

Ashes in a Teardrop

Chapter 6

The sun slipped into the room, forcing its way under the lids of a very tired Jerry. He clenched his eyes shut, protesting the inevitable announcement of morning. His effort was in vain, though. The bright beams were unrelenting. Jerry's eyes snapped open, bloodshot from a night of late work and bad sleep.

"Did you want coffee?" Jerry asked Amy with a yawn, shuffling past her in the kitchen.

"I did want coffee, that's why I made it." Amy scooted an empty mug across the counter. "You can refill mine, though."

Jerry welcomed Amy's sarcasm as a return to normalcy after a full week of added shifts and missed meals.

"So, I've made a list," Amy began. Her enthusiasm struck a chord of dread in Jerry—her lists usually meant chores.

"A list of what?" he asked, feigning interest.

"A list of places we can go today to research the wax embossing on the urn." Amy's zeal in finding the owners had reached new heights since the urn's return.

"OK, and here's my counter: We don't research and we hang out and watch movies all day, maybe order a pizza." Jerry's grin met Amy's raised eyebrows and he knew he was going to lose.

"OK, and here's *my* counter: We go research at the library because you have missed every dinner this week."

"Good compromise," he said in a teasing tone. "Let me go take a shower then we can go."

Jerry took his time getting ready, hoping the delay would make Amy change her mind. Instead she waited, staunch in her plan to be productive on his first day off. At first Jerry had been excited to hear from the coroner's office earlier that week:

"Is this Jerry Curtis?"

"Yes."

“This is Deputy Coroner Jonathan Scott. I am following up on the ashes that were brought in. You and your wife are listed as our point of contact,” he paused for a response but received none. “We ran a toxicology analysis that proved negative for any illicit substances and there is no DNA match to any of our missing person listings. Since we don’t have the resources to run a more extensive autopsy on cremated remains, we are delivering them to the funeral home. If you and your wife want to take responsibility, you may come by the office and fill out papers and legally have the remains released to your care.”

“That’s excellent,” Jerry blurted out in spite of the somber circumstances.

“That’s one word for it,” Scott replied in a clipped tone. “This also makes you accountable for the \$175 transportation fee.”

“That’s fine,” Jerry said. He felt blessed by the county’s lack of funding until Amy, with her endless supply of energy, latched on to the mystery.

“Are you ready?” she asked, snapping Jerry back to the present.

“I guess so,” he said with a sigh.

Giant pillars surrounded the downtown library like diligent warriors protecting a Greek palace. The white façade did little to disguise years of wear and tear.

Jerry and Amy walked past the two sets of automatic doors and into the belly of the information beast. Amy felt confident that here their questions would be answered. Jerry did not share his wife’s certainty, but knew his feelings were inconsequential at this moment. This was his penance for bailing on her all week.

“So, where should we start?” Amy asked with a grin.

“I don’t know; you have the list. Besides, who goes to libraries any more, anyway?”

“Smart people go to libraries,” Amy snapped.

She approached the reference desk, newly hushed husband in tow. “Hi, I was wondering if you could help us. I don’t really know where to start, but my husband and I are looking for some information on this symbol,” Amy said, showing the reference librarian a crude drawing.

He eyed the symbol for a while, mulling over where to send them.

“Well, if you think it might be a local symbol, I can direct you back to the Special Collections room. It has information about local history and things like that. Or, if you don’t think that’s the case, there’s always our reference section.”

“The Special Collections room sounds perfect. Thank you,” Amy smiled her appreciation and went off to dredge through decades of local history.

The scavenger hunt for clues about a mysterious symbol on the urn did not turn out to be as easy as Amy had assumed it would be. They had investigated the racks and pulled all the books that seemed like they might be helpful. The volumes seemed endless—as soon as Amy ruled out one, Jerry gave her another from the pile.

“Why does Modesto have so much history?” Amy lamented.

“Better question, how is it all so well documented?”

“Yeah, it’s well preserved but doesn’t answer anything.”

“We still have a lot more books to go through. We’ll find something.” Jerry’s optimism threw Amy off.

“Look at you enjoying my idea. What a shock.”

“Look at you enjoying being right. What a shock.”

The tower of books began to take on an ominous feel.

“How are we going to get through all these?” Amy asked.

“Don’t worry. This book looks like a winner,” Jerry said, pulling a random encyclopedia from the middle of the stack like a Jenga block. The tower swayed, but remained in place. Amy plucked a history in photographs from the top and they both went back to perusing the pages.

“Holy...Amy, you won’t believe it.”

“Shut up.”

“No, seriously,” Jerry said, pointing at a picture of two men holding an urn and looking solemn, the way everyone looked in the late 19th century. Even in black and white, the photo clearly was of “their” urn.

“What does it say about it?” Amy pressed.

“I haven’t gotten to it yet. I just saw the picture.”

“Should we make a copy of it?”

“Yeah, probably,” Jerry answered. “Do you have 10 cents?”

Amy was fishing around in her wallet when her phone started ringing. She didn't recognize the phone number but answered anyway.

"Hello, is this Amy?"

"This is she. Who is this?"

"This is Chuck. We met at the bar in Oakdale the other week."

"Oh, Chuck, yes, hi!"

"Hi, I was just calling to say I talked to the owner and he didn't have a whole lot of information about the symbol."

"Oh, really? Man, I had hoped for a better outcome with that. We are actually at the library right now researching it."

"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt—" Amy cut Chuck off before he could offer to call back another time.

"Don't be silly. I appreciate you calling me at all. We are going to leave here soon, anyway, now that we've found something."

"Oh, you did? Anything interesting?"

"Potentially. We kind of just stumbled onto a picture, but haven't examined it yet. Why don't you come over for dinner tonight and look with us?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't want to put you out."

"It's no trouble. It'll be my way of saying thanks for snooping around for us. We'll see you tonight at 6." Amy rattled off her address to Chuck and hung up. Jerry eyed her, waiting to be let in on whatever plans she had just made for them.

"So, I take it someone is coming over for dinner tonight," Jerry said after Amy didn't meet his gaze.

"Chuck, that guy I told you I met at the bar, he called to say he asked the owner of the bar and it's a dead end."

"Oh, then why did you invite him to dinner?"

"He's lived around here a lot longer than we have. I thought he might be helpful in putting some of the pieces together."

Jerry nodded and went off to look for the copy machine.

* * *

Amy pretended not to notice how late Chuck was. She dismissed his apologies with a wave of her hand, saying it was no big deal.

“I appreciate you two having me over for dinner.”

“We appreciate you coming,” Amy said as she walked to the kitchen to put dinner on the table.

The small talk continued for longer than anyone wanted. Jerry finally ended the awkward weather-and-weekend-plans conversation by pulling out a collection of photocopied sheets.

“This is what we managed to gather at the library,” he said.

“Yes, let’s get to it,” Chuck said, his excitement contagious. Amy stopped eating and looked at the papers Jerry had fanned onto the table. They each picked one to read and were absorbed instantly. They read and reread the articles, trying to tease out some clue that might have been overlooked.

“This is all so interesting,” Chuck said, breaking the silence. “May I see the urn?”

“Oh yeah, we just got it back today,” Jerry said enthusiastically, hopping up to get it.

He carried it into the dining room, gripping it tight. His fingertips had turned white and he was taking slow, calculated steps as if he were walking down the aisle at a wedding. His concentration showed in the creases on his forehead.

“Wow, that’s beautiful,” Chuck said, admiring the urn as Jerry rotated it to show him the intricate designs and different angles.

Amy looked up from a piece of paper and yelled, “Here!” Jerry and Chuck’s attention was ripped away from the antique.

“It says the urn is made with real ivory, amethyst and pearl and that it was created for William Chapman Ralston’s ashes after his untimely death.”

“Who is William Chapman Ralston?” Jerry asked sheepishly.

“Modesto’s namesake, sort of,” Chuck answered. “They were going to use his last name, but he asked them not to, thus proving his modesty, which is what Modesto means in Spanish.”

“However,” Amy said, calling the attention back to her findings. “However, the urn was stolen before it could be used. It was valued at \$400 in 1870 and is estimated that today it is worth 30 times that amount!”

“Thirty times? Geez. This is one helluvan urn.” Chuck said, his eyes wide.

“Yeah, and this book isn’t even current. It was written back in the 1970s or something. It has to be worth even more now.” Amy’s palpable glee made Jerry laugh.

“Maybe that’s why that guy called us, claiming to be an heir to it,” he said.

“What guy?” Chuck asked, concern in his voice.

“Oh, just some guy. He called me to say he found our information from the Sheriff’s Department and that the trailer and urn belonged to him,” Jerry answered nonchalantly.

“That doesn’t sound good. If this urn is as valuable as this book says, you should be extra careful. Do you want me to take it for you? I have a really secure safe in my house.”

“No, I think it’s OK. I’ve got a pretty good hiding place here,” Jerry said. He tried to sound reassuring, but a note of insecurity crept in.

“OK, if you’re sure.”

“Yeah, thanks for offering, though.”

“No problem.” Chuck glanced at his watch. “Nine o’clock already?”

“Oh, wow, I didn’t realize it was that late,” Amy said.

“I guess we were just having too good of a time. How about I take you guys out for some dessert? I’ve had a hankering for ice cream ever since I got into town. It’s the least I can do after the wonderful dinner,” Chuck said, his earnest tone winning Amy over.

“Sure. The Ice Cream Company is just down the way. Jerry?”

“Yeah, that sounds good. You two go over in Chuck’s car. I’m going to lock up.” Jerry tidied up his photocopies then locked both locks. As he started down the walkway, Jerry felt a heaviness in the air, making him uncomfortable. His eyes darted around, but he saw nothing. He even walked back to double check that he had locked the door before getting into his car.

Amy and Chuck already had ordered by the time he arrived. They sat patiently awaiting their treats, trying to avoid talking about the urn and symbol. But they ended up there regardless. It was like moths to a flame—they couldn’t help but let themselves be

pulled back into discussing all the details of the trailer and the urn and speculating about who could be inside.

“But who could have just taken it?” Amy would ask.

“I don’t know,” the men would respond.

Chuck appeared to be as clueless as they were, but enjoyed playing detective. The three ate their ice cream pensively, contemplating possible answers between breaks in the conversation.

“And how did it wind up in a *trailer*?” Amy would ask, new question at the ready.

“I don’t know,” Jerry or Chuck would respond, again.

The ice cream session went on like this until they neared the last spoonfuls. Chuck went to pay while Amy and Jerry collected their phones and their thoughts.

“Well, I had a great time,” Chuck said warmly as they walked out.

“Yeah, thanks so much for the help. It’s always good to have another head in the mix,” Amy said.

“Well I don’t know how much good my head will be, but I’m always happy to help,” Chuck said, waving goodbye. He got into his truck and turned toward Oakdale.

“He seems really nice,” Jerry said on the drive home.

“Yeah. I like him.”

They were quiet as they drove, enjoying the warm night. The house looked welcoming as Jerry pulled into the driveway. Amy waltzed up the walk.

“Did you not lock the door?” she called to Jerry, who was coming up behind her.

“What? Yes I did. I locked both locks. I even double checked.”

“Why is it ajar, then?”

Alarm flashed across both of their faces. Jerry barked at Amy to stay outside and call the police, then tiptoed into the foyer. Paper littered the floor, drawers had been pulled out and ripped through. Jerry followed the trail to the garage, his panic rising. He scrambled for the door and tore it open. There she sat, their little teardrop trailer, just as dinged up as she had been. He felt relief, followed quickly by fear that whoever wanted that urn now knew where they lived.

“Jerry?” Amy yelled from the front porch.

“I’m in the garage,” he said. “It’s OK. You can come in.”

Amy stepped delicately through the debris field their house had become. She peered into drawers to see if anything had been taken. All seemed to be in order.

“Is the trailer OK?” Amy asked in a squeaky voice.

“Yeah.”

“What about the urn?”

“The urn is fine,” Jerry answered. “After you two left, I decided to put it in the trunk of the car. Chuck kind of spooked me on it being dangerous here.”

Amy exhaled and then looked around. “The cops said they’d be here shortly to take a report.”

“OK.”

“Maybe we should call Chuck and let him know what happened,” Amy suggested.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.” Jerry was rattled, Amy could tell, from his voice.

She stepped out of the garage to make the phone call and was back before Jerry noticed she’d left. “He didn’t seem surprised—especially now that we know how valuable the urn is. He offered to come back and pick it up, but I told him not tonight. Too many things are going on.”

Jerry nodded his head absently as Amy rubbed his arm, trying to soothe him. “Yeah,” he murmured. The couple stood awkwardly, waiting for the police to arrive.

Chuck looked at the phone after hanging up with Amy. His fingers punched out a number.

“Hey Bob, it’s Chuck. The urn is close.” There was a pause on the other end.

“Thanks for that,” a man hissed. He hung up the phone and set it on the diner counter in front of him.

“Miss, may I have my check please?” the man asked, beckoning coolly to the waitress. He held up his card before she could even set the bill down.

When she returned, she laid the card and receipts on the counter. “Thank you, Robert. We look forward to seeing you again.”

The man walked out the door, leaving his signed bill behind him — R.R., with the Rs mirroring each other.