

Ashes in a Teardrop

Chapter 8

“She'll be there for another 45 minutes or so,” Tracy said, tucking her cell phone back into her purse. “The McHenry Museum closes at 4.”

“Great,” Amy said, glancing at the clock on the kitchen wall. They'd spent most of the day reviewing her notes and speculating. Now they were going to have to wait another day to make more progress.

Tracy must have seen the look on her face. “We can make it. Come on. Besides, the library's open late, and it's right in the next block. We'll hit the museum for as long as we can and check things out at the library after.”

While Tracy bundled Bianca into the car, Amy gathered up the paperwork they'd accumulated. She felt a pang for the missing diary. Illogical as it seemed, the book had felt like her link to Mrs. T. O. Without it, this hunt for more clues felt even more difficult. Then again, maybe she was just still jumpy after the break-in. She triple checked the locks on her way out.

The McHenry Museum looked just the way Amy remembered it from her field trip in elementary school. The neoclassical entryway seemed a little smaller now, but still was grand with its broad steps and imposing pillars.

Tracy's docent friend, Morgan, met them at the door. She was a friendly woman with an easy, welcoming smile and curly brown hair that showed only the slightest hint of gray.

“Half an hour is plenty of time for a tour,” Morgan said, leading them past the long wooden counter where people had checked out books back when this had been the public library. “Tracy said you were interested in the McHenrys' history?”

"Yes. I've driven past this place a hundred times, but never gave it much thought. Seems like a shame," Amy said, smiling. Morgan might be perfectly nice, but the break-in had made her cautious. She and Tracy had decided to keep the true reason for this research private, just in case. No harm in being careful.

"It is a fascinating history," Morgan said, bustling them into the first of the permanent exhibits, a turn-of-the-century replica schoolroom. She was clearly in her element and glad to have an interested audience. Tracy scooped up Bianca to keep her from climbing onto one of the wooden and iron desks as Morgan began telling them about the display.

"What about Mr. McHenry's family? He had children, didn't he?" Amy asked, hoping to steer her toward information that would be more useful to her hunt.

"He had one son, Oramil," Morgan said, then told them about the young family and Robert McHenry's famous mansion. He built it, Morgan explained, so he could be closer to his job at the Modesto Bank, the first bank in town. It shortened his commute from his primary residence at Bald Eagle Ranch.

"He had a ranch?" Amy asked, drifting over to the blacksmith display, thinking of the RR seal on the urn and the identical brand burned into the planks of the H Bar B.

"Oh, yes. Over two thousand acres down along the Stanislaus River," Morgan said. "It would have been quite a ride on horseback to the bank."

"So he had his own cattle brand?" Tracy reined the conversation back around, following Amy's lead.

"He mostly had orchards," the docent said. "This area was just as good for growing fruit and the like then as it was now. He did packing, drying, all manner of processing right there at their ranch." She glanced back at the blacksmith's tools and tapped her lip,

considering. "I think he had some livestock. I suppose he may have had his own brand. I don't think we have any information on it here, but there are registries for that sort of thing."

"Really?" Amy asked. Why hadn't she thought of that? That would be the perfect place to check on the brand.

"There's some sort of livestock identification bureau, I believe. It's probably somewhere under the umbrella of the Department of Agriculture," Morgan said. Then she frowned. "I doubt the McHenry's would be listed, though. They left the area in 1919 and moved to the Bay Area."

"Oh." Amy tried to hide her disappointment. She'd wanted so badly to find a local connection. None of this made sense otherwise.

Tracy wasn't so easily discouraged. "What about the Ralstons? Would they have had their own brand?"

Amy shot her a look. She hadn't wanted to bring it up so directly. Tracy shrugged, swinging Bianca over to her other hip.

"You mean William Chapman Ralston?"

At their nods, Morgan continued. "He was involved in the railroad, not in ranching around here. I really don't know about the rest of his family, of course, but he settled in San Francisco."

"I thought Modesto was almost named after him," Amy said.

"*That* story." Morgan said with a smile. "Modesto was built along the rail line between Sacramento and Los Angeles. Ralston was the director of the Central Pacific Railroad at the time. After famously turning down the honor of having the town named after him, he didn't have anything to do Modesto, I don't think. He went on to be a big name in San Francisco and founded the Bank of California."

Their theories were growing thinner and thinner. Morgan must have noticed their waning enthusiasm. "If it's that kind of history you're interested in, we do have quite an archive of local documents and photos."

Amy brightened, until Morgan added, "But we're about to close, so you'd have to come back if you want to dig through those. I can introduce you to the curator, if you'd like. Have you checked the pamphlet files in the library's Special Collections?"

"Pamphlet files?" Amy asked. When she and Jerry had gone through the local history section, they'd focused on the books.

Morgan nodded. "It has newspaper clippings, research articles, photocopies of some of the originals in our archives, things like that. You might want to check it out. They're open until 9 this evening."

Amy and Tracy thanked her and headed to the door with Bianca. Amy sighed as they went down the broad stone steps.

"What's that for?" Tracy asked. "I thought that went well."

"What do you mean? That was a waste of time. Ralston and McHenry weren't connected at all. And there aren't any of them left around here anyway."

Her friend laughed. "Maybe they didn't share the same suspicious cattle brand, but that doesn't mean they didn't know each other."

"How?" Amy demanded, skeptical.

"They both worked in banking. Both families ended up settling in the Bay Area. OK, that doesn't mean they were best friends or anything, but there may be a connection there that we just haven't found yet."

"I'm not driving to San Francisco to dig through their local history stuff," Amy said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, no," Tracy said. "But even if the big, famous branches of the family live out there, some of their relatives might have stayed around here. I bet if you checked the phone book, you'd find some Ralstons or McHenrys or someone related to them."

Someone with the initials R. R.? Amy wondered. She wished she knew the real initials of the trailer owner as well.

The reference librarian led the trio to the Special Collections room and unlocked it. He gave Bianca a long look, but didn't say anything. To be fair, the little girl had begun to squirm and Amy wasn't sure she'd last long in another hush-and-don't-touch-anything environment.

"These are the pamphlet files," the librarian said, pointing out a tall gray file cabinet. "The articles are arranged alphabetically, more or less. If you're interested in genealogies, you might check these, too." He pulled a couple of books off one of the upper shelves. He was tall enough to make it look effortless. Amy would have needed a step stool. No wonder she and Jerry had missed those titles.

"Also, there's the obituary index. That might be useful, if you're looking for next-of-kin information," he added, one hand on the door.

"Thanks," Amy said. She wondered how much further she and Jerry would have gotten on their last trip if they'd had a better idea of where to start looking. *Well, no time like the present.* "Do you know anything about cattle brand indexes?"

The librarian cocked his head, thoughtful. "Not off the top of my head, but I'll see what I can find. Will you be in here for a bit?"

Amy nodded and he let himself out with a promise to check and get back to her.

Tracy sighed once the door closed. She looked like she was reaching the end of her — or maybe Bianca's — patience. "Would you mind if I take her over to the children's room for a while? I can come back."

"Go ahead," Amy said. "We don't have to stay long. I'll get an idea of what's in the files. I'd like to wait long enough to see if he can find anything about the cattle brands." She hadn't wanted to mention the specific brand, but if he could find an index, she would have a place to start.

Tracy carted Bianca off and Amy dug into the pamphlet files.

Five minutes later, she understood why the librarian had said the files were in alphabetical order "more or less." Within the file folders, the clippings and documents were jumbled. The "R" folder had nothing on Ralston, to her disappointment. At first, she thought the "M" folder would be just as useless, but then she noticed that "McHenry" had an entire file folder to itself.

Amy commandeered one of the tables — she could, since she was the only person in the room — and spread out a number of clippings. Articles about the mansion. Stories about the ranch and the building of the original library. She copied down any names of family and friends she came across.

Toward the back of the file, she found an entire genealogical table, four generations deep. Originally handwritten, it had been photocopied at least a couple of times and was difficult to read. She decided against trying to photocopy it again. It would be all but illegible then. Perhaps the museum's archives held the original. She looked over it, searching for double Rs. *Nothing. Still nothing.*

Amy was about ready to snap her pencil in frustration when the door opened. The tall librarian ducked his head in, a slip of paper in his hand.

Finally some good news. Amy tidied the stack of articles and put it back in the file.

"You found the brand index?"

"Well," he hedged. "There's a copy of *Cattle Brands* at the Oakdale Library. We can have it sent here in a couple of days, if you'd like to look at it. The California Department of Food and Agriculture holds the index online as well, but it's not free to browse it. Some historical information is available. The 1919 Cattle Brand Index is available online here." He held out the paper.

Amy took it and read a web address in neat script. *1919. That would cover a brand that was around when the urn was first made, but would it include a symbol used to mark the wax seal?* She had to hope so. She smiled and gathered her things. "Thanks. Can I get back to you about the book?"

"Of course. Just call the reference desk and we can have it sent over here for you." He held the door open for her. "Did you want to see the obituary indexes?"

Amy shook her head. She couldn't stomach the idea of any more fruitless searching right now. Tracy and Bianca needed to get home. Jerry would be home soon, too, and she had to come up with something for dinner. "Thanks, but not today."

She found Tracy and Bianca sitting next to the giant tree sculpture in the children's section. Bianca had a collection of board books spread around her, much to her delight.

"No luck?" Tracy asked.

"Well, I didn't find any solid link to the Ralsons," Amy said, trying to remind herself that it hadn't been a complete failure. She didn't have R. R.'s name, but she'd copied down a number of other names and connections from the stack of articles. Maybe the trailer

owner's name would be in there somewhere, or something she could match up with T. O.'s diary. "That librarian found an online index of California cattle brands, but it's from 1919."

"Do you think the seal on the urn is that old?" Tracy asked. She convinced her daughter to put down the last of the books without throwing a tantrum. "Let's talk about this on the way to the car. I think Bianca's about two minutes from melt-down here."

Amy followed her toward the door, flipping through her notebook. "I've got a lot of names to follow up on. Maybe one of these will turn out to be our mysterious Mrs. T. O."

"If you say so," Tracy said. She took her time strapping Bianca into her car seat. When the little girl started to cry, it seemed to crack the last bit of Tracy's patience. "None of this is getting anywhere, Amy. You don't know any more about this woman now than when you started."

Amy was tempted to agree, but she couldn't. She couldn't give this up. "No, that's not true. I know that something she had was worth stealing or our house wouldn't have been broken into. I know that something she knew was worth hiding or she wouldn't have hidden the diary. Her secrets matter."

She started the car. "Maybe we're looking in the wrong direction, trying to find out what happened one hundred years ago with this urn."

"That's where it all starts though, isn't it?" Tracy sounded tired.

"True." *But that's not where it ends.* Amy didn't want to push her luck. She was sure her friend would regain her enthusiasm if she didn't force the issue. When she got home, she could show Jerry the Cattle Brand Index and the notes she had from the pamphlet file. Maybe they could start on the gathering angle. Her mind spun with possibilities.

Other than Bianca's crying, it was a quiet drive home.