

Ashes in a Teardrop
Chapter 7

Amy lay in bed flat on her back, one arm wrapped around her head. She twirled her hair between her fingers. She hadn't felt settled since giving the officer her account of what had happened.

The full moon lighted her bedroom enough that she could see all the details in her bedroom ceiling, every speck of dirt and cobweb staring back at her. She inhaled deeply, trying to calm herself. She closed her eyes, hoping as she exhaled that her worry would go out with her breath.

No such luck. Amy's eyes whipped open. Her clock threatened her with its 2:47 a.m. reading. In less than four hours she had to start getting ready for her day. She began to shake her foot under the sheets. Something wasn't right. She inhaled again, this time forcing her hands and feet to stop moving. As she exhaled, her body slowly restarted its anxious movements. Jerry shifted next to her. She did not want to wake her husband. An overworked and under-rested Jerry was the last thing she wanted.

The break-in had been traumatic; the police had taken statements from both of them.

Apparently no one in the neighborhood had seen anything suspicious. Jerry didn't believe it. He was convinced they had some of the nosiest neighbors around. They all conveniently took the night off from snooping when something finally did happen on their street?

Images of the mess came flooding back to Amy. Copies of the photos they had found at the library were scattered all over the floor, silverware spilled out around her kitchen. Cabinet doors were open. Nothing was missing, just rifled through.

Even though Amy had declined Chuck's offer to turn around and get the urn, he'd still returned to their house when she told him what had happened. Amy initially thought it was kind of him, but now it was just another worry. Chuck hadn't been too willing to help when the police were there. He'd arrived shortly after the responding officer and Amy noticed that he'd waited in his car for some time before walking up to the house. When the police had asked to speak with him, he'd seemed hesitant. He had told them he'd seen and heard nothing.

Once the police were gone, Chuck offered again to take the urn for safekeeping. When Amy and Jerry declined, he grunted his displeasure and left abruptly. Amy thought he'd acted rude but Jerry didn't seem to notice anything odd about Chuck's behavior.

She was troubled by her thoughts. She wanted to silence her mind but couldn't. *Some stranger calls, claiming he is the owner of the trailer. What was his name? Bob? The deputy never wrote a report so how could this Bob person have found out we have the trailer? Maybe Mario and Tracy talked about it? Maybe someone from the bar overheard us talking to Chuck? It is pretty convenient timing... but is it just coincidental? I can't believe the urn is worth so much. Someone must definitely be searching for it. Chuck was there when we found out the value of the urn. Then shortly after that the house is broken into. What's Chuck's story? Who is he? Why is he so interested in helping? Should we have trusted him? How does he know so much about this town's history? Or, maybe, WHY does he know so much? If it was about the urn, then will whoever wants it be back for it? Does Ralston have any family or something to do with the urn? Maybe this Ralston is one of the Rs on the imprint. I need to learn more about him. I think there was a picture of him at the Velvet Grill. I wonder if there is something similar at the library or maybe the McHenry Museum. Or maybe Ralston Tower? And I don't recall seeing anything related to "Ralston" in the trailer. Maybe there is a long-lost family member searching for this urn. Maybe the urn was stolen to begin with. The photo was from 1870; 127 years later the urn goes missing and we just happen to find it in a teardrop trailer? I wonder if Jerry is still planning on going to one of those "gatherings." Maybe there's a connection to Ralston and the McHenrys that isn't well known. Maybe the couple was a pair of drifters. Maybe Mr. and Mrs. T.O. stole the urn? Maybe they...*

"AMY!" She jerked the sheets close to her body. "What is wrong with you?" asked Jerry. "You're shaking the whole bed."

She sighed. "I just don't like it, Jerry. I don't like knowing that someone was in our home — broke into our home," Amy's hands clenched into fists on the sheets.

"I know, but the urn is safe now," Jerry said.

"Right. But whoever broke in doesn't know that. What if they come back? I've been home alone a lot lately, Jerry."

Now it was his turn to sigh. "I know dear. I'm sorry. Hopefully it won't be for much longer."

"That's not the issue now." Amy paused. "Do you think we did the right thing by keeping the urn?"

"I do," Jerry said. "Why? Are you worried?"

"I don't know if I am worried. I'm feeling unsettled. I just don't know if the urn is safe here."

The couple lay in silence for a moment.

"I think it's OK to feel unsettled after a break-in," Jerry said, in hopes of comforting Amy.

"I think I'm going to go back to the library after work tomorrow," she said, dismissing his effort.

"OK, do you want me to come with you?"

Amy didn't answer right away. "No, I can go on my own. Maybe I'll call Tracy to see if she can come."

"Good." Jerry kissed her on the cheek. "Now, get some rest." He rolled over and went back to sleep.

In the morning, Amy struggled to get out of bed. Her mind never had quieted enough for her to fully rest. Jerry suggested she call in sick, but she refused. She didn't want to use any sick time unnecessarily these days.

Her mind wandered back to the diary as she shuffled through getting ready for the day. It had been awhile since she'd looked through it. She decided she needed to take the diary and the notes she and Tracy had made with her to the library. Maybe she could cross-reference any information she might stumble upon.

Amy called Tracy, hoping she'd be free to join her at the last minute. While the phone rang, she opened the cabinet and reached for the diary.

"Hello?"

"Tracy. It's Amy. Do you want to---" Amy stopped midsentence.

"Do I want to what? And good morning to you, too," Tracy answered. But Amy was too busy shuffling through the cabinet for her friend's subtle jab to register.

"Amy?" All Tracy could hear was the sound of rummaging.

“Oh. My. Gosh. Where is it?” The distress in Amy’s voice was clear.

“Amy?” Tracy tried again, but she didn’t respond.

She began pulling out the contents of the cabinet and throwing them on the floor. Towels landed in bunched piles of white and teal. Boxes of batteries fell to the ground, a flashlight, sheets and blankets following.

“Amy?” Tracy said a third time. “Where’s what?”

Still nothing but little sounds of panic coming from the other end.

“Amy! Are you OK?” Tracy was getting worried.

“No. I’m not OK.” Amy finally answered. “It’s gone.”

“What’s gone?” Tracy asked.

“AMY!” Tracy shouted into the phone, startling little Bianca, who was playing nearby. “Amy? Answer me. You’re really freaking me out.”

“The diary.” It was all Amy could say.

“The diary? The diary from the trailer?”

“Mmhmm.”

“When’s the last time you saw it?” Tracy asked. “Maybe Jerry moved it and forgot to tell you.”

“I don’t remember,” she said. Amy looked at all of the stuff scattered on the ground around her and suddenly images of their ransacked house from the night before rushed into her mind. She sank to the floor.

Tracy didn’t understand why Amy felt so panicked over the diary, but she knew her friend needed comfort.

“Amy?” she said softly. “Maybe you shouldn’t go in to work today.”

Her friend took a deep breath before responding. “You’re right.”

“Do you want to talk about what’s going on?”

“Yes.”

“I’m packing up Bianca and we are coming over.”

“OK, start from the beginning. Tell me everything that has happened.” Tracy set a mug of hot tea in front of Amy. Bianca was occupying herself with the toys her mom had brought along. Amy told Tracy about the teardrop trailer gatherings and the discoveries at the library. She detailed the encounters with Chuck. She didn’t spare Tracy any details of the break-in or of her restless night.

Tracy did not interrupt her friend. She let her say all she needed to.

“Who would have thought this trailer would end up being so much trouble?” she asked once Amy had finished her story.

“I know. The last 24 hours have been crazy stressful,” Amy said, sipping her tea. “I was thinking I would head to the library later to do some research on Ralston.”

“That sounds like a good start,” Tracy said, tapping the side of her mug. “Do you think Chuck’s on the up and up?”

“I hope so.” Amy paused. “Do you think he isn’t?”

“I don’t know. How important is the urn to you and Jerry?”

“I’d like to try and return it to whoever it belongs to. I mean, wasn’t that the whole point of us going to that bar? And Jerry and me going to the library?”

“Well, yeah,” Tracy said. “But what’s the likelihood you will actually find out who the urn rightfully belongs to?”

Amy sat quietly for a moment. “Tracy, how long have you lived in Modesto?”

“My parents moved here in the ‘70s.”

“Mine did, too. I remember my mother was slightly disappointed she never got to experience the ‘original’ library. She always loved that building.”

“Oh, what’s now the McHenry Museum,” Tracy said.

“Right. Do you think the McHenrys and Ralston have anything to do with each other? Do you think their paths ever crossed?”

“I don’t know. I’m not too knowledgeable on Modesto history,” Tracy said. “I do have a friend who is a docent at the museum. She might be helpful. I can give her a call to see when she’ll be there again.”

“That’s a great idea, Tracy. Thank you.”

"I wonder if Mr. & Mrs. T.O stole the urn. Or maybe there was a big family feud decades ago that put the urn in their hands."

"You know, I was thinking the same thing!" Amy's demeanor was more relaxed now that she had shared her worries with Tracy. "The initials are RR on the urn. I don't remember reading anything about a person in the diary whose last name is Ralston or even with R as a last initial."

"No, I don't remember seeing any of that either. But she talked about a Robert, didn't she?" Tracy turned to see if Bianca was still engrossed in her toys. Satisfied, she looked back at her friend. "I don't come across too many little boys named Robert in school."

Tracy spun her mug in small circles. "Where did you get the name Ralston, anyway?"

"From Chuck," Amy said. "The diary is from 1997? If he were a 40-something-year-old man...he would have been born in the late '40's or '50's. Robert was fairly common then, right?" Amy looked to Tracy for confirmation.

Tracy thought for a moment. "I suppose. Isn't Robert the name of *the* McHenry?"

"I believe so, but I'm pretty sure there's no way this could be the same guy. That Robert lived over a century ago," Amy said.

"So did Ralston, if I remember correctly. I wonder if he had any children."

Amy got up to grab something to write with and a notepad. "We should write these questions down. That way we know what we are looking for when we head back to the library."

The two women sat together writing a list of inquiries to make at the library and the museum.

Tracy scooped Bianca into her lap and snuggled with her. All the mystery was making her grateful her life was a bit more certain.

"Amy?"

"What?" she said, looking up from the notepad to meet Tracy's eyes.

"Do you think maybe the break-in had nothing to do with the urn but was about the diary?"