a phone line or coax cable. It isn't big enough for an electrical plug. Right now it is capped to be watertight. This is the stuff the clubs will notice right off."

Jerry nodded.

"Some of this is still in good condition," Andreas said, motioning to the door and siding. "But you'll have to hammer out the fenders, get new tires and replace the hitch coupler."

Jerry was making mental notes of things to fix. However, this isn't where he wanted the conversation to move. He stood and asked, "How would I find a club?"

"Back in the day, you would look in a magazine or talk to someone at the dealership. I learned about mine from a lady at Knights Ferry. You know, where the covered bridge is. Well, anyway, we had gone on a white-water rafting trip and we met her on the boat. Nice lady. She told me about her club and gave me her contact info."

"You still have it?"

"The contact info? No, that was over 15 years ago. I don't camp anymore, much less raft. Why don't you try using the Internet? They have everything on there these days. I bet you could find a club that way."

"Thanks, Andreas," Jerry said, sticking out his hand.

Andreas took his hand and replied, "Not a problem." Then, as if looking at Jerry for the first time, he asked, "Why are you all wet?"

“There was water coming out of the lighting fixtures in the women’s bathroom,” he said. Andreas started to say something, but Jerry cut him off. “It’s a long story and I really do have to shower and eat.”

Andreas smiled and nodded. “Glad you weren’t arrested, although that would have made a great story. Are you documenting everything you are doing? You know, if the person in that urn is famous, like Jimmy Hoffa, you can make millions selling your story. I would —“

“Dinner’s getting cold,” Amy said from the door.

I love you, honey.

Andreas waved at her. Jerry grabbed his tools from the driveway and started heading for the door when he heard Andreas shuffle away. *Found someone else.* He was smiling and shaking his head as he entered the house.

Amy was sitting at the kitchen bar, facing him. Dinner was on a warming plate and the place settings were out.

Something’s up, Jerry thought. He tried to remember if this was a special day. “It smells wonderful.”

She smiled at him. “So what was that about?”

“Oh, he used to have a teardrop, knows a lot about them.”

“In reality, or an acting job?”

“In reality. And he told me about —“ Jerry’s phone rang, stopping him midsentence. He held it up, looked at the number, and his shoulders dropped.

“Gatherings,” he finished before answering. “Yeah ... yeah ... I could, but I really want to change first ... Yeah, I’m still wet ... How long? ... ‘K. Bye.”

Amy’s demeanor changed. She looked tired.

“I gotta go,” Jerry said. He looked at Amy and around the kitchen, then scowled at the floor. Had he taken the freeway home instead of the back roads, or had he come into the house instead of talking to Andreas, he would have had time to eat with his wife. He didn’t know how to tell her that she deserved better, that he wanted to spend time with her, so he took off his shirt and simply said, “Randy’s sick. I have the first half of his shift.”

She smiled sympathetically and said, “I’ll pack dinner for you.”

“Oh, I also have to work Saturday.”

As he headed down the hall to get a new shirt, he heard Amy packing up his dinner in the kitchen, much louder than normal. He knew he was going to have to be ready to do something special on Sunday.