Chapter One / St. Croix

From the first week I landed in St. Croix, I became part of a drug culture. Drugs were available everywhere at all times. Especially reefer. You could smell it on every other breath of air. In bars, on street corners, in passing cars, on buses, at the beach— people grew it in their home gardens and smoked it like cigarettes. It was so much a part of everyday life even the local police didn't bother with it, which is why the island was also a depot for smugglers.

The U.S. customs office was kept busy inspecting oil tankers from the Middle East which supplied crude oil to the refinery at Hess Oil. That left sailboats and speedboats from the British and French and Dutch and independent islands to slip into St. Croix at night and unload their cargoes of marijuana and pharmaceuticals from Europe and underground labs. Then U.S.-registered pleasure boats would haul the cargo up to Florida, where it was easy to unload into trucks at any backyard dock along the intercoastal waterway.

But all I did was smoke it. I never thought dope would lead to trouble, and I certainly had no idea it would land my ass in jail. While I was in Key West smoking dope and wondering when I would find my writer's voice, everything in St. Croix had changed. Racial tension in St. Croix had always run high. There were a lot of white haves and a lot more black have-nots. The tension mounted when a radical black party, based on the Black Panthers, formed and publicly called for white extermination. The racial divide widened, and the anger boiled. Homes were broken into. People were murdered. Stores were looted. Hotels hired extra security to patrol the grounds and beaches. Tourism dropped. The news media picked up the story and before long the wealthy white people who were living in the States and building retirement homes in St. Croix decided to cancel their house jobs. It was that sudden. Now, nobody was working, black or white. The story must have been reported in the Florida papers, but in Key West I was "too busy" to read one and didn't hear about the situation until after I arrived. By then, it was too late to turn around.

All my father's building jobs had been canceled. I was trapped. Instead of finding ourselves building new homes or hotels, my father and I worked at building large wooden packing containers to fill the need of the hundreds of people who were scrambling to empty their homes and ship their belongings off island. The white exodus was on. All day I built crates. Because money was tight I didn't draw a paycheck and instead reluctantly agreed with Dad to be paid in room and board. With the little money I brought from the States I just managed to keep gas in my car. And there was no way I was going to save money for college.

After my year of racial harmony at the King's Court I found the turmoil in St. Croix very disturbing. I understood the black point of view, but there was no way I could get them to see my sympathies. I was just another white target on legs. The level of anger was beyond reason. Black activists were preaching white extermination and the place was getting ready to explode. It wasn't long before I wondered if I could build a crate and ship myself off the island.

One morning after I had just smoked a joint rolled from old roaches a man came in with hand-drawn plans for a crate which included a false bottom about four inches deep. I remember him in detail. His name was Rik. He was in his late twenties, blond, shag haircut, green eyes, and a silver-dollarsized circular burn scar on his forehead. When I asked about the scar he said it came from being shot with a flare gun.

"What was that like?" I asked.

"Blinding," he said dryly.

I didn't ask more, but he said he was shipping art and archaeological artifacts that needed extra protection. Fine, I thought, let him ship the crown jewels. It was none of my business.

After work I went down to the dockside bar where all the whites tanked up on duty-free Heineken. I took a seat at the bar, next to my dad. As I looked across the room I spotted the guy with the scar sitting by himself. "What do you think of that guy?" I asked.

My dad took one look at him and had him pegged. "He's a dope smuggler," he replied.

"How do you know that?" I asked. "Just do," he said. "It's a gift I have."

I told him the guy had ordered a crate with a false bottom.

"He probably wants to smuggle cash or dope or gold into the States."

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe he has Indian artifacts or pottery or stuff he doesn't want shippers to find."

"Don't be naïve," he said. "I've got his number. Dope is his game. But I don't give a damn where his money comes from as long as it helps get us off this rock."

I felt the same way. I wanted off. Since I didn't have much money it didn't matter how lousy the bookstores were, and the library was little help. It was so hot and humid inside I had to scrape the mold off the spines of the books in order to read the titles. Nine out of ten books I looked up were missing. The librarians just shrugged when I mentioned the apparent theft problem. And if I complained too much they turned up their desk radios and played at being busy.

Because I couldn't find the books I wanted, I read what was available. The biographies were closest to the ocean and were especially moldy and not as desirable for the thieves. I read a few books about revolutionaries: Che Guevara, Emma Goldman, an odd book titled Mutual Aid by Peter Kropotkin, who was an anarchist, and a book by Alexander Berkman titled ABC of Anarchism. All this political.reading made me think the island was ripe for an all-out race riot and political revolution just like the Haiti Graham Greene had written about in The Comedians.

Since I was trying so hard to make books lead my life, I didn't want to read them and then just put them back on the shelf and say, "good book," as if I was patting a good dog. I wanted books to change me, and I wanted to write books that would change others. I was still trying to find something significant to write about and so, like all those political writers, I realized the only thing for me to do would be to jump right into the middle of the racial tension and use my wits. I remembered reading a quote from a newspaper journalist that stuck with me: "Where there is blood, there is ink."

I thought I'd put that quote to work. I got my notebook and a pen and ventured down to the Black Revolutionary Party headquarters to see if I could interview any of the leaders. There were about twenty black guys sitting under fluorescent lights in an old warehouse. They were playing cards and drinking rum. The walls were covered with Black Power posters, pictures of Malcolm X, and green, red, and black maps of Africa. When I walked in, all heads turned toward me. It wasn't quite like stepping into a military ambush, or being on the front lines in Spain, or witnessing the aftermath of an atomic bomb, but the atmosphere around me was definitely hostile. There was a man in the back sitting at a desk. I assumed he was the leader. He had an Afro-pick stuck in his ball of black hair and he was talking loudly to someone on the telephone.

When he saw me he abruptly hung up and gave me a long, studied look. "What you want, white boy?" That question sure cut to the chase and everyone watched to see how I'd take it. There was no going back.

"I'm looking to interview someone about the race relations," I replied. "They seem pretty bad to me, and I want to know more."

"What's there more to know than what you can see with your own eyes?" the man shot back. "The white people own the island and the black people work it like wage slaves." That brought loud agreements from the other men, but they seemed to laugh and enjoy the situation more than be angry. For the moment, the oddness of my showing up was funnier than it was confrontational. That was a relief, but I wasn't sure how far I could keep going.

"I guess I want to know what you are going to do about it. I mean, how are you going to go about getting your share?"

"See," the man said, pointing at me, and looking to the other men in the room as if he were a preacher, "see, this question goes directly to the heart of the matter. Because we don't want a share of what we own, we want all of what we own. And that is the issue that cannot be solved with the white man unless we come to blows."

I stood still, and felt instantly trapped inside a stage play of rehearsed hostility. I looked from side to side as much as I dared. The anger was so sudden I was afraid to make eye contact with anyone for fear they might

make something personal of it. And I couldn't tell if my courage had evaporated or if it was common sense that told me to get out of there, so I just asked, "Well, do you have a book I can read, or some material that will explain what your goals are? And then I can understand it all a bit more, and we can talk about it later?"

"What's to understand?" a man sitting to one side asked. "He already told you: the island belongs to the black man, so the black man is going to take what is his and be done with it. We don't need to make it more clear than that."

"Thank you," I said, and like some cub reporter I began to scribble a few words down on a small pad of paper. My hand was shaking badly.

"Besides," the first cut in, "how can we trust you?"

I didn't answer. But another man did. "Give him a gun," he suggested. "Give him a gun and let him go out there and shoot a white man dead. Then we'll trust him."

I started to back away.

"Yeah. Give him a gun. If he's on our side, let him show it."

"I can't do that," I said.

"Then here's some advice," the same man continued, pointing a finger as black as the barrel of a gun at me. "Don't be coming in here as if you can play with the big boys. Revolution is serious business. You just turn your white ass around and go back to the white bar you come from and drink a cold white man's beer while you can because as the song say, 'When the revolution comes, Hertz is not going to put you in the driver's seat.'"

I knew it, too. "Okay," I said, turned around and fixed my eyes on the door, and as I walked toward it, I hoped I would make it. And when I did make it, I walked quickly to my car and took off with both hands on the wheel to keep them steady. I drove directly to the all-white bar and ordered a drink. I didn't know what to do next, so I went out back and smoked a joint, then returned and ordered another drink. And another. I should have taken out my journal and written about what had happened. But I was so afraid of the incident I ran from it rather than write it down. Somehow, I didn't trust

myself. I didn't trust that my own words would make a difference to anyone, black or white— even if the ink was blood red.

A few nights later Rik stopped by the warehouse. My dad was gone and I guess that was the moment he knew he could talk to me about his big plans. He wanted to pack the crate and have me screw it together, as he didn't have a screw gun. Before we got busy he pulled out a hash pipe and a piece of hash the size of a candy bar. "You mind?" he asked.

"Fire it up," I said.

He cut off a gram and lit the pipe. He took a big hit and passed it to me. We went on like this, loudly inhaling and exhaling, until the pipe was finished. He went to his car and returned with a stack of square plastic containers about the size of cigar boxes. The edges were sealed with silver duct tape. We both knew they were filled with hash. What else could it be? But I didn't say anything. He slipped them into the false bottom, wedged them tightly together with wadded-up newspaper, then I screwed down the next layer of plywood. That was it. He didn't have anything else to send in the rest of the three-foot-square crate.

"Seems odd to ship an empty box," I ventured, before screwing down the top.

"Yeah," he said.

I looked around the warehouse for some heavy items. We threw in a bag of concrete, some broken pieces of cast-iron garden statuary, and a twenty-pound ingot of hard tar, then carried it to his trunk. It wouldn't fit all the way in.

I went to get some twine to tie the trunk lid down, and when I returned he said, "I'm a little low on bread, but I could pay you in hash if that would work for you."

"Yeah," I said.

"That'll work for me." Since I wasn't paid anything from my dad, getting paid in hash was a good deal. Besides getting off the island, it was the only other thing I wanted.

He snapped the bar of hash in half and gave me some. It must have been about two ounces. Just before he pulled away he said, "By the way, if you see a sailboat with red sails pull into the harbor, give me a call." He told me the name of his hotel.

"Sure," I replied. "I'll keep my eyes open." As soon as he left I made a pipe out of some plumbing fittings and aluminum flashing. I got so high I passed out in the warehouse and slept on a sheet of packing foam.

A couple of days later I looked down at the harbor from our hillside house. There was a sailboat with rusty red sails reefed around the booms of the fore and aft masts. A red jib was set and the skipper was carefully trying to steer it toward the dock. The boat looked to be about fifty feet long, and every few minutes the skipper had to let go of the wheel at the stern, then dash to the jib to make an adjustment, then dash back to the wheel, then back to the jib. It was obviously a job for two men, and it was equally obvious that he was by himself. As the boat slowly picked its way through the moored yachts, I thought of Rik. Then, just before I went inside to call him on the phone, I took one more glance down at the boat and watched as it drifted head-on into the dock at the Hotel on the Cay. I could hear the faint thud as the bow hit the pilings.

After work I met Rik at the dock. We got in a dinghy and rowed out to the boat. *Beaver* was painted across the stern. It was a sixty-foot gaff-rigged ketch with a wide beam— a real tub— but as I stood on deck it felt solid against the harbor chop. We were silently met by a tall well-tanned man wearing cutoff jeans and a T-shirt. He was British, and his name was Hamilton. I guessed he was forty years old, maybe fifty. He had a full beard, as bushy as a giant sea sponge, and intense blue eyes. He stood as still and meditative as a Greek Orthodox apostle. He didn't say a word, and as he looked me over, top to bottom, I felt like I'd been rubbed with sandpaper.

"We have a proposal to make," Rik said. I looked at Hamilton. He pursed his full lips and nodded. "First," Rik continued, "before we get into the particulars, do you think you could help us sail this boat to New York, like, leave this week? And take, say, six weeks to deliver it?"

The thought of it hooked me right away and I was ready to push off immediately. That night, if necessary. With so much around me going the

wrong way, I figured the boat was my exit. Plus, I'd end up in New York, where all the writers ended up. "Yeah," I replied. "I can do that."

"Then here's the deal. But if you don't take it, you can't say a word to anyone."

"Okay," I said, glancing at Hamilton, who looked even more morose as he leaned over me.

"We have two thousand pounds of hash buried somewhere," Rik said. He pointed toward the ocean. "I need to fly to New York and arrange the deals, and we need someone, you, to help Hamilton sail the boat to Manhattan, where I'll be waiting. Your job is just to get the boat there, and for that you get ten thousand dollars. Cash. Of course, we can't pay you until we've made some deals, so you might have to stick around and help out a bit."

All I heard was the number— ten thousand dollars, cash. This was the jackpot. The answer I was looking for. My exit from St. Croix and my entrance to whatever good school would have me. I didn't think of the danger involved with breaking the law. I didn't even consider that I had no idea how to sail a large boat, or that Hamilton might kill me and dump my body off the coast of New Jersey — that anything bad could possibly happen. I just saw my exit from the island and entrance to my future, and it was glorious and good and calling me and there was no way I was going to get a better offer in a lifetime of sitting on St. Croix. And even if I had a good job it would take me years to save that kind of money. But now I could do it in six weeks and all for little work and lots of adventurous fun. I was ready. My heart was pounding. "Count me in," I said, smiling. "I'll go home and start packing."

"Not a word to anyone about the cargo," Hamilton finally said with his eyes bearing down on me. "No bragging to your friends. No loose talk. No nothing."

"Not a word," I replied earnestly. "I can keep a secret. You can trust me."

"I don't have a choice," he said, with some reluctance.

After that, there wasn't much to say. I was so anxious to get going I swam to shore and drove my car up the steep unpaved road to our house. All the way up I kept saying to myself, "Now, settle down and think. Think about what you are doing. Be careful. Think about what you are risking." But I wasn't answering myself. I was so excited I knew I wasn't weighing the danger. I was ecstatic. I felt invulnerable. When I reached the top of the hill I looked down at the harbor. There was the sailboat floating on the blue water like a toy. My ship had come in, and I was ready to play.

The next day I told my mom and dad I'd been offered a sailing job, and had taken it and that I might be moving to New York.

"But you just got here," my mom said, disappointed.

"I can't blame you," Dad said. "If I could afford it, I'd get off this rock, too. Maybe the last crate I make will be my own— and hopefully it won't be a coffin."

I hoped so, too. I felt bad for him, but I had to go. Two days later he came down to the boat with me to look it over, and make sure it was seaworthy. He had been in the navy. I set it up in advance for Hamilton not to be there and to just leave a note saying he was grocery shopping. I hadn't told Dad that Rik was involved. He already had him pegged, and I just knew if he laid eyes on Hamilton he'd peg him, too, and never let me go. We spent about an hour looking over every square inch of the boat. I could tell Dad was on to something, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Finally he said, "Well, I guess this tub is shipshape." Then he looked me in the eye. "Is this on the up-and-up?" he asked.

"You bet," I replied. "Then smooth sailing, sailor," he said, and slapped me on the back. "My only regret is that I'm not going with you."

I'm so glad he didn't.