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STEPHEN COONTS

A RELIC FROM THE PAST
A BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

SAUCER

AN ADVENTURE

STEPHEN COONTS



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S A U C E R

NONFICTION BOOKS BY STEPHEN COONTS

**THE CANNIBAL QUEEN
WAR IN THE AIR**

NOVELS BY STEPHEN COONTS

**AMERICA
HONG KONG
CUBA
FORTUNES OF WAR
FLIGHT OF THE INTRUDER
FINAL FLIGHT
THE MINOTAUR
UNDER SIEGE
THE RED HORSEMAN
THE INTRUDERS**

To Rachael and Tyler

THERE ARE AT LEAST 100 BILLION STARS IN THE MILKY WAY.

RIP CANTRELL WAS HOLDING THE STADIA ROD, TRYING TO blink away the sweat trickling into his eyes, when a bright flash of light caught his eye. The light was to his left, near the base of an escarpment almost a mile away.

Careful not to disturb the stadia rod, he turned his head to get a better view.

"Hold that thing still for a few more seconds, Rip."

The shout echoed off the rock formations and tumbled around in the clear desert air, rupturing the profound silence. Occasionally one could hear the deep rumble of a jet running high, but normally the only sound was the whisper of the wind.

Dutch Haagen was at the transit, reading the rod. He and Bill Taggart were the engineers surveying a line for a seismic shoot. Rip was the gofer, working a summer job before he returned to college in a few weeks.

Rip concentrated on holding the rod still. Fifteen seconds passed, then Dutch waved his arms.

Now Rip looked again for the bright spot of reflected light.

There! Shimmering in the hot desert air, at the base of that low cliff, maybe a mile to the north. The afternoon sun must be reflecting on something shiny.

But what?

Trash? Here in the central Sahara?

The three men were a hundred miles from the nearest waterhole, two hundred from the nearest collection of native mud huts. A twin-turboprop transport with fixed landing gear dropped them here three weeks ago. "Your nearest neighbors are at an archaeological dig about thirty miles west," the South African pilot said, and gestured vaguely. "Americans, I think, or maybe British."

As Rip thought about it now, it occurred to him that he hadn't seen a single piece of man-made trash since he arrived. Not a crushed Coke can, a snuff tin, a cigarette butt, or a candy wrapper. The Sahara was the cleanest place he had ever been.

He put the stadia rod on his shoulder and waited for Dutch to drive up.

"Had enough for today?" Haagen asked as Rip stowed the rod in the holder on the side of the Jeep.

"We could do a couple more shots, if you want."

Dutch wore khaki shorts and a T-shirt, was deeply tanned and pleasantly dirty. Water to wash with was a luxury. In his early thirties, Haagen had been surveying seismic lines for ten years. The job took him all over the world and paid good money, but at times he found it boring. "We've done enough for today," he said with a sigh.

Rip looked again for the flash from the sun's reflection as he got into the passenger's seat.

"Look at that, Dutch."

"Something shiny. Candy wrapper or piece of metal. Old truck, maybe. Maybe even a crashed plane. Found one of those once in this desert."

"Let's go look."

Dutch shrugged and put the Jeep in motion. Rip was still a kid. He hadn't burned out yet. The central Sahara was a big adventure for him, probably the biggest of his life.

"Did you find that plane around here, Dutch?"

"Closer to the coast, in Tunisia. Old German fighter plane. A Messerschmitt, as I recall. Pilot was still in the cockpit. All dried out like a mummy."

"Wow. What did you do?" Rip held on to the bouncing Jeep with both hands.

"Do?" Haagen frowned. "Took a few photos, I guess. Stuck my finger in some of the bullet holes—I remember that."

"Did you get a souvenir?"

"One of the guys pried something off the plane. I didn't. Didn't seem right, somehow. It was sort of like robbing a grave."

"Did you bury the pilot, anything like that?"

"No," Haagen said softly. "We just left him there. The cockpit was his coffin. The plane had been half uncovered by a windstorm a few weeks before. The cockpit had a lot of sand in it. The wind probably drifted sand back over the plane within days after we found it."

Rip pointed at the sandstone cliff they were approaching. "About there, I think."

"Yeah."

Haagen stopped the Jeep and watched Rip bound away. He was a good-looking, athletic kid and smart as they come. The boss picked his résumé from a pile of two hundred engineering students who applied for this summer job. The kid worked hard, never complained. Still, this was just a summer job to young Cantrell. Rip was too bright to settle for seismic surveying when he graduated next May.

Haagen sighed, turned off the Jeep, and stretched.

The low cliff rising in front of him was sandstone sculpted by the wind, like thousands of similar formations in this section of the desert. It was perhaps twenty feet high, Haagen guessed. The slope of the face was about thirty degrees, gentle enough to scramble up.

"Better come up here and look, Dutch."

"What did you find?"

"Looks like metal. Right in the rock."

"A survey marker rod?"

"Come look."

Haagen slowly climbed to where Rip was perched about ten feet above the desert floor.

"It's metal of some kind, Dutch. Curved, right in the rock."

Haagen reached out, touched it. The metal was exposed for a length of about a foot. Vertically, perhaps four inches of metal were showing. At the maximum, the metal protruded about an inch from the stone.

"Looks a little like the bumper of an old Volkswagen Beetle polished by windblown sand."

"It's no bumper," Rip muttered.

Haagen bent down to study the exposed surface. It resembled steel, yet it didn't. A titanium alloy? It seemed too shiny, too mirrorlike to be titanium, he thought, and the color was wrong. The metal was dark, a deep gray, perhaps.

"Funny thing is, it's right in the rock. *Inside* the rock. Now how do you suppose someone got that in there?"

"Looks like it was exposed as the wind and rain weathered this cliff."

"That can't be right," Rip Cantrell countered stubbornly. "That would mean it was older than the rock."

"It's a mystery," Haagen said dismissively and turned to look out over the desert. Dirt, sand, and stone, but it *was* beautiful. He loved being outdoors. Even though he had an engineering degree he had never wanted an "inside" job.

Rip picked up a handy stone and swung it against the exposed metal. It made a deep *thunk*.

Haagen turned around to watch. Cantrell swung the rock three times, hard, then examined the metal closely.

"Didn't even mark it," he announced finally, straightening. "Not even a scratch."

Haagen bent down and again examined the surface, which was smooth, extraordinarily so, without a mark of any kind, like a mirror. Amazing how sand can polish metal. Well, wind-driven sand wears away the hardest rock.

"There're lots of mysteries in this desert. Lots of things we'll never know." Dutch Haagen shook his head, then climbed down the ledge toward the waiting Jeep.

Rip followed him. "Maybe we ought to report this, eh?"

Haagen chuckled. "To Harvey Quick?" Harvey was their boss. "What are we going to tell him? That we found a funny piece of metal out in the desert? Ol' Harve will wonder what we've been drinking."

Haagen grinned at Rip. "Someday you're going to own this oil company, kid, and I'm going to win a big lottery, but right now we both need these jobs."

That evening Rip told Bill Taggart about the find. "It's right in the rock, Bill. The rock is weathering away, and as it does, more and more of the metal is exposed. That's the way it looks to me, anyway."

"What do you think, Dutch?" Bill asked. He was about forty, a heavysset, jowly guy who didn't like the heat. He spent most of his afternoons in the tent plotting the team's work on a computer.

"The kid is leveling with you. I don't know any more than he does. Never saw anything like it."

"Show it to me in the morning, will you?"

"Sure. If we can find it again."

Taggart smiled. "Did I ever tell you fellows about the time we found a still in the Louisiana swamps? Mash was cooking and shine was dripping out the tube. There wasn't a soul around, so we helped ourselves. Didn't get any more work done that day, I can tell you. Ah, that was good stuff."

"There's something inside that rock," Rip Cantrell said, unwilling to see his find so quickly relegated to the tall-tale file.

"Maybe it's Martians," Bill Taggart suggested with a chuckle.

"Or a big black rock," Dutch put in, "like they had in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. You guys ever see that old flick?"

"Before my time," Rip said crossly.

"I hate to bring you wild adventurers back to earth," Taggart said, "but we are going to have to do something about the food supply."

"There's nothing wrong with the food," Rip said.

"You should know. You ate it all. We're darn near out."

"Maybe we should take an inventory, make a list," Haagen suggested.

"I already did that." Taggart passed him a sheet of paper. "Since the food delivery last week, this kid has personally hogged his way through enough grub to keep a caravan of camel drivers eating for a year. Honest to God, I think he has a tapeworm."

"The tapeworm theory again! Thank you, Professor." Rip stalked away. Haagen and Taggart had been kidding him all summer.

"There's something wrong with him," Bill Taggart assured Dutch. "Real people don't eat like that."

Before he went to bed, Rip Cantrell walked a few yards from the fire and sat looking up. Since the desert lacked the haze and light pollution that obscured the night sky in the major cities of the temperate world, the stars were stunning, a million diamonds gleaming amid the black velvet of the universe. Only in this desert had Rip seen the night sky with such awe-inspiring clarity.

The searing memory of this sky, with the Milky Way

splashed so carelessly across it—that was what he would take back to college this fall.

Billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars.

As he had done every night this summer, Rip Cantrell lay down on his back in the sand. The warmth of the sand contrasted pleasantly with the rapidly cooling desert air. Lying spread-eagle on his back it almost felt as if he were free of the planet and hurtling through space.

A meteor shower caught his eye, dozens of streaks all shooting across the star-spangled sky at the same angle.

What was buried in that sandstone ledge?

He made a promise to himself to find out.

“SEE, BILL. I WASN’T KIDDING. IT’S *IN THE ROCK*. AND IT wasn’t pounded in. The rock is real rock, not concrete or some kind of artificial aggregate.”

“Hmm.” Bill Taggart examined the stone carefully. The sun had been up less than an hour and was shining on the metal at an angle.

When Taggart straightened, Rip set his feet, got a good grip on the sledgehammer, and started swinging.

Each blow took off a few small chunks of sandstone. When he tired, he put the head of the hammer on the ground and wiped his forehead. The humidity was nonexistent, yet the air was just plain hot. Already the thermometer was into the nineties. It seemed as if the heat just sucked the moisture from you.

Dutch brushed away the chips with his fingers. “Well, you didn’t dent it. Exposed a few more inches of it, I’d say.”

“What the hell is it?” Taggart asked.

“Something man-made from damn good metal before that rock was laid there,” Rip told him.

“And what might that be?”

"I don't know," Rip admitted. "Dutch, you been knocking around these deserts for a lot of years. What do you think?"

Haagen took his time before answering. "What's the weather forecast?"

"Clear and sunny," Rip replied, "as usual." He got the weather off the satellite broadcast every morning. "Not a cloud in the forecast."

"We're a day or two ahead of schedule. What say we take today off, drive over to the archaeology dig, introduce ourselves to our neighbors. Maybe they'll let us borrow an air compressor and jackhammer, if they got one."

"Yes!" Rip shouted and tossed the hammer to the sand below, near the Jeep.

"An air compressor," Bill Taggart mused. "I thought those folks used dental picks and toothbrushes for their excavating."

"We can ask," Dutch said and kicked at the metal sticking out of the rock. He frowned at it. It shouldn't be there, and that fact offended him. Frogs don't fly and dogs don't talk and sandstone ledges don't contain metal.

Bill brightened. "Might get a decent meal over at the dig."

"Might even see some girls," Rip said with a laugh. "You two old farts wouldn't be interested, but I sure am."

THERE WEREN'T ANY GIRLS WITHIN TEN YEARS OF RIP'S age at the archaeology dig. In fact, the only two females in sight had been on the planet at least half a century and weighed perhaps thirty pounds more than he did. Taggart kidded Rip about it as they walked toward the office tent.

"What are these people digging up?" Rip asked, to divert Taggart from the subject of women.

"Old stuff," Taggart replied. "The older the better."

The head archaeologist was Dr. Hans Soldi, from a famous Ivy League university. He shook hands all around,

then listened with a skeptical expression as Dutch explained why they needed a jackhammer.

"We have one, to do the heavy digging," Soldi said when Dutch ran out of steam. "Now tell me the real reason you want it."

"It's diamonds, Prof," Rip said. "We found King Solomon's mine. We're gonna jackhammer the place, steal everything we can carry, and skedaddle."

Soldi ignored the young man. "Metal inside rock is an impossibility," he said to Haagen and Taggart.

"It's there, sure enough," Dutch replied quietly. "Whoever put it there didn't know it was impossible."

"I will let you borrow the compressor and hammer, if you will swear to me that you are not disturbing an archaeological site."

"I swear," Rip said. "Cross my heart."

"You others?"

Dutch Haagen got out his pipe and slowly tamped the bowl full of tobacco. "I don't know what we have, Professor. Tell you what—you loan us the equipment and come along. Take a look. We'll bring you back this evening before dark."

Soldi didn't mull it long. He was in his fifties, a healthy, vigorous man wearing a cowboy hat. "Okay, I'll come. I need to think about something besides stone tools."

"Stone tools? That's what you're digging up?" Rip asked incredulously. "People used to live around here? In this desert?"

"This wasn't always a desert," the professor said as he led them to where the compressor was parked. "The climate didn't become extremely arid until about five thousand years ago. Then the wind carried in most of this sand, which covered up the valleys and low places. What we see protruding from the sand today are the tops of hills and mountains."

"So the site you are exploring is at least five thousand years old?"

"More like fifteen thousand years old, I suspect. Man lived here during the Ice Age. We are trying to find evidence that these people cultivated grain."

"By the way," Rip put in, "do you folks have any food left over from lunch? Maybe I can get a snack to take along. I'm sorta hungry."

"Sure, son." The professor pointed toward a tent and gave him the name of the cook.

HANS SOLDI MADE HIS EXAMINATION OF THE SANDSTONE ledge while the surveyors started the compressor and man-handled the jackhammer into position. Rip waited until Soldi was out of the way, then began hammering.

The heat wasn't unbearable if one were accustomed to it. Wearing jeans, long-sleeve cotton shirts, and hats with wide brims, the men instinctively spent as much time as possible in the shade and swigged on water.

"I never saw anything like it," Soldi admitted to Dutch as he watched Rip work the hammer. The scientist had been scrambling around with his video camera, shooting footage from every angle.

"We'll see what Rip can do."

Haagen picked up one of the shards of stone kicked out by the hammer and handed it to the archaeologist. "How old is this, anyway?"

"Offhand, I could only guess. I'll get it analyzed."

"More than five thousand years old?"

"Oh, yes. The desert and the ocean came and went through the ages, many times. Time is so . . ." He flung his arms wide. "We talk blithely of time—as we do death and infinity—but humans have difficulty grasping the enormity