

ASHES IN A TEARDROP

CHAPTER 15

Jerry's shot missed Bob, struck the rock wall and ricocheted. Bob shot wildly twice, spun and scrambled out of the cave then ran for the boat. Jerry crawled after him and got out as Bob was already scudding downstream. Jerry raised the pistol and sighted at Bob's receding back. He hesitated then dropped his arm. "Nope," he said aloud. "I don't want to kill anyone."

He turned and shouted back into the mouth of the cave, "Okay, Mario. Drag Radcliff out of there."

"Are you kidding?" came the reply. "Get down here and give me a hand."

Jerry ducked back into the cave and grinned at Mario poised over the fallen Radcliff with a rock in his hand.

"Well, we got one of them," boasted Mario.

"Yeah, one out of two ain't bad."

Once they had dragged the stunned Radcliff out and into the open Mario looked at the small canoe and shrugged, "We still got a problem."

"Yeah, that dinky canoe will never hold three."

"What'll we do?"

"One of us will have to go back for a motor boat and since you're better than me you will have to go. I suggest that Bob is long gone but just in case I'm wrong you take the gun with you."

"What about Radcliff?"

"We'll tie him up and if he makes a move I'll conk him with a rock."

"How come we're both so cool after this?"

"Beats me. Maybe because we drank our Ovaltine. Get going."

"I knew it! I knew it!" Amy was on the verge of tears. "I told you not to go out there on the water."

"I didn't drown, I was shot at," Jerry remonstrated.

"That's even worse. Now where are we?"

"We're out of it, that's where we are. No more map, no more treasure, and no more shooting. We have reported this latest episode and put everything in the hands of the police. Let them handle it. That's what we pay them for."

"And no more getting rich," a note of regret crept into Amy's voice.

"That too," agreed Jerry, "but it was all sort of a game to begin and a pipe dream to end."

They gazed quietly at each other, savoring a poignant moment of shared feelings until the ring-tone broke their reverie.

"Is that you or me?" asked Jerry.

"That's you, Dummy. Who else would have that Lone Ranger tiddy-rump, tiddy-rump, tiddy-rump-rump-rump theme?"

"Okay, Tonto, I'll give you that one. He took the iPhone from the pocket of the jacket tossed on the sofa. "Hello," he said. "Yes, speaking. (pause) Yes, we can do that. (pause) Okay, ten o'clock. Yes, we'll be there." He rang off.

"Well, who was that?"

"Police. They want us to come down to the department at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning. I told them we would be there."

The tall, older man in the dark blue suit exuded an aura of authority and command as he smilingly welcomed each of the three couples into the lounge of the Modesto Police Department. "Please be seated," he said, "And make yourselves comfortable. I have asked you to come here today because you are the three couples touched by this teardrop trailer confusion and that I may explain to you the intricate nature of the often terrifying situation in which you have found yourselves. With us today is Captain Jonathan Spencer of the Modesto Police Department." He motioned to the uniformed officer standing near the window. "My name is Orson Wright. I am an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"The FBI?" gasped Amy.

"Yes, Mrs. Curtis, the FBI. The federal government is involved because the underlying events in which you were entangled include federal offenses. However, before I expand on that point I wish to congratulate Mr. Curtis and Mr. Smith on the bravery they displayed in a difficult situation and their ability to come out of a tight corner relatively unscathed.

"Having said that, and though I hate to disillusion you, I want to tell you that all of you were on a wild goose chase. The map was a phony, the key meant nothing, and there was never a Confederate treasure. There was a very different kind of treasure that was connected to your finding the trailer and the decorative urn. It is a multiple convoluted story that began before most of you were born, with the exception of Mr. Andreas Stavros. If you will bear with me patiently I will explain the circumstances leading to your involvement.

"One day before Thanksgiving in 1971 a man identifying himself as Don Cooper, later to be known as D. B. Cooper, boarded a Northwest Airlines 727 with a bomb in his satchel. He commanded the pilot to land in Seattle, where he demanded 200,000 dollars in small bills and two parachutes as ransom for the release of the passengers. His demands were met and the plane flew away south with a minimum air crew. Sometime later, though still above the state of Washington, Cooper put on a parachute and dived out of the rear of the airplane. Though he was sought for many years by experienced trackers Don Cooper was never again seen alive.

"Yes, sure," said Jerry, "I think we all know the story of D.B. Cooper. What has that got to do with us?"

"Be patient, Mr. Curtis. All will become clear. But now I would like to go back before Cooper's exploit and show how the social setting of the 1960s contributed to your present problem of the urn in the teardrop trailer. This was a tumultuous time with the Vietnam War, civil rights, peace movements, feminist rights, hippies, and the march on Washington. But the most devastating was the tremendous rise in rampant criminal activities. And, during that time, one of the most virulent criminal groups in America came to be known as the Ninth Street Gang."

"Ninth Street," gasped Amy. "You mean right here in Modesto?"

"Right here in Modesto," averred Wright. "Ninth Street south of the river was worse than many of the big city criminal enclaves of prohibition days. Drugs, robbery, holdups, prostitution, mayhem and murder. You name it. And the leader of that most vicious gang was none other than Bob Barr's Auntie Clara. Clara Barr made Ma Barker seem like a Sunday school teacher. She had a hand in all that went on in the den of iniquity that was Ninth Street. Don Cooper and his kid brother Pete were members of Clara's gang and without her knowledge they cooked up that hijack scheme. After Cooper escaped with the money he couldn't get back to Modesto so he thought up the urn idea. He stuffed the money into the urn, clamped a seal over the money and filled the upper cavity with ashes stolen from a local mortuary. Then he shipped the urn off to his brother. When Pete Cooper received the urn his first thought was to hide the money before Aunt Clara found out about it. He did get it hidden but shortly after Clara killed him and dumped his body in the river.

"Apparently she was aware of the brothers' plot all along and had chosen her own time to do something about it. That was when she concocted the story of the Confederate treasure. She remembered a cave along the river where she used to hide illegal contraband long before she drew the gang around her. She had a map drawn up showing the location of the cave as the spot where the treasure was buried. She hid the map in the trailer and the key in the urn. Mary's so-called diary was also a fake. Mary was one of the toughest members of the gang; like aunt, like niece."

"But why?" interjected Andreas Stavros. "Why would she make up such an elaborate scheme? How would it profit her?"

"Times were not good and law enforcement was cracking down. The men were restless and wanting some activity. Bob and Ralph were especially loud in protest. Bob was the most vicious member of the gang; you will notice all the shooting was done by Bob. He was also ambitious to take over the gang which, of course, would mean eliminating Clara. She knew this and the major reason for the treasure fraud was to keep Bob and the other men involved in something that would distract them from any thought of deposing her. They had the map and the urn with the key. But after the urn was lost with the trailer most of the gang lost interest in the game but not Bob and Ralph. Then, when the trailer was recovered they felt their luck had changed and got right back into the hunt.

"Now here is where it gets tricky." Wright moved over to put his hand on the urn where it stood on a low table.

"All the fuss over a paper and a diary and a map supposedly revealing the site of the treasure, when the map was staring you all in the face. You all thought the etchings and sparkly things were decorations but they were more than that. Look at this mosaic pattern. See the squiggly lines and curvy lines and hatch marked lines? You don't have to be a cartographer. Anyone who is familiar with the county should be able to go right to the treasure. The curvy line is the Tuolumne River, these heavy crossing lines are major streets; Yosemite to the north and Hatch Road to the south with the river in between. This picket fence line is the Santa Fe Railway. And south of Empire that dot right here is the spot where Pete Cooper buried the money from the Northwest hijacking."

Wright put the tip of his index finger on the small crossbar.

"X marks the spot," he said.

Jerry jumped up from his chair protesting in an angry voice, "What a cock and bull story. Nobody knows what happened to Cooper and if it was him why ship the money down here in the urn? How do you know he stole the ashes? Who invented the kid brother? And that yarn about Aunt Clara. Who writes your stuff, anyway?"

"You're right, Mr. Curtis. There is much surmise and conjecture in that story. There are things we will never know and questions we will never have answered. But there is also solid evidence, reliable observation, and tattle-tell stories from involved witnesses."

"Yes, Dear," said Amy, reaching for Jerry's hand. "Sit back down, Dear, and listen. He's not trying to fool you with a fabricated story."

Jerry sat down, still scowling and still shaking his head.

"Alright, Mr. Curtis," said Wright, "I'll explain some of the sources of knowledge on which this tale is based. Part of it comes from reliable trained agents who have observed the participants for many years. Part of it comes from projections of highly probable factors following one another. And finally, the most factual parts come from eyewitness accounts of those personally involved in the action."

"For instance?" Jerry was still not mollified.

"For instance, highly trained and experienced federal agents; for instance, analysis by professional diagnosticians; for instance, Chuck Addis and Ralph Radcliff," Wright rattled off the background.

"The Ninth Street Gang is defunct. In 2001 Aunt Clara died in a fire on Ninth when the motel they were using as gang headquarters caught fire and the blaze swept through all the structures. The Coopers were already gone and the few remaining members vanished into the woodwork. Cousin Mary is doing a long stretch in the Women's Facility at Tehachapi.

"When the gang was at its peak Ralph and Bob were just kids but they saw and heard most that went on. Much of the story I outlined came from Ralph's memories. Bob is dead. Ralph had a hideaway in Keyes and after you frightened him off," a nod to Jerry, "he went to the Keyes hideout. The police were hot on his trail and when they tried to arrest him he chose to shoot it out and they killed him. However, Chuck has recovered and telling everything he knows and Radcliff is singing like a canary.

"That about wraps it up. The Cooper money was recovered from a plot in a pet cemetery on Santa Fe Road where Pete Cooper's pet German Shepherd, Regal Rex, was buried, hence the RR on the urn. We recovered 180,000 dollars and Northwest Airlines is giving a ten percent reward which will go to you, Amy and Jerry. "Eighteen thousand is not too bad. It's all yours and the urn."

"No, no", said Amy. "Half goes to Mario and Tracy."

"Whatever, it's yours to do with as you please."

Slowly the tension began to dissipate as the three couples thanked Mr. Wright and, chattering excessively, trailed out of the room.

"Boy, that's over....

"Let's go home...

"I don't like that...

"How about Andreas...

"I still don't understand..."

"Aw, forget it..."

"We still have the book to do..."

"What happened to the..."

"Talk about nothing..."

"Thank God!"

As the quiet settled on the room Captain Spencer grinned at Orson Wright, "I think Curtis was right...that was some cock and bull story."

"Yeah, but the question remains, who was the cock and who was the bull?"