

The Gold of St. Croix

By 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, six-foot 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 thought. “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 making a decision, 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 took a look 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 some kind of 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 purse-snatcher 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.