

Ashes in a Teardrop

Chapter 5

Amy sighed as she watched her husband's car back out of the driveway. Getting angry with Jerry would serve no purpose. "Stupid Randy," she muttered under her breath, feeling slightly guilty for her uncharitable thoughts as she wiped down the counter. It wasn't his fault either, but there was no one here to judge her.

She took her frustrations out on the kitchen and found that in her snit she worked much more efficiently than usual. Still, she was in a bad mood and had more time on her hands than desired. She was too wound up for TV and any thought of the diary held no appeal — Amy wanted to improve her frame of mind and the tragedy hinted at within its pages certainly wouldn't accomplish that. Besides, staring at it wouldn't make the broken sentences and smudged words legible enough to finish their sad tale.

Amy wandered into the living room, thinking of the diary with a flash of clarity. It had been deliberately concealed, she decided. Why else would it have been in such an inconvenient location? But who had hidden it? Ms. T.O. seemed to have been in a healthy relationship that would require no such deceit, so it didn't seem like it could have been her. Although maybe she had put it there in an attempt to hide the unhappy memories housed between its pages.

Reading the diary had placed Amy in the shoes of a woman who had lost a baby. Although the decipherable details were sketchy on whether the child belonged to Ms. T.O., somehow Amy thought it had. Several questions had been dancing through her head since the discovery of the yellowed pages beneath the bed, but they were taking on an uncomfortable urgency. *Who was the woman who had unintentionally let Amy into her life? Why were there ashes in a teardrop trailer, of all places? Were they her remains? Was she even connected to the urn?*

With a new resolve, Amy retrieved her cell from her purse and called the third number on speed dial.

"Hey Tracy, how would you like to help me ditch my diet tonight and go out for a couple of drinks? I know it's late notice ... You're in your pajamas already? Oh come on,

we're not that old yet! Let's be a little spontaneous while we still can!" She listened for a moment. "No, nothing's wrong. Yes, he got called into work tonight ... No, Jerry and I aren't fighting about his overtime." She let out a huff of exasperation. "Oh, for crying out loud, are you going to go or not? Great! I'll pick you up in half an hour. An hour? We're both married, no one's going to look at us anyway, why waste all that time?" She sighed. "Fine, an hour, but you'd better be ready when I get there."

* * *

"The H B?" Tracy asked skeptically as Amy searched for parking.

"It appears to be a popular place."

"The H B???" Tracy repeated.

"It's not the 'H B,' " Amy said, showing off her newly acquired knowledge, courtesy of Jerry. "You pronounce the 'bar.' Get it? It's a bar, the 'H - Bar - B.'"

Tracy looked unimpressed and Amy shrugged. "Maybe you have to be from Oakdale to appreciate it."

Its simple brick exterior could have been there from the town's early days. It sported only a few upgrades, including a neon sign stating the bar's name in bright orange. The watering hole was in the middle of Oakdale on a corner of Highway 108 where the limited parking could spill onto a side street.

"Doesn't look like much," Tracy said as Amy parked.

"It's supposed to be an authentic cowboy bar," Amy said.

"Where are the horses?"

"There's one right there." Amy smirked as she gestured across the street to a life-size metal statue of a man riding a bucking horse. "Just go inside and try to have some fun!" she admonished her friend.

"Fine, but when you asked if I wanted to go out, I envisioned more of a ladies' night. You know, margaritas, karaoke, a late call for a ride home since neither one of us could drive?"

Amy opened the door to the sound of an angry woman crooning about her plans for vengeance against a background of drums and steel guitars. She peered doubtfully into the dim interior. "I don't think we'll find karaoke here but I'm pretty sure you can find

margaritas. We'll see what we can do about needing a ride home later, OK?"

Tracy snorted and followed her friend into the building.

"Oh my," Amy said.

"No kidding," Tracy agreed. Every wall held multiple trophies, the kind that used to breathe.

"This reminds me of a horror movie, one where all the animals come to life and take their revenge on the hunters," Amy said out of the corner of her mouth.

Tracy snickered. "Holy crap, I can't believe this place is here. It's like stepping through a portal from California straight to Texas! Where are all these cowboys from?"

"Presumably from Oakdale," Amy answered drily. "This is 'The Cowboy Capital of the World.' "

Tracy's observation was valid, Amy thought as they made their way to the bar. Not everyone was wearing cowboy boots and Stetsons, but at least half were. All the seats were taken, so the women stood behind those fortunate enough to have secured a stool. Waiting patiently for the bartender's attention, they continued to take in the scene, avoiding the glassy gaze of anything hanging from the wall.

Amy caught the eye of an older gentleman dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. Her gaze dropped involuntarily to his feet, which were tucked beneath his bar stool. Ah, he had boots on. "You're one of the lucky ones," she commented with a smile, gesturing at his stool.

"You've got to either get here early or have the luck of the Irish to get a seat at the bar here," the man responded with a grin. "Fortunately, I have both. I'd offer you my seat, but as there are two of you I'm not sure how helpful that would be."

"Oh, don't worry about it. We're more interested in taking in the sights, anyway."

"We are?" Tracy chimed in.

"Yes, we are," Amy answered with a pointed look at her friend.

"Oh right, yes we are!" Tracy said, suddenly recalling the reason behind their visit. "Do you remember a brand around here with double Rs?"

"Not off the top of my head," the man said slowly, "but I've been coming here for so long that I rarely notice the decor anymore. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, we're just curious," Amy said with a nonchalance she didn't feel. She shot an

annoyed look at her friend, silently chastising her for the less-than-subtle approach. “I saw the brand somewhere recently and my husband thought he remembered it from here.”

“OK. Well, let’s see what we can find.”

“Oh no, thank you for the offer, but we don’t want to disturb you.”

“Sure we do,” Tracy interrupted with a wink. “If he’s a regular, he can probably find it faster than we can, and then we can relax and have our margaritas. My name’s Tracy, by the way, and this crazy lady is my friend Amy.”

“Pleased to meet you, ladies. I’m Chuck,” he said, offering his hand. “Let’s get you started on those margaritas while we look.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Tracy said. “You only get so many nights out once you have kids — why squander a perfectly good one?”

“You didn’t even want to come out tonight!” Amy protested indignantly.

“What can I say? You’re very persuasive.”

At a gesture from Chuck, the bartender, also in jeans and a T-shirt, approached. “Just in case you don’t know, we only take cash here,” she said with a smile after taking their orders.

“Thanks for the warning,” Amy answered. She turned to Tracy once the bartender had gone and said, “Driving home won’t be a problem. I only have around 20 bucks on me!”

“Me, too!”

It was suddenly quiet as the song ended. Amy expected the twang of country to take its place and was surprised to hear Guns N’ Roses instead. “Quite an eclectic selection of music,” she observed to no one in particular.

“It fits us,” Chuck said with a shrug.

“I can see that,” Amy said, looking around. The bar was full of people in plaid and boots, T-shirts and tennis shoes, but some sported suits and loafers, dresses and heels. They all appeared to be having fun.

Their drinks arrived and Tracy took a sip. “Excellent,” she said to the bartender. The woman, in her 30s and clearly in charge, smiled as if to say, “Of course it is. I made it.”

“Alright,” Chuck said, slapping the bar and rising from his stool. “Let’s go find this brand.”

“I doubt my husband would have made it too far from the bar, but I haven’t seen anything yet. What about by the restroom?” Axl Rose’s caterwauling in the background gave Amy an idea. “Or the jukebox?” Unfortunately, neither area had the brand and as the bar got more crowded it became increasingly difficult to examine the walls. It wasn’t until Amy and Tracy were nursing their second drinks that Chuck finally found the brand near the exit.

“That’s it!” Amy cried out in excitement as they stared at the wall. She was impressed that Jerry had noticed, much less remembered, it. The brand was nearly hidden by a diner who seemed unnerved by their stares.

“Great,” Tracy said. “We’ve seen it. What now?”

“Oh. That’s a good question. Um, Chuck, do you have any idea where we might find the origin of this brand?”

“Well, you could ask the owner of the bar, or maybe some old timers.”

Amy and Tracy switched their attention from the brand to him, to the apparent relief of the diner and his companion.

“Yes,” Chuck said, his blue eyes twinkling, “there are occasionally people here who surpass me in age.”

“Of course there are,” Amy assured him. “You’re only, what, in your 50s?”

Chuck snorted. “I was in my 50s a decade ago, and I look like it. That brand isn’t one I’m familiar with, but I’m not a rancher. Let’s see if we can find someone who is.”

Unfortunately, the owner of the bar was out and, according to the bartender, the ranchers all had gone home. “They tend to keep early hours,” she explained. “What’s this about, anyway?”

“My husband and I found an urn with this symbol pressed into the wax,” Amy said. “We’re just trying to find who it belongs to.”

“Huh. Is that the urn they found in a storage shed in Modesto?”

“No, according to the paper, they know who those ashes belong to, they just can’t find anyone who wants them.”

“How sad is that?” Tracy asked.

“I know, right? Anyhow, the Sheriff’s Department has the urn, but we thought we might be able to find out something on our own.”

“Won’t the coroner be able to identify the remains?” Chuck asked.

“Probably,” Amy said, “but it’s not like they’re going to share that information with us.”

The bartender looked at them for a moment. Amy could tell she wanted more information but was too good at her job to pry.

“Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t help you. You want anything else to drink?” The trio declined and she went to attend to other customers.

Chuck leaned against the bar. “So where did you find the urn?”

“In a trailer we found in the river,” Amy said, then filled him in.

“I don’t know if it’ll do any good, but if you like, you can leave your number with me,” he said. “If anyone recognizes the brand, I’ll let you know.”

“That would be really nice, but I don’t want to put you out any more than I already have,” Amy said.

“Don’t mention it. All we do here is sit around shooting the breeze; this will give us something interesting to talk about for a change.”

Amy smiled. “Well, thank you, Chuck. I really appreciate it.”

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An hour later, Amy thanked her friend as she dropped her off. “It was actually kind of fun,” Tracy said as she got out of the car. “We just need to take more cash with us next time.”

“Next time?” Amy teased.

“Sure, why not? The drinks were good and I liked Chuck.”

Amy waited until Tracy was inside before driving off. At home, she was greeted by an empty house instead of her husband, who should have been there. “Stupid Randy,” she said as she crawled into bed. Despite her irritation, she drifted quickly into a sleep full of crying babies, dusty books and restless figures wearing cowboy hats.

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Amy's strategy for unwinding after work involved loud music and singing at the top of her lungs with the car windows rolled down. The following Monday it worked well, although it did make hearing her cell phone problematic. Fortunately, Jerry was used to having to call her multiple times before getting a response. He finally caught her during a lull between songs and got straight to the point.

"Amy, the strangest thing just happened. Some guy just called saying that the trailer was his."

"Really? How on earth did he hear about it?"

"He said he read about it in a sheriff's report and then got our number from them."

"Huh, so that deputy filed a report after all, even though he gave us grief for contacting them."

"Well no, he didn't, but I'll get to that in a minute. This guy, Bob, couldn't tell me anything specific about the trailer. He claimed it belonged to his uncle, but he certainly didn't mind throwing him under the bus, so to speak. Bob claims that his uncle was an alcoholic, got drunk one night, and through some mishap the trailer rolled into the river."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope, although I'm pretty sure Bob is full of crap. I called Radcliff — the deputy who took the urn, remember? — to complain about them giving out our number. He denied it and assured me that no one else at the department had, either. And here's the kicker: Radcliff never filed a report. He said it wasn't worth their resources."

"But what about the urn? Didn't he file a report on that?"

"He did, but only someone who was already looking for it would find it. It's not like they posted it on Modbee or something."

"So this guy knows about the trailer, but we don't know how. He didn't mention anything about the urn?"

"Not a word and I didn't want to ask any leading questions."

"Right."

There was a lull in the conversation as both of them chased down their thoughts. Amy spoke first. "OK, here's what I think. There's no law that says we have to hand over the trailer to any yahoo who says it's his. He should be able to show us proof and if he can't, then we should keep it."

She continued, feeling the need to justify keeping something that wasn't really theirs. "This guy already lied about how he found out about the trailer, he could be lying about owning it, too. Hey, did he say why his uncle isn't claiming it?"

"No, he didn't. I just assumed he's dead, but even if he is, who's to say the nephew was the one who inherited his stuff?"

"Exactly, and what's more," Amy said, "I'm not sure I believe this story about Mr. T.O. being a drunk. That place was spotless; everything was neatly stored. That trailer was well taken care of, even loved, if Andreas is right about all of the upgrades. I don't think that trailer ended up in the river through any misdeeds of Mr. T.O. And another thing, there was no mention in the diary of problems with alcohol."

"Agreed," Jerry said, although he felt there were a few holes in her logic, the most glaring being her assumption that alcoholics didn't take care of their belongings. He also questioned the validity of relying on a diary that may or may not have belonged to the trailer's owners. However, valid reasons or not, his gut instinct was that "Bob," if indeed that was his name, had no right to the trailer.