

Ashes in a Teardrop

Chapter One

“Come on, slowpoke!” Amy Curtis shouted over her shoulder, her flaxen ponytail bobbing up and down as her husband struggled behind her.

“Where’s the fire?” Jerry grunted between his pedaling and labored gasps for air.

All he could hear was his wife’s laughter as she rounded the curve, widening the gap between them even farther. *I didn’t want to come on this stupid bike ride in the first place*, he thought. *Yes, I’m overweight, and yes, Amy looks terrific after her diet, but did she have to pick the hottest day of the year for a bike ride?*

Jerry rolled to a stop. “It’s over 100 degrees out here,” he muttered. He took a gulp of water from his plastic bottle. The water was so hot it would have made a great cup of tea. The hot water just added to his frustration. Jerry spit it onto the steaming asphalt.

“Where the heck did you go?” he yelled down the trail. “What about quality time together, huh? What about that?”

Forty minutes on the trail and they hadn’t seen a soul. The river was more like a brook without any babble. Jerry was hot, sweaty, chafed and more than ready to head back to the car. Home was a half-hour drive across Modesto. *There’s a Mickey D’s on Oakdale Road. I could get a mocha frappe.* The thought calmed Jerry a bit.

“This just isn’t working,” he said softly as he laid his bike down. “I wish I’d bought the big-butt seat. Who cares if it looks silly?” Jerry kicked the dust as he moved to sit on a chunk of log. “I’m in pain here!” His cry for sympathy went unheard.

“Legion Park,” he mused. “I thought parks had grass and water and stuff. This river is practically dried up. The grass is dead. Drought killed it all, and I’m next. Now I’m sitting on a stump talking to myself!”

Jerry bent down and picked up a rock about the size of a walnut and hurled it at the bushes. Kurr-thunk! The rock hit something that definitely wasn’t wood. He ran his fingers

over the hot, dusty sand at his feet. A rock a bit smaller than the first was just below the surface. He tried to throw close to where the first one had landed.

The rock hit metal. Jerry slowly lifted his aching body off the log. He stretched and strained to see what was beyond the brush. Curiosity getting the better of him, he crossed the path and peeked through the dead and dying bushes.

A glint of light flashed between the dry leaves of a dusty oleander. Jerry pushed back branches, trying to get a look at what lay beyond. The vegetation cracked, snapped and broke in his hands. He looked around. No Amy to tell him not to. Nobody else, period. He started tearing limbs out of the way. They were so dry that there was little resistance. As Jerry stomped on a low-lying branch, he saw another flash of light.

He fought his way through the vegetation. His sweaty T-shirt caught on a sharp spike and tore. He swore beneath his breath, but kept plowing deeper into the brush.

Then he saw it. Ensnared in a web of broken limbs, wire, clumps of river algae and several inches of dirt was an old-fashioned teardrop trailer. It rested at a 45-degree angle, supported by branches and completely hidden from the bike trail. On the other side of the river were a steep embankment and open field.

"How did you get here?" Jerry said, panting as he continued clearing a path. "This is so cool! It's just like the ones at the MJC Graffiti Car Show."

He inched down the side of the trailer and made his way to the back. The bank was dry and the water was at least 20 feet below, but the angle was steep. It was obvious from the amount of debris tangled on and around the trailer that it had been submerged at one time. A torn corner of a license plate was all that was left of the small metal frame on the bumper.

No license, no ID, Jerry thought. His mind raced with visions of the little trailer polished, shining like a new nickel and being towed behind a 1950 Ford Woody station wagon. He imagined Amy coming out of a mountain lake in a bright red bathing suit just the color of their wagon. The fact that they didn't have a Woody was not important at the

moment. Jerry's mind was spinning, trying to figure out how he was going to get the trailer off this riverbank and home.

"Jerry!" Amy's voice cut through his thoughts. "Jerry! Where are you?" She sounded panicky.

"Over here!" Jerry yelled.

"Over where?"

"Hold on," he called.

"Were you watering the bushes?" Amy asked with a giggle.

"No!" Jerry said indignantly as he appeared through the brush.

"Look at you! You're bleeding."

Jerry looked down at his torn shirt. His legs stung from scrapes and scratches. The abrasions on his arms completed the set. "I'm fine. Listen."

"You need to get those cleaned up," Amy said. "Did you fall? Why'd you stop?"

"Would you just listen?" Jerry said.

"What?" Amy asked, a bit taken aback by her husband's tone.

"I found a trailer! It is so cool. A little teardrop trailer like the ones we saw at the car show at MJC. Remember, you said how cute they were? I found one!"

"How did you get on Craigslist out here?"

"No, no, no. I found one over there!" Jerry said, pointing toward the gap in the bushes. "Come look."

"I do not want to look like I've been clawed by a bobcat," Amy said.

"Then give me your phone," Jerry said, motioning with his fingers.

Amy handed him the phone. "Who are you going to call?"

Jerry quickly tapped numbers into the phone. "Mario, it's Jerry. I need your help." Jerry paused, then said, "Doing what? Bring her with you. You got a car seat, don'tcha? Look, I found an old-fashioned aluminum teardrop trailer. I need you to bring your flatbed trailer so I can get it home. No, I don't have a hitch. Besides, I think the tires are flat."

“Are you crazy?” Amy huffed. “You can’t just haul off a trailer.”

Jerry gave her the “be quiet” wave and continued. “Just come out Yosemite, turn on Santa Cruz and keep going. Stop when it turns into Tioga. Yeah, yeah, way out. I don’t know, 15, 20 minutes maybe.” Jerry took a deep breath. “Yeah, yeah, east end of Legion Park. I’ll be in the little parking lot. Awesome.”

“You’re going to jail!” Amy exclaimed, her eyes wide.

“OK! Thanks, buddy. See you soon,” Jerry said, handing the phone back with a big smile.

“Are you nuts? You can’t do this,” Amy said. “It belongs to somebody. It’s like grand theft auto without the auto. You’ll get arrested. Honey, please. I know you’re excited, but step back for a second. Think for a second. Here,” she thrust out the phone. “Call Mario back and tell him you had a heat stroke or something. You were delirious.”

“Listen, listen, listen. It’s fine,” Jerry said. “There’s no license plate. It’s been down there forever.”

“It’s fine, officer. It didn’t have a license,” Amy said, attempting a deep voice.

“You’ll love it,” Jerry answered. “It’s awesome. I’ll fix it all up and we can go camping.”

“You hate camping.”

“Can’t I just take it home then figure it out?” Jerry’s last defense was pleading.

“Remember the puppy you found?” Amy asked. “This will be like the puppy.”

“No, no, I don’t have to feed this, just clean it up.”

“I give up,” she sighed.

“Then I can take it home?”

“I didn’t say that. I said, ‘I give up.’ If you and Mario want to go to jail and have little Bianca be turned over to Child Protective Services, that’s up to you. I’m going home. It’s hot out here and I do *not* intend to get arrested.”

“OK, OK, I’ll wait here for Mario,” Jerry said. He picked up his bicycle and started riding back to the car. About 10 yards up the trail, he turned around and rode back to the log. He jumped off his bike and rolled the log to the middle of the trail.

“Now what,” Amy shouted. “You’ll get somebody killed.”

“We’re the only ones dumb enough to be on this trail in the middle of August,” Jerry answered.

He watched the bikes’ wheels spin on the bike rack as Amy drove away. Even under the shade of a tree, Modesto’s mid-August heat was stifling. Leaning back against the *Mary E. Grogan Grove* sign at the edge of the grass, Jerry realized that Amy had taken the cell phone.

Nearly 30 minutes later, Mario pulled into the parking lot in his gigantic Cummins diesel pickup. Behind it was a lowboy trailer, complete with winch.

“Yes!” Jerry yelled, pumping his fist as he ran to the truck.

“So where’s this trailer?” Mario asked, giving Jerry his famous what-kind-of mischief-are-we-about-to-get-into smile.

The pair had become friends when they attended Somerset Junior High. All through high school and junior college they had fought each other’s battles and developed reputations for getting into crazy predicaments. Today seemed like a return to form.

“Down the trail about a mile,” Jerry motioned.

“How am I supposed to get in there?” Mario asked. “There’s cement posts everywhere.”

“Not *everywhere*.” Jerry pointed at a gap near the end of the line of white concrete posts.

“Well, let’s go get it!” Mario was so excited that he sounded more like a teenager than a 34-year-old man. He dropped the truck into gear.

Jerry pulled himself into the front seat and shivered. "Man, this air-con really works," he said as the truck pulled onto the trail.

"New Freon," Mario said. "Did it myself and I added a bit extra. Works good, huh?"

"Where's the baby?" Jerry asked, looking into the rear seat.

"Tracy came home just as I was walking out the door. She asked what we were up to. I said salvaging. Good one, huh?"

"I'm using that one on Amy. OK, slow down a bit. I rolled a log onto the path. You should see it any ..." Jerry broke off for a long moment. "There it is!"

"What were you guys doing out here? It is insane hot today." Mario tapped the digital thermometer overhead. "103!"

"Amy said we'd burn up fat," Jerry said as he hopped out of the truck.

"More like you'd *burn up!*" Mario said with a laugh.

Jerry pushed the log to the side of the trail. Mario came and stood next to him.

"It's down there at kind of an angle," Jerry said. "Must have been there forever. The hitch is at this end."

"I'm gonna pull up farther," Mario said, looking at the opening in the bushes. "We'll just pull 'er out and onto the flatbed. Can you get down to the hitch?"

"No problem," Jerry answered. "Can a winch pull out something that big?"

"Guaranteed to four tons!"

Jerry ran ahead of the truck and guided his friend forward until the back of the trailer was even with the teardrop. Mario cranked the wheel and backed his flatbed to match the angle of the little trailer. He jumped out with the truck idling.

Mario slipped on a pair of leather gloves stashed behind the winch, threw a switch and unrolled about 10 feet of cable. He hit the switch again, then took off the gloves and tossed them to Jerry.

"OK, loop the hook through the hitch bar and then hook it on the cable. Make sure the point is down. Got it?"

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.” Jerry gave a sloppy salute.

He approached the trailer from a different angle this time. The triangle-shaped bars were snarled with vines, weeds and wire. Jerry shoved the hook through the debris and fixed it on the cable.

“Got it!” he yelled.

“Get out of the way!”

Jerry scrambled back up to the truck. The slack slowly lessened as Mario began reeling in the cable. As the cable came taut, the trailer broke its bonds of soil and branches and tore free. Foot by foot, yard by yard, the cable wound around the winch spool. Finally, the hitch appeared through the vegetation, providing the first full view of the aluminum teardrop.

“There she is! There she is!” Jerry yelled, raising his fist over his head as he did a victory dance.

Mario stopped the winch and hit a large black button on the side of his trailer. The back end of the lowboy tilted until it touched the ground. Pulling the winch lever again, the little teardrop half rolled and half slid onto the flatbed.

“There you go, Jer!” Mario said, beaming at his friend. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

The two men stood and marveled at the tiny teardrop resting level and safe on the trailer. Jerry tried to open the door.

“Stuck.”

Come on, Hulk. Give it some muscle,” Mario teased.

The handle creaked. Jerry put his other hand above the door and pulled. The door made a sound like a vacuum-packed can of nuts and swung open. Jerry jumped back as two cans of pork and beans rolled out.

“Look at all the stuff!”

“There’ll be time for exploring when we get this thing to your house,” Mario said. “We probably should get out of here, don’t you think?”

"Yeah, let's go."

It took nearly an hour to secure the trailer and drive to Jerry's house. As they backed it into the driveway, Amy came out the front door.

"And where do you think that is going?" she asked.

"Where I can work on it in the shade," Jerry said, guiding Mario to the open garage.

"And my car will go where?"

"On the drive?"

"Great," Amy said. "So I can blister my butt every time I get in?"

"Not at night or in the morning," Jerry said meekly.

"Grrrrrrr; you two!" She stomped into the house and slammed the door.

"I gotta get home," Mario said. "I promised Tracy I'd barbeque some chicken tonight."

"Thanks, buddy. I owe you one." Jerry patted his friend on the shoulder.

"More like a hundred."

"What?" Jerry asked.

"Nuthin'," Mario said with a laugh as he got into the truck.

After an hour's work, the Shop-Vac had collected almost a gallon of dust off the trailer. Jerry had washed his new treasure and was just about to polish it when Amy stepped into the garage, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel.

"Need some help?" she asked sheepishly.

"Excuse me? Who are you and what have you done with my wife?" Jerry said with mock severity.

"It really is cute, sweetie," Amy said, crossing the garage and giving Jerry a peck on the cheek.

Knowing this was as close to an apology as he was going to get, Jerry beamed with childlike pleasure at finally having an accomplice in the *Great Teardrop Trailer Caper*. "I was about to start polishing her up. It is stuffed with who knows what. How would you like to figure out what to keep and what to throw away?"

“Is it nasty inside?”

“No, it is really tight, so there’s almost no water damage,” he said. “It kind of whooshed when I finally got the door open. I’ll go get the garbage can for you.”

Amy peered inside the trailer. She was amazed to see stacks of papers, canned goods and clothes. They looked like they’d been tumbled in a clothes dryer. The surprising thing was that there was no smell of mold or mildew. She pulled out a stack of magazines and newspapers that sat near the door. Dry as a bone.

“These are all dated 1997,” Amy said, holding them up to show Jerry.

“Cool. Here you go, recycle and garbage,” he said, tossing back the lids of the bins.

Amy dropped a handful of papers in the recycle bin and Jerry started his polishing.

The cans were nearly full before Amy was able to get inside the trailer. She stacked some usable things — pots and pans, silverware, an ice chest and some men’s clothing — on the garage floor.

There was a small bench seat and a fold-up table attached to the wall of the trailer. Amy sat on the bench and looked around the tiny space. There were a pair of accordion doors toward the front.

Must be the bed, she thought, moving half crouched across the space. Behind the doors there was a small mattress and a jumble of blankets and pillows. A hand-stitched quilt caught her eye. She gave a tug, but it didn’t budge. As she pulled at the quilt again, she realized something was rolled up in it.

A heavy enameled vase. Amy stepped out of the trailer to see it in better light.

“Jerry,” Amy called softly.

“Once I get this all buffed out it is going to look amazing,” he said with pride.

“Jerry, honey.”

Amy moved to the rear of the trailer and held the vase at arm’s length. The couple paused for a long moment, gazing at the beautiful colors and unusual shape of the vessel.

“Isn’t it gorgeous?” Amy said.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But the lid is sealed with red wax. Look."