

Blood Silver

The Yocum Dollar

by

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PROLOGUE

The flat black thing turned out to be a laptop computer.

Clint Smith, twenty-seven, had run across all kinds of personal items before – eyeglasses, cameras, bikini tops, a deck chair once – but never a computer, one hundred and twelve feet below the surface, and he couldn't help but wonder, had it been thrown into the lake in a fit of frustration or accidentally dropped, much to someone's horror?

Maybe an unhappy wife, whose husband was supposed to be spending his vacation time focused on her, sneaked it overboard in the middle of the night.

He loved how a guy's imagination seemed so much freer down here than up in the dry world.

Maybe the water patrol had been swarming in on a terrorist. If his diabolical plans were on the hard drive, he would have had to make that computer disappear before “the man” boarded.

Clint was able to recognize the crooked “E” in the four-letter brand name because, even below the second thermocline, the ambient light on this day afforded a visibility of nearly seven feet.

Dewey Short, Duck Island, Breezy Point, Moonshine Beach – the spots most scuba enthusiasts stuck to – Clint and diving buddy, Daniel, avoided. Been there, done that.

Once, he was able to lift some risqué photos from an SD card out of a small Nikon he found. Would he be able to dry this laptop enough to peruse its hard drive? Maybe it held the world's only key to Einstein's unified field theory.

They had decided to dive the Joe Bald area in an attempt to locate the original confluence point of the James River and the White River before the lake was created, not for treasures necessarily but more to see if such a point were discoverable or discernible in some way.

When a river is dammed to make a fifty-three thousand acre lake, can a person come along seventy-some years later and chart that river's original course? Would it be possible for a scuba diver to pick his way back along the river's natural path from point A, the dam, to point B, where the two rivers originally merged into one? That's where the local history would really be, wouldn't it? And possibly, one or more of the legendary Yocum Silver dollars. Who knew? Clint didn't.

As a child, and to this day, he sometimes imagined finding one of the fabled trade coins. He had no expectation of ever actually laying eyes on one but a guy could always dream.

When his fingertips dipped into the silt to take hold of the laptop they touched the edge of a small hard disc. He pinched it immediately.

Coins possess a mystical quality that impels a human hand to behave that way, automatically clenching them, and that's what his right hand did, tightly. With his left, he tried to wave away the murk he unsettled and then dolphined himself away to find Daniel to whom he gave the sign for both to go up.

Standing in the boat with the disc in his left palm, he gently wiped the mud away with his right index finger. When it began to gleam, his pulse quickened.

"What is it?" Daniel asked, removing his tank.

Clint gazed away as though studying the condos across the lake on the hill-side, in the hundreds now, but he didn't see them. His mind's eye was peering through a hole in time to another world long since gone. "Take me in," he said.

"What?" It was only just past eleven. "Why?"

Clint lowered his bottom to the deck, folded his legs and studied the coin. "I've got to go visit my great grandmother."

“Now?”

“She’s a hundred and two, Daniel.” He looked up. “No time to waste.”

Y

Her name was Ruby Smith, but Clint, since the age of two, had always called her Gramma Yoka. She was by far the oldest resident of Lake Shore Assisted Living.

Tears welled as she held the coin in her hand and studied it. “Do you think it’s real, Jerry?”

“I’m Clint, Gramma Yoka, Jerry’s *son*. Jerry, your grandson, is your daughter Martha’s boy, and I’m Jerry’s boy.”

She sighed, confused.

“Yes, I think it’s real.”

“Your Grampa got killed building that dam. Did you know that?”

She meant his great grandfather but there was no point in correcting her generational time warps today. “Yes, Gramma, I knew that. In 1955, right?”

“1955. Got caught in one of those gigantic cogs. Crushed the life out of him.”

“I know,” Clint said, nodding sadly. “He used to tell my dad, your grandson, Jerry, the story of the Yocum Silver Dollar and he, my dad, Jerry, your grandson, passed it on to me, the story, I mean.”

She turned the coin over to inspect the other side. “Trade Coins,” she said softly. “That’s what they called them. Whose is it?”

Clint shrugged with a smile. “The way I see it is . . . well, as the great, great granddaughter of Arnold Yoachum, I think this coin belongs to you, Gramma.”

“Me? What would I do with it?”

Clint pulled a chair up near hers. “Now this is just an idea that hit me on the way over, Gramma, but I was thinking you might want to donate it to the museum at College of the Ozarks.”

“Ralph Foster’s place?”

“Right.”

“He’s the same age as me, you know.”

“Ralph passed away in 1984, Gramma, but the Ralph Foster Museum is bigger than ever. Here’s what I think we should do. You donate the coin and we record you telling the story to go along with it.”

“What story?”

“The story of the Yocum silver dollar.”

“That was your grampa’s story, Jerry, not mine, and I can tell you as sure as shootin’ most folks never believed a speck of it.”

Clint leaned in and put a hand on her shoulder. “They will now, Gramma. They’ll have to.”

She thought about it for a moment then returned her eyes to the coin. “It’s pretty, isn’t it, Jerry?”

“I’m Clint, Gramma. Yeah,” he nodded. “It’s pretty. It’s beautiful.”

PART ONE

It is not possible a land which has within itself everything to make its settlers happy can remain unnoticed by the American people.

—Moses Austin
1761–1821

CHAPTER 1

Cahokia, Illinois Territory

October 12th, 1813

His mother had given birth to three big sons with no need to bother a doctor, so his wife could do it too, he assumed. But tarnation, how long did it take? As an event, James, the middleborn of the three Yoachum boys, thought this would be a wonderful moment, but his wife, Ruth, was not enjoying it at all, nor had she been, not a second of it, since seven fifteen that morning, six hours ago, when she announced the baby was coming. The baby had not come and Ruth, God bless her, toiling to pass the new person into the world, had been suffering painfully the whole time.

James finally gave in to his younger brother, Solomon. “You’re right, Sol, go get the doctor. Hurry.”

Fifteen minutes later, to the sounds of a blood-curdling scream, the doctor burst through the door with Solomon on his heels.

“Get back, Jim,” The physician ordered. “Stand away, both of you.” He pulled the blanket aside that James had arranged for modesty’s sake, then drew a sharp breath. “Good Lord.”

“It’s all right Ruth,” James called to his wife, “the doctor’s here. It’ll go quicker now.” He stared at the back of the doctor’s head. “She’s been hurting terrible, Doctor. What can you do?”

"I think I can save the baby," the doctor said.

"Yeah. Good," James said, and then thought for a moment. "Wait. What do you mean?"

"I think I can save the baby," the doctor said sharply. "Step back. Don't watch. Let me get this little thing out."

James, confused, turned to his brother.

Solomon's look was one of deep regret.

"Wait, hold on," James said turning back to the doctor. "If it's between the two of them, forget about the blasted baby. Save my wife."

"Too late," the doctor said. "Sorry. Now, please, shut up and let me work."

"Ruth?" James called nervously over sickening, sticky noises. "Ruth?" He could not fathom the doctor's words or the way he had spoken them, as if in anger. "What do you mean, too late? Too late for what? Ruth?"

Then there was that sound which had not changed in thousands of years, the first cry of the newborn as the doctor swung around with an eight-pound bloody mess and laid it in the crib, prepared weeks earlier by its mother, nineteen-year-old Missus Ruth Yoachum.

"Ruth?" James shouted.

The doctor reached into his bag for a clean cotton wipe, then looked up to James. "Mister Yoachum, your wife did not survive." He shook his head. "She should have, but this is no time to blame anybody."

"What are you talking about?"

"She should have had a cesarean days ago. Weeks ago. Surely you knew things weren't right."

James could not comprehend. "Ruth?" he shrieked, kneeling by her side. He studied her anguished gaze. Dark curls matted by sweat clung to her delicately featured face, her large brown eyes lifeless.

His younger brother stepped forward to put a hand on his shoulder. "She's gone, Jim."

James went rigid. What kind of doctor was this? She was alive when the doctor walked in, then hunched over her, and now, three minutes later, she was . . . dead? "I ought to kill you," he snarled, twisting toward the doctor.

"You think I'm the one to blame?" the doctor said. "What time did she go into labor? Huh? What time?"

As the doctor and Sol waited for an answer they saw a sudden change come over James as though someone had just blown out the candle that had

lit his soul for twenty years, and then James Yoachum, the man, appeared nearly as lifeless as his lost wife. Quietly, barely breathing, he blinked and then walked out of his house.

Sol and the doctor went to the door and watched as James wandered away.

"She should have had a cesarean days ago," the doctor repeated.

"I don't understand" Sol said. "What do you –"

"That baby was never going to pass naturally through this girl." He turned back to tend to the wailing newborn. "She just wasn't built for it."

Sol sighed and stared at Ruth.

The doctor pulled the blanket over her face. "There's things need to be done here," he said. "We lost one and we got a new one, both need to be dealt with in a right timely fashion and I don't think your brother's in a state to do any of it."

"He'll be all right," Sol said.

"Let's hope so. In the meantime, I know people. You stay here. I'll send some women over and get the coroner to tend to Missus Yoachum."

Sol nodded, tears welling in his eyes. "Thank you, Doctor."

James was wandering the streets of Cahokia, Illinois, the bustling capital of St. Clair County.

People on foot and on horseback moved out of his way as they stared at the huge man with the yellow hair who was obviously not all right.

Y

Around two that afternoon, Solomon spotted James on a barstool in the Dancing Fox Tavern on Water Street.

He paused in the door to study his brother, trying to calculate some measure of the whiskey he may have consumed.

He didn't look wobbly, but then James was nearly six and a half feet tall and did not go down easily for anything, including alcohol.

He had never been a drinker, not really, not after having survived childhood with a German father who drank daily and amused himself by shooting dogs. In the end it was an enraged dog owner that shot Heninrich Yoachum to death when James was fourteen, Sol, eleven.

Today was different. Sol could tell now by the way James swayed on the barstool, but who could blame the man? He had just lost his wife, Ruth, whom they had known, both brothers, since they were little and so yes,

James was drinking, pouring alcohol into his troubled soul, and Sol could feel his brother's torment as he watched him from the door, sitting there, deranged with the pain of unfathomable loss as the alcohol streamed its anesthesia through his veins.

Sol laid a brotherly hand on James's shoulder to let him know that he was there, standing by his side on this day of unspeakable heartache. But something needed to be talked about here, and it was an urgent thing and so he had to speak. "Jim?"

"Hey, little brother, pull up a stool."

"James, you have a son. You're a Pa now. I'm an uncle."

James stared ahead. "I don't want to be a pa."

Sol seated himself. "Well, you started out as a son, didn't you?"

No answer.

"Then worked your way up to being a brother, and you were always a swell brother, and now you've been promoted to being a pa." Sol's effort was to frame the rungs of life as a foregone conclusion of responsibility, but still there was no response. "It's terrible about Ruth but you got to come on now and take care of your boy."

James shook his head. "Just leave him be. He killed his own mother so it's natural that he not survive, you know, without a ma. That's just natural. It happens sometimes. A deer don't drop its fawn the right way, they both die. That's nature's way."

"But we ain't animals, Jim, and your baby is alive and kicking."

"I don't care."

"You remember Missus Hargas? Rachel Hargas? Had a baby about a month ago? Doc says she said she'd be glad to wet nurse your boy for you."

"Quit calling it my boy. It ain't my boy. I don't want the blasted thing."

Sol stood back, angry now. "Well, then why don't you just go home and shoot him? Shoot him right through his dark curly haired little head. You'll have to take good aim. He ain't no bigger than your foot and he squirms like a—"

A smashing right fist to the face put a stop to Sol's rebuke and knocked him to the floor.

James rose from his stool, and muttered, "Leave me alone." He paused to get his balance and then hobbled out the tavern door.

Sol rubbed his bleeding mouth but yelled loud enough for James to hear, "He's Ruth's son too, Jim. He's a Yoachum!"