

Ashes in a Teardrop

Chapter 9

“Good morning, officer. Table or booth?” the petite waitress asked, looking up at the man lumbering toward her.

“I’m actually meeting someone,” he answered, no expression on his face.

“Over here, Ralph,” a man in the corner booth said, motioning him to the table with a wave of his hand.

The deputy scanned the room for familiar faces as he sauntered over. He slid awkwardly into the booth, working to negotiate the many items on his utility belt into the tight space.

“Morning, Bob,” he said, a slight smile on his otherwise stoic face.

“What’s the word? I haven’t heard from you,” Bob said sharply.

“The natives have been restless,” Deputy Radcliff replied with a smirk, a reference to the numerous gang-related and vagrancy complaints he answered daily.

“Shocker,” Bob replied, raising an eyebrow as he stirred more milk into his coffee.

“Just as you suspected, the key was in the urn. What luck that I took the call about the trailer,” Radcliff said, shifting on his seat. “I fudged a bit with the coroner and told him that the couple had opened the urn like idiots and he seemed to buy it. He didn’t find anything telling when he examined the ashes, according to his report.”

“What did he tell the couple?” Bob prodded.

“There was really nothing to tell. No DNA match. No traceable drugs. The coroner released the ashes to a funeral home and the couple picked them up last Friday. It should be a dead end.”

“How did they react to the break-in?”

“That totally freaked them out, especially the lady. As did your phone call,” Radcliff continued, with a stern look at Bob. “Any particular reason you felt the need to call them and give them your real name? They called me to complain and I had to plead ignorance to cover my butt. I told them that no report had been filed and that I had no idea how their phone number got out. Lame, man. Really stupid.”

“Yeah, I got impatient. Sorry about that. It was a mistake,” Bob said, looking down. “I thought it was worth a try to get the trailer back without resorting to petty theft. When you called me to tell me that you had the urn in hand, it was like a light switch. Anyway, I’ve been keeping tabs on the couple. They’re pretty ambitious. The lady’s been going to the library quite a bit and Chuck told me they’ve come across some photos of Ralston holding the urn and a little information. He said they didn’t really know anything concrete as of last week. Hopefully they won’t be able to make any connections.”

“What about Chuck?” Radcliff asked. “Do you think he’s solid? He called me, acting as nervous as a cat in a room full of rabid dogs about giving his statement to the MPD after the break-in. It was just a formality, for crying out loud.”

“What are the chances that she’d approach him in the bar, of all people?” Bob responded. “What could I do? He’s heard me talking about the family legend since I was a boy. When he called, I felt there was no other option than to include him. I sweetened the pot by offering him a portion should we ever find what we’re looking for. His family has been struggling to keep the farm above water. Chuck needs the money. We’re talking about a whole lot of money here. Plus, he’s come in handy. If it weren’t for him, we wouldn’t have had the opportunity to get the diary so soon. I told him to just lie low, stay out of the way and avoid the bar. You know how Chuck gets when he drinks. Loose lips sink ships.

“What about the diary? Did you find anything of interest?”

“No, it was pretty degraded, though it did have one page that had been carefully removed,” Radcliff said. “I thought for sure that’s where it would be, but we’re just working with what information our family’s passed down over the generations. The missing piece we need has got to be *in* that trailer somewhere.

“We’ll find a way to get access to it,” he said, glancing at his watch. “I’ve got to get going. I’ll be in touch with a plan to gain access to that trailer. See you around.”

Bob watched the deputy walk away, thinking back to all of the efforts to find the urn. A resolution to this mystery has been a long time in coming. He remembered the violent confrontation between himself and the lawyer 17 years before and thought *desperate times call for drastic measures*.

That day at work, Amy was pleased to get the message that the book on cattle brands she’d requested from the Oakdale Library had arrived at the Modesto Library. *Perfect. I can take it home and look it over with Jer.* Tracy and Mario were coming for dinner so they could go over everything together.

On her way home, she stopped by the city’s offices to drop off some paperwork and then walked around downtown Modesto. She smiled as she passed the Modesto Flower Clock filled with the multicolored zinnia and impatiens blooms of late summer—*one of only 12 working flower clocks in the nation*, she’d read recently. When she saw the time, 5:45 pm., Amy headed for home.

Hey, Amy, out here!” Jerry called. *If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em*, she thought, grabbing a Heineken and stepping outside. She found Jerry in the back yard, knocking back a cold Half Dome microbrew, tongs in hand, a bowl of marinated chicken before him.

“What time are Mario and Tracy getting here?” Amy asked. She reclined on the red Adirondack chair with the comfortable striped cushion, pulling one knee close to her chest.

“They should be here any minute.”

“How was your day?” she asked after taking a sip of beer.

“Good. I think they are finally going to hire a part-timer to help out at the hospital. Not that I was minding the overtime, but it was taxing.”

The sound of tires in the driveway followed by slamming car doors signaled their friends' arrival. Amy greeted them at the front door. “Hi guys. Thanks for coming over tonight.” She hugged Tracy and Mario and picked up a squirming Bianca. “Jerry's out back,” she said with a slight jerk of her head, directing Mario outside.

“How can I help?” Tracy asked, pulling a large cache of stuffed animals from her bag to entertain Bianca.

“Everything's ready. Can you grab the salad? Bianca, can you bring your toys?” Amy watched the little girl head for the door with an armful of stuffed animals. No sooner had they crossed the back door threshold then they heard a thud and a cry from Bianca, who had face-planted onto the concrete patio. Jerry reached her first and immediately scooped her into his arms.

“OK, let me see. You're all right,” he said, rubbing the red spot forming on the little girl's face. Amy smiled sympathetically at her, marveling over how quickly Jerry had reacted.

Bianca's crying subsided to whimpers that were muffled by Tracy's shirt as the little girl was transferred into her mother's arms.

“Are you sure you guys are up for this? Long nights and screaming kids?” Tracy asked in a joking tone, knowing that her friends were more than ready. “Where are you guys on the baby front?”

“We’re ready. I haven’t even had the chance to tell Jerry yet, but I found out this week that we’ve saved enough to really start the process, thanks to Jerry’s overtime,” Amy said.

“That’s fantastic!” Jerry exclaimed, leaning in for a kiss. “The light at the end of the tunnel,” he murmured softly as they hugged.

“You two are going to be great parents,” Tracy said.

Mario smiled at his friends. “As I remember, the fun’s in the trying.”

“We may look into adoption if we aren’t successful the old-fashioned way,” Amy said.

“Careful with that. I’ve had so many friends who started the adoption process only to find out that they’re pregnant,” Tracy said.

“Come what may,” Amy answered wistfully. She and Jerry caught one another’s eyes and shared hopeful looks.

“Not to change the subject,” Mario said, “but I heard that there’s going to be a Trailerfest in Lodi next week. Sounds like fun. Let me know if you need someone to go with you. What’s up with the rest of the ‘investigation’ these days?”

“Is Chuck going to be joining us tonight?” he continued with a snicker.

“Shady! I still can’t believe I let Amy ride alone with that guy,” Jerry muttered disgustedly.

“We’ll catch you guys up after dinner. Apparently Amy brought home some new stuff to research, if you’re interested,” Jerry said as he took the chicken off the grill. “Dinner is served.”

After clearing the dishes, the couples reconvened around the dinner table. “Let’s see if the book I picked up today has any constructive new info,” Amy said, digging through the black hole she called a purse. “It’s supposed to have all of the brands local to this area.”

While Mario and Tracy scrolled through the online *Cattle Brand Index of 1919*, she and Jerry took on the *Cattle Brands* book.

“Honey, should we come back in a few hours when you’re ready?” Amy teased Jerry. “Keep flipping,” she said, impatient at his need to study every brand.

“The brands are in brandabetic order, but I’m not finding anything in the Rs,” Jerry said. “Why wouldn’t it be here?”

“Amy, that’s it! That’s the brand,” Tracy exclaimed with such gusto that Mario jumped. The four studied the brand’s unique interlinking letters.

“OK, so it looks like the brand design belongs to Douglas R. Brewster and his wife, Marguerite,” Amy read aloud. “It says that the property is at 960 Crawford Road, Modesto, California.” There is a letter and a group of numbers beside the address and underneath the name—B 147453.” Amy paused for a moment, then said, “I’m certain that the name Brewster is on the list of acquaintances, friends and colleagues that I compiled from the pamphlets at the library.” She grabbed her black notebook, running her finger down the page as she looked for the name Doug Brewster. “There. Why didn’t I write down the relationship to Robert McHenry as I went? Now I’ll have to go back to the pamphlet files to check.”

“Why don’t we try cross referencing Brewster’s name with McHenry’s online and see what we come up with,” Jerry suggested, opening a new tab on his laptop.

Tracy thought back to the diary entry she and Amy had seen what seemed like a lifetime ago. “Amy, this is the name from the diary, the one we couldn’t fully read. I’m sure

of it: Doug and Mar_____. Finally, a connection to the diary! Mrs. T.O. and the Rolling Ranch owners obviously were within the same social circle.”

“Do you guys realize we now have a concrete, tangible lead?” Amy asked, unable to look away from the computer screen.

“If that excites you, wait until you read this Bee article,” Jerry said. He swiveled the computer around for her to read.

“You’ve got to be freaking kidding me,” Amy said as she read the headline: *Brewster Mansion? Historian finds evidence Robert McHenry wasn’t a McHenry*. “This article suggests that Robert McHenry was born Robert Henry Brewster. Could that be true? How did I not hear about that and why didn’t the docent at the McHenry Mansion mention it? I guess I wasn’t asking the right questions.”

Jerry seemed as stunned as Amy. “If this article is true, we may have a family connection with Douglas and Marguerite Brewster. It says that Robert was originally from Ohio but came out here to reinvent his persona after deserting the Army when directed to the front lines of the Mexican-American War. The reporter found evidence in an 1860 census that McHenry lived with a Brewster who turned out to be his brother. If one of his family members made it out here to California, do you think it’s possible that others may have, too? Maybe a cousin or uncle?”

“This is going to help with this weekend’s search in the Special Collections room,” Amy said, flashing a huge smile. “Since you don’t have to work this Saturday.”

“Great,” Jerry retorted sarcastically. His smiling eyes said it all, though. He was excited, too.

The next day, he and Amy visited the Modesto Library again. "I can't wait to bring our kids here," she said as they watched parents guiding their kids into the Children's room. Jerry noticed his wife touching her belly, a new habit of late.

They were escorted into Special Collections, with its quiet and serious air. Gone were the sounds of children and parents having fun. It was time to get down to business.

Amy knew what she was looking for and felt optimistic that this trip to the library would be fruitful. Genealogy. Land title information. Parcel maps.

"We're back," Amy said to the now familiar librarian for the Special Collections room. "The online cattle brands index was a great find. Now I am armed with a name. I need to see the McHenry family genealogy. I'm also looking for land titles and property parcel maps today. Would I find those here?"

"Genealogy-related items, yes," answered the librarian. "For land titles and maybe for parcel maps, you're going to have to go to the Clerk Recorder's office."

"What do we do now?" Jerry asked as they stepped aside to redirect their efforts. "Do you want me to head down there?"

As he spoke, Amy's phone vibrated in her purse. Embarrassed, she fumbled to answer the call, wishing she had turned it off.

"Hi, Tracy," she said softly. "What's up?"

"Amy, don't be mad, but I've been keeping my docent friend, Morgan, in the loop about the Brewster connection. I described the brand to her and wanted to see if there was more information about whether the name bore any connection to McHenry. She called me this morning with a tip. Morgan was helping a student research some McHenry files in the McHenry Museum's collection yesterday and came across a folder with the Rolling Ranch

brand. She mentioned that it contained a map. She photocopied it and is working at the museum today if you want to pick up the material.

“Amy, I think it would be well worth your time to get over there if you can.”

“Wow! Are you serious? OK. We’re at the library right now. I’m reviewing the McHenry file at the library, trying to find the article where I first saw Douglas Brewster’s name, but it looks like Jerry is available,” Amy said. “Let me ask him if he’s willing to walk over there to check it out. Great work, Tracy! And, no, I’m not mad at you. Thanks for getting involved. Will you call her back and let her know that Jerry’s on his way?”

“Sure thing, Amy. Love you, girl.”

“What did you just sign me up for?” Jerry asked, glad for a new mission.

“All right, so I need you to walk over to the McHenry Museum and introduce yourself to Morgan. She found a piece of information marked with the RR brand in the museum’s collection,” Amy said. “Tracy hinted that there is something in that book that will blow our minds. You down to check it out?”

“I’m all over it!”

As Jerry climbed the museum’s stairway, he felt for the first time the weight of how his and Amy’s search might impact Modesto.

Jerry approached a docent with a hesitant smile. “Hi. I’m looking for Morgan.”

“You must be Jerry,” she said, extending her hand. “I am so glad that you could meet me today. I think this information will help you and your wife, from what Tracy said.”

He opened the file and saw a skillfully drawn map of a property—the house, a barn, the Stanislaus River, pastureland. Even though it was a color photocopy, he could tell the map was yellowed with age but reasonably well preserved. As Jerry’s eyes drifted to the top right corner of the page, he saw the inverted R brand and a date, 1861. His heart beat

faster as he noticed the name above the property map, Rolling Ranch, written in an old-fashioned script. He began to notice new details—a large grouping of trees on the north end of the property, small rock formations to the east. Jerry couldn't believe it when he saw the name of the neighboring ranch to the east, penned in small, almost illegible print — Bald Eagle Ranch!

His eyes met Morgan's. "Thank you for contacting Tracy. I can't wait to go through the rest of the information with my wife."

As Amy approached the car, she could see that Jerry was excited. "Ready to go?" she asked.

"Yes!" he said, then whispered, "This map is the mother lode of good information. Did you find anything?"

"Oh, I found something all right," Amy said smugly.