

Ashes in a Teardrop

Chapter 11

“Do exactly as I say, or your husband Jerry dies,” the voice on Amy’s cell phone commanded.

She pulled it away from her ear, as if it were a snake about to strike. Amy double-checked the incoming ID to confirm it: the call came from Jerry’s phone.

“How’d you...what do you want?” she asked, returning the phone to her ear.

“First, make sure I’m not on speaker, and then tell me where you are,” the voice said.

“You’re not on speaker, and I’m at a cemetery.”

“Get to your car.”

“I’m already in my car.”

The voice sighed. “You’re sitting in your car at a cemetery? Weird.”

“I just got in, I was leaving. Who is this?” she asked warily.

“This is the guy who’s got a gun to your husband’s temple and would rather not have to spray bits of his brains all over your gaudy living room. Yellow and blue canvas sectional, really, what were you thinking?”

“He’s okay,” Amy sputtered, falling back into the driver’s seat. “Is he okay?”

“For now,” a pause. “Jerry, say ‘hello.’”

Amy listened carefully. There was a shuffling noise and then Jerry calling out, “Amy, don’t come home. Get—”

Amy heard sounds of a commotion and then Jerry crying out in pain.

The voice returned: “Sorry ‘bout that. I had to put three shots into your couch and press the heated barrel against Jerry’s neck. The steel gets extra-hot when a silencer’s

attached—burned him something fierce. Seems Jerry wanted to go all heroic on us.

Couldn't have that."

Amy choked back a sob. She blinked hard, trying to figure out her next move. "What do you want?" she gritted out.

"Hey, don't get all hotty-totty with me missy. I'm trying to get to that. Are you ready to listen?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, I figure you'll start working out a way to get help, if you haven't already. Of course, we can't have that. So, are you in your car?"

"Yes."

"Good. Put me on speaker so I know you aren't flagging anyone down or making some pointless attempt to call the police. You're going for a drive. By the way, if I hear anything suspicious, I shoot Jerry."

Amy sucked in a deep breath. "Where?"

"Well, I'll start with a knee or something, but if you screw around, I'll gut him."

"No, you monster, where do you want me to go?"

"Oh, of course. You're coming home to join us. Now, you keep talking to me the whole drive. What cemetery did you say you're at?"

"Acacia, off Scenic and Bowen," she said, turning on the car, muting the radio, and setting her cell phone close to her on the passenger's seat.

"Hmm, that's about five to ten minutes away, I imagine. I'll give you seven to get here. Try not to get pulled over."

It took all of Amy's concentration to put the car in drive and pull out onto Scenic Drive. "Tell me what you want. You don't need to hurt him."

“Oh, good topic of conversation for our little drive here,” the voice chuckled. “I was worried I’d have to make small talk about your wretched taste in floral patterns. Really, daisy embroidered pillows on paisley upholstery? Where do you even find paisley infested furniture anymore? Anyway, what do I want?”

The cell phone went quiet. Amy grabbed it; worried she had lost the signal. A car honked as she swerved into the oncoming lane. “Hello? Hello?” She yanked the wheel back and steadied her nerves.

“I said *don’t* get pulled over. Sounds like a sound effects CD out there. Anyway, my associate and I would like nothing more than to hitch up this damned teardrop camper and be outta here, but you and your Scooby-Doo husband had to empty the thing out.”

Amy scanned the packed parking lot at Save Mart. *All those people, if I could just let one of them know.* “We can put it all back, we didn’t know,” she said, returning her gaze to the road ahead.

“Well, that’s neither here nor there. You think I like hurting people? Ole Jerry here was locked up, didn’t say anything. Lucky for him, he got a text in the middle of our interrogation and my associate had the brilliant idea to call you.”

Amy took a deep breath and blinked hard, erasing the tears. She was close to home and would need all her wits. “Okay, so tell me what you’re looking for and I’ll give it to you.”

“Well...that’s the problem. I can’t say it straight out because then I’d be giving too much away. I’d rather find that middle ground where you tell me everything, and I figure out if you and Jerry here are useful enough to keep alive.”

“So what then? What do we do?” Amy asked, turning onto her street. A white unmarked sedan was parked in front.

“Well...ah, my associate tells me you’re pulling onto the street. I’ll let you know how

you can help once you're in here. Remember, don't you dare hang up. I don't want any funny tricks where you dial 911 and leave the line open. I've seen Matlock." The voice paused. "Besides, it looks like you've got company. Time to take me off speaker."

Amy did so and put the phone to her ear as she pulled into the driveway.

Andreas stood in his flip-flops and bathrobe, waiting for her on her front porch. The 68-year-old blocked her path to the front door.

Andreas didn't like what he saw. Amy was a harried mess, giving him a forced smile and a wave, as she stepped out of the car. Her keys jangled as she tried to set the auto-lock. It took several tries.

This didn't bode well with what Andreas had seen twenty minutes earlier: two guys arguing as they approached the Curtis' front door. About fifteen minutes later, he thought he had heard a yell from inside.

No one had answered the door when he knocked.

Andreas rubbed the bridge of his nose. Maybe he should've called the cops straight away, but he was warned about any more "conspiracy theories" or "wild-goose chases." His last fine for a false alarm from the MPD had shot past triple digits. Even his beloved Rose agreed with the officer that jail-time might be necessary after the next infraction. Actually, she had insisted that they take him away that afternoon.

He pictured the cops showing up and finding three guys watching some sports game. But now, Amy paced towards him as though she were concentrating on every step.

"No, he's our neighbor," she muttered into the phone, "he's fine. Please, yes, I'll handle it." She glanced up and beamed an eerily forced smile at him. "Hi, Andreas, what can I do for you?"

“Uh, just...wanted a cup of sugar,” he said. “Everything okay?”

“Sure, sure, everything’s fine.” She held her keys out to unlock the door, and then turned the doorknob, as if remembering it was already unlocked. “Sorry, we don’t have any sugar.” She kept the phone plastered to her ear.

“You don’t have any sugar?” Being well-versed in the thespian arts, Andreas recognized a poorly improvised line when he heard one.

“No, um, I know because we just ran out and I was supposed to pick some up. See you later, gotta go.” Amy shut the door in his face.

“No problem,” he yelled through the door. “You have a good day.” The hairs on Andreas’ neck stood up. After years of watching over the neighborhood, his day had come: He was needed.

But how to proceed?

Intel...he needed to gather intel.

Andreas summoned his teachings from the “Way of the Samurai”: *There is nothing more than the single purpose at the present moment.*

After taking a deep breath, he tiptoed—best he could in flip-flops—past the driveway and into the side-yard. He lifted the gate handle, crept in, and crouched down.

Nothing in the garage, laundry room, or kitchen.

Ooh, Jer’s a propane guy. I woulda taken him for a charcoal guy. Andreas examined the high-end Char-Broil grill, wondering why he’d never been invited to a backyard barbeque at the Curtis’.

Focus! Andreas admonished himself.

He heard muffled voices farther along; they were in the living room. The sliding glass door was shut, but the bay-window was cracked open—typical for this time of year. Every

shade was drawn, so he couldn't see anything.

Andreas' robe got caught on a rosebush thorn as he crawled toward the window. He tugged it loose, scraping his wrist in the process. Like a true samurai, he didn't make a peep—though the cut stung. He leaned in and his left thigh cramped. Again, he didn't make a peep as he winced, stretched his leg, and shook out the cramp.

I am a samurai.

With an ear just below the window screen, he listened.

"Show her the vid," someone said. "You should recognize the person I'm talking to: your pal Deputy Radcliff. It's a cell phone recording that I had Chuck here sneak, so you'll excuse the audio. However, if you listen carefully, you'll hear him talk about how he's been lying to you, how he figured the break-in would 'freak you out.'"

"You too Chuck?" Amy asked.

"Leave Chuck out of this," the stranger said. "The point is—I've got Deputy Radcliff, which means I've got the cops. These coincidences of yours—where you pop up everywhere at the wrong time—are starting to annoy me. I've got something to find and you're gonna help me find it."

Andreas nodded to himself: *Smart, not calling the fuzz.*

"How do we know you won't just kill us?" Jerry asked. At least, it sounded like Jerry.

Good question, Jer, Andreas thought.

"You don't," the stranger said matter-of-fact. "But I could shoot you in the kneecaps to make sure you help me."

"This is too much, Bob," A new voice said. *Chuck?* "This is steamrollin' outta control."

"First, shut the hell up, Chuck. Second, *shut the hell up.* And third, you are hired help, don't forget your place."

"I'm walking man," Chuck said. "I'm walking away."

"Don't move another inch," Bob said. "Forget about what Radcliff can do to you, think about this Glock for a second. Think about what it will do to you. You're a cowboy, I'm sure you've seen what a bullet does to a slab of meat."

"I won't go no farther with this," Chuck said.

"Fine."

Three quick muffled pops sounded, followed by a crash.

Amy screamed.

"Shut up! Shut up, or Jerry's next," Bob yelled. "Now, no more playing around."

Andreas couldn't agree more: *No more playing around*. He slinked away, got to the side gate, cinched up his robe, and prepared for action. *As the great Jim Morrison sayeth, "The time to hesitate is over."*

Jerry stared at the prone body. Chuck lay face down, his breathing shallow. Blood pooled at his abdomen. Jerry continued to pull at the duct-tape on his wrists and ankles.

"Get up," Bob ordered, lifting Jerry off the couch. "We're going to your garage and finish this blasted errand."

The little fat man was having trouble. Jerry considered rushing him, but the guy kept the gun locked on Amy. His fear had boiled to anger the moment Bob started pointing that damned pistol at her. First chance he got, he'd rip the guy's throat out.

A knock at the front door jolted all of them.

"Ignore it," Bob said as Jerry gingerly stood up and stepped away from the chair.

The knocking grew louder and more insistent.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Bob asked them both.

“No,” Amy said, her voice quivering.

Bob pressed the gun to Jerry’s temple.

“No,” Amy insisted.

Jerry leaned away from the gun and shook his head.

The knocking continued. “I really, really need to talk to you.” It was Andreas.

Bob sighed, “Get rid of him, now, now, now,” he ordered Amy.

Jerry watched as Amy went to the door, calculating his chances of spinning and slapping the gun away with his bound hands before it went off.

Bob had kept his finger firmly pressed against the trigger the entire time. *Six shots, Jerry remembered, three in the couch, three into Chuck, but how many does a Glock clip carry?*

“Andreas, what are you doing?” Amy asked as she backed into the living room.

Jerry’s jaw dropped at the image before him: Andreas—clad in his usual robe and flip-flops—walked into the room with a pistol drawn and pointed squarely at Bob.

Bob shifted so he was behind Jerry and aimed his gun at Andreas.

“Put down the Glock,” Andreas said. Wet dirt stains streaked his robe. At least Jerry hoped it was wet dirt.

Bob laughed, “Not what I expected. Anyway, why don’t you put the gun down?”

“Why don’t you?” Andreas asked in a measured tone.

Oh God, he’s playing a character, Jerry worried.

“Or no, how about we stand like this until someone fires? Or we stand like this all day? What do you say?”

Andreas’ face remained granite. “I say this, see how I’m holding my Smith and Wesson? I’ve got one hand on the grip, while my other hand wraps the first. My arms are

extended, my right arm straight and my left braced to stabilize my shot. Also, I noticed you shoot in three-shot increments. The couch is shot three times, as is that poor fella on the ground. Each shot is spread by at least twenty centimeters.”

Jerry wondered how Andreas saw any of this, since his eyes hadn't left Bob since walking in.

Andreas continued, “Three-shot increments shows a lack of ability or a lack of confidence. This Smith and Wesson will only need one shot, right where I'm pointing. Now, drop your gun.”

“Yeah,” Bob said snarkily, “but I've got a meat-shield.”

Jerry did the math: Amy was to Andreas' right. Bob's Glock was just inches from his head. If he could shove Bob's arm enough to waver his shot...

The wait was growing too tense. Something bad was going to happen, Jerry was certain. The only risk in shoving Bob's arm was that Andreas might miss his target and shoot Jerry instead.

Jerry's eyes fell on Amy. Her eyes were blurry and red, dried streaks stained her cheeks.

She glanced his way, beseechingly.

Jerry no longer cared if Andreas accidentally shot him, at least Amy would be safe.

He lunged for the gun, digging his teeth into Bob's wrist.

The Glock puffed out shots into the ceiling. Andreas dashed forward and shot Bob square in the face.

The sound was deafening. Jerry ears rang with a high-pitched whistle.

Bob grabbed Jerry, dragging him down.

“The gun!” Jerry yelled, realizing that both Bob's hands gripped him—they were

empty-no gun.

Tumbling backwards, Jerry saw Amy and Andreas searching the floor.

“Got it,” Amy yelled. Her voice sounded far and away. She shoved the gun into Andreas’ hand.

Bob kicked away and darted past everyone to the front door. He turned and glanced back as he pulled the door open; half his forehead was charred. Burnt ends of hair streaked the left side of his head.

Andreas stood with both guns. Amy ran to Jerry and hugged him hard. He felt her breath on his ear, but only heard soft mumbles.

He kissed her hard. After coming up for air, he pointed to his ear. “Muh, muh, muh...” He opened his jaw wide, trying to pop his ears.

She said something, but he could only read her lips. Something that ended with, “I love you.”

“Can’t hear too well,” he hollered. “But I love you too.”

Andreas shook his head and called out, “None of us will be able to hear for a bit.”

“What happened?” Amy asked. “I saw you shoot him in the face.”

“Blanks,” Andreas said with a shrug. “Stage gun. I stuffed some dirt in the barrel on my way over.” He yelled, using his hands to demonstrate what he meant.

“On your way over?” Jerry asked, some of his hearing started to return.

“Long story. Short version: I heard about the cops being in on it, ran home and got my gun. Er, fake gun.”

“That stuff about proper gun holding, or whatever you were saying?” Jerry asked.

“That was freakin’ awesome.” He winced, the sting from the burn on his neck returning.

“A little ‘Rumpole of the Bailey’ skit I was in at the West Side Theatre in Newman a

few years back. You see, we trained for authenticity because—”

“Uh, sorry to interrupt you two, but we’ve got a person bleeding to death here,” Amy shouted, grabbing towels from the kitchen and rushing to Chuck’s side.