


TOM SEDAR

WARM WATER
ANCIENT TREASURE
AND
COLD BLOODED MURDER

THE
GOLD
OF
ST. CROIX



The
Gold
of
St. Croix

TOMSEDAR



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Tom Sedar

Chapter

1



The porch in front of the little coffee shop on King Street was getting warm, and as the waitress drifted over and offered one more cup of coffee, I shook my head.

“Are you waiting or just loitering?” she asked, looking bored.

I studied Alli for a few seconds. She was one of those great kids, all smiles, smart, but still working three jobs to survive in paradise. I looked at my watch: quarter after twelve. “I was just waiting for someone, but I don’t think they’re going to make it,” I said.

“Stood up.” Alli seemed amused at my fate.

“It happens when you get old.” I started to slide my chair back.

“Mr. Cotton?” a voice came from behind me on the street.

I settled back in the chair and turned toward the voice as Alli went inside. The voice belonged to a small, slender woman with long, curly, red hair and no make-up. She wore jeans and a faded T-shirt that said: “POSITIVE IS HOW I LIVE.” As she came over, she managed a weak smile. “Sorry I’m late. The damn

traffic on the West End was snarled with an accident in Princess.”

“Bad one?”

“No, but the police had the right lane closed, and things just backed up.”

“Sure,” I said as she plopped a huge black purse on the seat next to me and sat down on the other chair.

“Mr. Cotton,” the woman said, “I’m Betsy Rourk,” reaching across the table and offering me her hand.

I stood up, uncurling my slightly overweight, sixfoot frame from the flimsy, fake-wicker lawn chair, and took Betsy Rourk’s hand. Her shake was firm but brisk. Like many long-time residents of St. Croix, she had played in the sun too long, and it showed in the hard lines beginning in what had once been a soft face. I didn’t figure Betsy Rourk as much older than 35, but in her short years, she’d run a hard race.

“Coffee?” I asked.

She hesitated for a second, staring out at the street, then said in a much quieter voice, “Sure” and moved her gaze to the hands in her lap.

“You OK?” I asked.

Betsy Rourk looked up from the hands, moisture in her eyes, and a slit of white smile emerged from her deeply tanned face. I looked at her for a few seconds, gave my best reassuring smile, and waved Alli over.

To my surprise, Betsy stood up and gave Alli a big hug. “Hi, sweetie,” she said as they broke their embrace.

“You should have told me you were meeting Betsy, Mad Dog. I would have told you she’d be late.”

“Not,” Betsy Rourk said playfully, throwing a right gently to Alli’s jaw.

“Is so,” Alli replied.

“Just get the coffee, baby and quit telling stories on me.”

Alli turned back to the shop, and Betsy sat down. The mist I’d seen in her eyes was gone, replaced by a look of resolve.

“Good kid,” I said, watching Alli leave.

The woman facing me paused and said. “Yeah, good kid. But I didn’t come here to talk about Alli.”

“What was it you came all the way from Frederiksted to talk about?”

“My husband,” she said. She paused, and then began again. “I know you’re going to think I’m over-reacting, but my husband, Bob, didn’t come home last night, and this morning, when he still didn’t come home, I panicked and called Mike Taylor down at the dive shop, and he gave me your name. He said you used to be a police detective, and sometimes you helped people on the island.”

“Mrs. Rourk,” I began as Alli walked over with a coffee for her and a pot for my empty cup.

“Mrs. Rourk,” I said, trying to ignore Alli, who seemed to be lingering at our table, “I’m retired. You need a real detective like Sol Mimi or Kelly Tilson, not an old retired guy like me.”

“Mad Dog, that’s not true,” Alli said. “You found Sandy’s car, and Mr. Stilman said you went all the way to San Juan to find his son for him.”

I shook my head, trying not to show my annoyance at Alli for butting into the conversation. “Alli, please,” I said as I turned to her and raised my hand. The second I did, I felt bad. The wait for the meeting had me edgy, and I knew Alli was just trying to help.

“OK, grumpy,” she said, turning and walking away.

When I looked back at Betsy Rourk, her face had erupted into a million-dollar smile, and the very devil was sparkling in her eyes. “Got quite a fan there, Mr. Cotton.”

“Call me, Mad Dog.”

“OK, Mad Dog. And I’m Betsy.

“OK, Betsy. You don’t seem like the type of woman that would panic and call me just because your husband went missing a few hours. What’s up?”

“I don’t panic. My husband, Bob, is no angel, and him missing a few hours is no surprise.” She looked me in the eyes. “Is that a fair answer?”

“Fair,” I agreed, sensing there was more to this than just a missing husband.

“The last time I saw Bob, he and Tony Rasser were heading out to Isaac’s Bay to dive.”

“What time was that?” I asked.

“About five in the evening.”

“Night dive at Isaac’s?”

“Yeah,” she replied, studying her hands. The mist in her eyes was returning.

“Not the best plan,” I said.

“Bob and Tony dive three or four times a week. They both know their stuff.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I used to go out to Cane Bay with Tony when he was doing a lot of underwater photography.”

“I thought I recognized you. Bob and I used to teach at Cane Bay Dive Shop.”

I thought for a second and then remembered a bubbly brunette who taught at the shop about seven years ago, when I first came to the island. “You dyed your hair.”

“No,” she smiled, flipping the curly hair on her shoulders. “I quit dying my hair.”

“Bob? He’s a tall red-headed guy?”

“You got it.”

“OK, so Bob and Tony head to Isaac’s Bay. Have you tried calling Tony?”

“That’s part of the problem. I kept trying to call him all night and finally got hold of Meg Rattles, his new live-in. She said Tony didn’t come home either. She thinks they’re probably sleeping it off at some beach party.”

“Could be.”

“No, it couldn’t,” Betsy said, reaching into the black purse and pulling out a small pack of tinfoil. She sat for a second and held it in her hand, as though deciding, and then cautiously looked around. Finally,

she slowly reached across the table and handed it to me.

“Heavy,” I said.

Betsy looked down at her hands again and back up into my eyes. “Open it.”

Cautiously, I peeled back the foil and looked at what it had concealed, then looked around the street. “Talk to me,” I said.

“Two days ago, Bob and Tony went diving at Isaac’s Bay and found that.”

“Two days ago?” I looked down again into the foil and knew I would have been back making a second dive as soon as I could. “They didn’t go back the morning after they found this?”

“Bob didn’t, but he spent all day at the Whim Museum doing what he called ‘research.’ I don’t know what Tony did.”

“Research on what?”

“I don’t know. Bob just came home, gave me that piece of foil, told me not to open it, and left to go diving. I put it in my purse. I figured it was a sappy gift he wanted me to open when he was around.”

“But you opened it.”

“Yeah, this morning when he didn’t come home.”

“You know what it is?” I asked.

“I think so.”

I started to reach across the table to return the package, but she stopped me and said, “No, you take it. I’m not superstitious or anything, but I think it’s

evil.” I pushed my hand toward her and said, “Look, Betsy, this is bigger than me, and you need to take this.”

“I’ve been hearing stories about you for years,” she answered. “I don’t trust anyone else. You keep that damn thing as my retainer. Mad Dog Cotton, you go find my husband.”

There was something in her deep, green eyes that ripped into my heart right there at the coffee shop on King Street. I knew, or figured I knew, that Bob and Tony both were dead, but I couldn’t say a word.

Staring into my eyes with an intensity that made me want to flinch, Betsy Rourk said, “Damn you, Mad Dog. I don’t give a shit what it costs or what you have to do. You find my Bobby, and you bring him home!”

Then, as I sat there in silence, she grabbed the big black purse, stood up, and walked away.

I sat for a long time, spinning the piece of foil in my hand.

Finally, Alli broke my concentration. “Looks like you’re stuck with the tab.”

“Yeah,” I said half-heartedly, and handed her a ten. Alli headed back into the shop.

I stood up, looked around the street like a pursesnatcher getting ready to hit a mark, and walked off the porch, tucking the tinfoil and the crust-covered Spanish gold coin it hid deep into my pocket.

Chapter

2



With Bob Rourk's find giving my heart a jolt like it was a new pacemaker, I left the coffee shop. Only two blocks up King Street in a hidden alcove was my first stop, my favorite jeweler and an old friend, Sam Drumand. Sam was a long-time dive buddy and had a fascination with the treasure of the Spanish fleet. His little store offered a large selection of antique Spanish coins.

In the short walk to Sam's shop, I must have processed a million thoughts. What the hell had happened to Bob Rourk and Tony Rasser? Was the coin in my pocket real? How did it get to Isaac's Bay? Was it really found at Isaac's? How had I ended up working on this case?

When I entered Sam's store, his wife was behind the counter.

"Morning, Ann."

"Morning, Mad Dog. Looking for the boss?"

I nodded, and she waved me over to a door. "He's in working."

I walked behind the counter and into Sam's office.

"Got a second for an old friend?" I said as I entered the small cluttered space.

"Sure," he said, pushing a small rolling chair toward me.

Not really in a mood to visit, and anxious to find out what I had, I pulled the foil-covered coin out of my pocket and gave it to Sam.

He looked at me with a curious smile and began to unwrap it. When the coral-crust coin was free of the foil, I saw it all for the first time. As Sam moved the coin in the light, I could clearly see letters and shapes inscribed low on one side where the crust had been removed. The part of the coin that was exposed, though it was misshapen, looked like it was minted yesterday. The gold flickered and glistened from its corral womb as if screaming to be free. The sight was mesmerizing. For a moment, I could fully understand the insanity such an object could create. I had an irrational urge to take the coin, thank Sam, and leave.

He didn't say a word, just took out a black magnifying loop and put it in his right eye. Although I was watching him closely, I couldn't see the slightest reaction. I made a mental note: "Never play poker with Sam Drumand."

After looking at the coin for nearly two minutes, Sam took a small metal scraper out of his drawer and looked up at me. "May I?" he asked.

When I didn't protest, he began picking the crust from the coin.

"Someone," he said, "took some of this off and polished away this part here." He pointed to the small part of the coin in which the glimmer of gold could be seen.

"Yep," I said, not wanting to say what Betsy had told me about how it was found.

"I suppose you're gonna not tell me shit about this. That right, Mad Dog?" Sam asked.

"Well, buddy," I said, "I hate to be that way, but that's pretty accurate."

“So, buddy.” He mimicked my term of endearment. “Should you get more of these, would you consider letting me sell them out of the shop?”

“Sure,” I said giving my old friend a nod. Then he turned back to hunch over the coin, scraping and peering at it, pulling a book from his shelf and reading intently.

Finally, Sam looked up and said, “Old friend, what you have here is an eight-escudo gold coin. My guess, because this is not my expertise, is that it was minted at the Spanish mint in Bogota, Colombia, between 1625 and 1642.”

“So,” I said after pausing to take in what Sam had told me. “There a lot of these floating around?”

“In a word,” he replied, “no.”

“The coins were shaped odd back then,” I said, trying to reach into my mind for some treasure fantasy facts stored there.

“Right,” Sam said. “The coin you’re looking at is a cob coin the Spanish made quickly. Before sometime in the mid-1600s, they made a real pretty coin with fine workmanship. Then they changed the process and made sloppy misshaped ones like this.

“There were cob coins from the wrecks Mel Fisher found in Florida that were minted in the 1700s. This one is much older, and to be honest, I looked once and couldn’t even find one on the Internet.” “What’s it worth?” I asked.

“A lot.”

“Thousands?”

Sam’s face finally lost its poker steel, and a large, excited smile rippled across it. “Buddy, this little fucker is probably worth more than your car.”

“Give me a break, Sam. My car isn’t worth thousands.”

“Well, this little coin is worth tens of thousands if it’s an original.”

After making me double pinky promise to market any coins like it that I got in his shop, Sam called Gene Triller, a professor of history at the University of Puerto Rico and the only one he knew who could give me the full scoop on my coin. “Gene’s a real expert on antique Spanish coins,” he said as he got off the phone, “and wants to see what you’ve got as soon as possible. I set up an appointment for you for six tonight if you can get there by then.”

I checked my watch and figured that with a little luck, I could make it. Then, with the largest retainer I’d ever received nestled safely in the front pocket of my favorite khaki shorts, I used Sam’s phone to call Joyce Baker at the seaplane port three blocks away. Joyce was an old friend of my wife’s, but more important, she was also the manager of Seaborne Airlines.

Luck was with me. Sam’s professor in San Juan was my best lead. I had to see him soon, and Joyce could get me on a 3:20 flight. But I had to hurry. She’d already be bending the one-hour check-in rule. After we hung up, I took a deep breath for courage and called my wife.

Cheri answered on the first ring, and I told her what I could without mentioning things like the coin that I thought my new client wanted just between her and me. In her silence after I said I’d be on the next plane to Puerto Rico; I could sense her mind analyzing every word I spoke. Cheri had been a deputy U.S. Marshal on the island for twenty years before she retired. I knew she was itching to know all the facts, and like a puppy watching a ball being thrown, wanted in on the

game. One of the things I love about her, though it can be a little annoying, is that she's a born sleuth. I knew that as she was hearing my words, she was straining to fill in the blanks.

"Mad Dog, you know we were supposed to go to dinner with Del and Margie tonight," Cheri said with a playful hint of frustrated anger.

"Look, honey, I know, but trust me this is important. This Betsy Rourk woman I met with today really needs help. I talked with Sam Drumand, and he gave me the name of a professor in Puerto Rico who maybe can shed some light on this case. I should be back by tomorrow afternoon."

"You know you forgot your cell phone." Cheri was figuring a way to come to town and get more information out of me. "I can come right in with it and bring my gun and makeup kit."

"Yeah," I said, knowing it was a little lie. I hadn't forgot the damn phone. I left it home because it was like a leash, and I hated being bothered by it. Just this once, though, I wished I'd brought it so I could make some calls on the case while I was in San Juan.

"You want me to bring it down?" Cheri asked. Her voice made it clear she wanted to go with me.

"No," I said, resigned to my phone-less fate. "The plane leaves at 3:20. I'll just wing it."

When I hung up, it was 2:40, and I hurried to the seaplane port. For some reason, I felt ten years younger. I had the hot coin in my pocket and a case I felt getting more interesting with every minute.

I wasn't really sure why I was flying to San Juan instead of hunting for Bob and Tony or going out to Isaac's Bay to look around, but my instincts told me to check out the coin first, so San Juan it was.

I'd parked my old pickup in the lot at Fort Christiansted, so I decided it would be quicker to leave it there and walk. The plane was only five minutes from Sam's shop in a little walkway leading to the Board

Walk along the Christiansted Harbor docks. Passing over the old walkway's cobblestones, I wondered if one of the men who owned the coin in my pocket might have walked these same stones hundreds of years ago. The Virgin Islands past was all around me on the street, the buildings that lined both sides silent reminders of their history. I turned right out of the narrow walkway and went down the bustling docks, surrounded by camera-toting tourists and hurrying locals. An east wind carried the familiar perfume flowing over me, a mix of sea breeze, ocean rot, and fish. The air gave the back of my neck a gentle tickle, and the scent of the ocean carried a touch of adventure. My step quickened, and I realized with a smile that I was back in the hunt. It felt good.

When I got to the seaplane office, Joyce said she'd booked me into the last seat to San Juan. I got my ticket and walked over to sit in the tent-covered waiting area between the building and the sea. I had no idea what lay ahead but suspected it would be far different from those few peaceful moments in a lawn chair backed against the security fence, just admiring the boats and dreaming of treasure.

The scene relaxed me, until I noticed the snatches of arguing voices the breeze was blowing my way. I turned toward the ticket counter, where a large black man in a white T-shirt was clearly becoming angrier because he couldn't get on the flight. As I watched, he turned and hurried away.

“Definitely not on Island Time,” I thought, as he practically ran down the dock toward the shops and restaurants.

After seven years of living on St. Croix, I could never help notice the obnoxious rarity of someone like that. An uptight tourist, I figured, but it wouldn’t be long before the island had him sipping rum and lying placidly in the sun.

The pilot came into the tent shade and began calling names to board the plane. As I stood when I heard mine, a hand touched my shoulder. Cheri was standing there on the other side of the three-foot chain-link fence, cell phone in one hand and a small brown bag in the other. “Phone. Keep it on,” she said with a stern look. She knew my habit was just the opposite.

Cheri lifted the brown bag, and her look turned to a smile. “Dock kit,” she said. “Brush your teeth and shave so you don’t look like a bum.”

There was no time to talk. Suddenly, I hated leaving her, and I think she saw it in my eyes as she reached both arms over the fence. The hug was a long one. “I can’t believe you’re going to San Juan without me,” she said teasingly, accepting that I’d be going alone.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine,” I said.

“I’m not worried about you,” she lied. “I just want to go shopping.”

“Sir,” a voice behind me said. “We need to go.” The pilot was the only one left in the waiting area. I looked at him, then gave Cheri a quick kiss and walked down the floating dock to the plane.

Within minutes, I was bouncing across the waves and off to Puerto Rico. God, I love an adventure.