

Sword

A Cord MacIntosh mystery
by Stephen Morrill
First in a series
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Chapter 1

I had been summoned, by a gang of archeologists, to a seedy waterfront warehouse that had been converted into a seedy waterfront warehouse with offices. I could not imagine why archeologists would need a private investigator but if they thought they did, and had any money, I was willing to humor them.

"To get to the point Mr. MacIntosh," Del Taylor was saying, leaning back in his dark brown Naugahide executive chair and steeping his soft fingers precisely over his vest buttons, "Last week, on Monday afternoon, Carl Shifter was performing a test excavation on a condominium site near Narvaez Park on the shore of Boca Ciega Bay. Umm, that's on the west side of St. Petersburg."

"Yes," I said. "I know."

"You do?" He seemed surprised.

"I like to know my way around," I said. There had been a time when my first act on arriving in any new town or country was to plan an exit route. I had put all that behind me now but learning my way around had always been a good habit anyway.

I smiled at Taylor, who was both the president of Florida Archeological Associates and very fat. His three-piece suit, light blue with a broad yellow pinstripe, placed him, I estimated, one step above a used-car dealer in the clotheshorse category. To help out, he wore a string tie with a turquoise-and-silver clasp, what the Navajo would call pawn goods. He was about sixty and his hair was full, pure white, and baby-fine. He was very pale for Florida and I could see his pink scalp through his thinning hair, especially in the furrows where he ran his fingers from time to time. There was a fat cigar smoldering in an ashtray on his desk. Florida's indoor clean air law obviously meant nothing here. Back when I smoked I was never into cigars and now the stench almost turned my stomach.

Carl Shifter was one of Taylor's two partners and sat on the ratty and lumpy sofa beside me. The third and final partner, John Arledge, perched on a straight back chair against the opposite wall. Shifter and Arledge glared at each other in their spare time and I wondered why.

One fake-wood-paneled wall had pictures of Taylor digging holes here and there around the world. Taylor, Shifter, and Arledge were Florida Archaeological Associates' sole stockholders. I was certain that the cigar smoke hid some underlying mildew and I wondered if these guys had any money.

"Ah, yes," Taylor continued. "Carl is our field man. On that day, just before quitting time, he found a Spanish artifact in an Indian shell mound. A shell mound is the common term for several types of earthen or oyster and conch shell hills built by pre-Columbian native Americans ..." He was launching into lecture mode, his eyes unfocused, his voice developing that singsong rhythm.

I interrupted. "I know what a shell mound is. Tell me about the artifact."

He broke off and glanced at the pictures, perhaps looking for inspiration, perhaps recalling better times. "Ahem. Yes. The artifact was a sword, or to be precise, the remnants of a sword."

"Was there any treasure buried with the sword?" I asked.

Taylor blinked. "Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"Just hoping."

"Er, yes. Anyway, Carl took the usual steps to document the facing, location and depth, then removed the artifact to the lab here." He looked to Carl Shifter.

Shifter half-turned to face me and took up the story. About thirty-five, slightly older than I was, he was a string bean of a man in jeans and a lumberjack shirt with the cuffs rolled back. He was darkly tanned, with faded jeans. His light brown heavy-duty hiking boots looked seriously abused. He also wore thick bifocals with tortoiseshell frames. It gave him a scholarly and bewildered look. The glasses and his six-foot, 150-pound frame made you wonder if he got a lot of sand kicked in his face by beach bullies. I glanced at his wrists and forearms, which were thickly-veined and ribbed with muscle and tendons, the arms of a ditch-digger. I had two inches and thirty pounds on Shifter and I wouldn't have wanted to discuss politics with him.

"Back in the lab I took steps to stabilize the find," Shifter was saying. "To prevent further deterioration caused by handling and by exposure to the elements. You understand?"

Taylor leaned forward to pick up the cigar, the silver tips of his bolo tie tapping the desktop because they were not tucked behind the vest. I frowned at the cigar. Taylor noticed and put the cigar down. I looked to my left to see Shifter waiting expectantly.

I kept the ball rolling. "Sure. Elements."

"Ah. Yes." Taylor, interrupted, running his left hand through his hair. "Don't you want to take notes or something?"

"No. I have a good memory." When wearing a three-piece suit, were you supposed to tuck bolo ties inside your vest like a regular tie? I decided I would give Taylor the benefit of the doubt for now. I wasn't up to speed on bolo ties.

"Yesterday morning," Shifter was continuing, "the sword was missing. No one here had taken it. We searched and found nothing."

"What you really mean to say," I pointed out, "Is that no one here admitted to taking it."

Shifter started to reply but Taylor beat him to it.

"Well, of course," Taylor said. "I called the police and they came and questioned all of us, first some men in uniform and then a sergeant. But all they did was get fingerprint powder on everything in the lab. We were half the day getting it cleaned up."

Shifter nodded. "It was obvious that they weren't very interested, even though this was potentially one of the biggest archeological finds to come along in decades." He seemed amazed that the Tampa P.D. hadn't scrambled extra shifts to find a stolen antique.

"Why?" I asked. "It was just a sword. Are you sure you didn't find a few gold coins?"

"Forget the gold coins," Shifter said. "That sword might have established once and for all that Hernando de Soto landed in St. Petersburg. It might have finally driven the nails into Max Sohn's coffin."

"Perhaps, perhaps," Taylor said. He patted the air in Shifter's direction and glanced at me. "A matter of professional dispute. These things happen."

He looked at the cigar, then reached forward and carefully tamped it out. It figures, I thought; he's a saver.

"Nevertheless, the sword is missing, the police seem unlikely to stir themselves on our behalf, and I asked my attorney, Ms. Feinstein, for advice. She gave me your name. She said you were an excellent private detective. She also said that you had once been a mercenary somewhere in the Middle East. I gather that she exaggerates."

"Alice Feinstein? With Yankmar, Bowen?" I left the mercenary part unanswered. That was behind me and there were several places, parts of the Middle East included, that I preferred to forget — or preferred that they forget me.

"Er, yes. That's correct," Taylor said.

"By the way, I'm a private investigator," I said. "The police get annoyed at anyone calling themselves a private detective."

"What the difference?"

"I don't know. Ask them. Did the police find any sign of a break-in? A jimmed door? Broken window? Hole in the roof?"

Taylor shook his head, but it was Shifter who answered, catching me off guard.

"No. In fact we have no windows in the building. And in answer to your next question, we have no burglar alarm. We've never had anything that anyone would want to steal. At least not before."

I suppressed my annoyance. The alarm system had been my next question. "Who discovered the theft?"

"I did," Shifter said. "I checked the sword first thing when I came in. And it was just ... gone."

I stared at my hands, folded in my lap. They let me. I took a deep breath, which I instantly regretted because of the lingering cigar stench.

"Dr. Taylor," I said after a moment. "This job could be expensive. I don't know how long it might take. Is this sword really that valuable?"

"Well actually," John Arledge said from his corner, "its value has yet to be determined, but in all probability ..."

"Shut up John," Shifter snapped. "As usual, you don't know shit about archeology."

I looked at Arledge, who had shriveled like a day-old hibiscus blossom. Taylor ignored them both. "Carl is almost certainly correct in his belief that the sword will write a new page in the history of the Spanish conquest of Florida. Will you take the case? Money is no object."

I smiled. "You sound like my kind of client all right. But not so fast. Who hired you to do this archeological survey?"

Taylor looked puzzled. "Is that germane?"

"No, it's good old American English. Can you answer the question?"

"Aha. Yes, I suppose. It's Berle Development. Er, that's a company based here in Tampa. Mr. Wallace Berle. Why might that be important?"

"Because I know most land developers would rather have root-canal work than pay for environmental and archeological surveys. Will the fuss over this sword slow down the development of the property?"

Taylor and Shifter exchanged glances. "Well, possibly," Taylor said. "We of course immediately stopped work and reported our findings to the Shippo."

"What's a Shippo?"

"The State Historic Preservation Officer, or SHPO, in Tallahassee."

"You said you had stopped work. So, at the moment, is everything on hold?"

"Well, ah, yes. Certainly our survey must await a review by the Shippo, and no construction may commence until that survey is completed. It is of course somewhat embarrassing to our relationship with Mr. Berle. Not, I hasten to add, that we would lower our professional standards to accommodate outside pressure."

"But he's already asked you to, right?"

Taylor's face flushed. "Let's just have it that we'd like to resolve this matter as soon as possible. And having the artifact in question vanish is certainly no help."

"I'll bet. How long will the delay last and what are this Shippo guy's options?"

Shifter opened his mouth to speak but Taylor beat him to it. This back-and-forth act of theirs was getting annoying. I felt as if I was watching a tennis match. "The Shippo is thinking over his options now and will probably have additional requirements," Taylor said.

"Like what?"

Taylor shrugged. "Anything from a few more test excavations, to re-siting the new construction, to preserving the mound intact, to a full-scale excavation of the mound. Full photo-documentation throughout, of course."

"Well of course. When will you know?"

"I'd hoped to hear before this. He's quick when a major project like Mr. Berle's is delayed like this. And we have already sent in the full details."

"It's been a week. Berle must be getting antsy."

Taylor nodded. "Mr. Berle is most impatient with the pace of events."

I picked at the loose stuffing in the couch a moment. "All right," I said. "I'm on. I'll need a retainer now against expenses and forty hours. Additional billing will be weekly, in advance. Reports by phone any time, and in writing at the end of the job." I named a figure calculated to make Taylor's string tie knot itself. "I take cash, checks, cards or electronic transfer. Your choice."

Taylor frowned. "Is that, er, within the normal fee range for private investigators?"

"Certainly not," I tried to look offended. "I'm the best PI in the business. Your own lawyer told you so. If I want some old bones dug up, do I call Roto-Rooter, or do I hire you guys?"

Taylor frowned a moment. "You're either very arrogant or very good."

I smiled. "Well, I like to think that I'm arrogant. But the truth is simply that I'm good."

Chapter 2

John Arledge gave me a tour. Compared to Taylor, Arledge was merely plump, with black hair slicked straight back and soft hazel eyes, age perhaps thirty. At five-eight, he was six inches shorter than me but he weighed twenty pounds more. He wore a pink knit shirt with a little alligator on it in honor of Florida, and iceberg-lettuce-green slacks with elastic instead of a belt. If he'd had one of those wire hangars sticking out of his head, he would have looked like a Christmas-tree ornament.

Although the warehouse was cool, Arledge was sweating and I thought he could have laid the deodorant on a little thicker that morning. His glasses were the wire-rim kind with the perfectly round lenses like John Lennon used to wear. They were his only stylish point.

There wasn't that much to look at in the rest of the building. Arledge's office was obsessively neat, but Carl Shifter's office looked like a Dumpster. There was a trash can full of trowels and brushes to the left of Shifter's desk. There was no trash can for actual trash, which explained the crumpled papers strewn about the floor. A sign on the door read, *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*. Arledge said he didn't know what it meant. I told him it was from Dante's *Inferno*.

The lab was the largest room. Plain wooden work benches made of two-by-six sawhorse legs and heavy plywood tops took up most of the center. Around the edge were steel storage cabinets. Across one wall, above some work counters, were a dozen clipboards hanging from a row of nails.

In one corner of the lab was a large tub made of plywood and two-by-fours, silicon grout at the seams. It was half full of water. What looked like an electrode was hanging over each end, with wires leading to a small transformer plugged into a wall outlet. A yellow towel hung from a nail in the wall.

Peering down into the tub, I saw what looked like a very old and rusty railroad spike, half embedded in a limestone ball. Several thin streams of tiny bubbles percolated up from the limestone. I could feel the dampness in the air above the tank.

"That's our electrolytic tank," Arledge explained. "That's where the sword was before it was stolen. The ship's planking nail you see was not in the tank at the time of course, but in a separate pail of water to keep it away from air."

I nodded. "You wouldn't want two different metals in the water with an electric current."

"Exactly," Arledge beamed. "You know about this stuff?"

"Lucky guess. I live on a sailboat. Boaters deal with galvanic corrosion too. Would taking the sword out of this tank damage it?"

He shook his head. "Other than the usual rust problems, no. Had the sword been immersed in salt water that would have been another story. I hope the person who took it dried it off well, and a coating of oil wouldn't hurt."

"What shape was it in when Carl found it?"

He shrugged. "Not too bad, actually. The pommel, hilt, grip and guard were in pretty good condition and there was about sixteen inches of blade. The remainder of the blade had rusted away. If it had been buried in sand nothing would have been left at all. But the shell in the mound formed an aggregate around the sword and helped to preserve it against water leaching through the soil. We had gotten most of the aggregate off before it disappeared."

"You must be an archaeologist, too."

Arledge smiled his shy smile. "No. I'm an accountant. Even archaeological firms need a firm hand on the financial tiller. But I take an interest in it, and I guess I pick it up from Carl and Del. It's awfully interesting."

I stared at him. Firm hand on the financial tiller? He must have practiced that in front of a mirror.

"Why would anyone steal the sword?" I asked. "What's your theory?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? But one guess is that it could be a very important find, historically. Then there's the money."

"What money?"

He shrugged. He was a shrugger. "No one can know yet. It hasn't been authenticated. But if it's what we think it might be, it would be worth a small fortune to the right collector."

"Why? Is it gold or something?" Hope springs eternal.

"No. There's some very thin gold wire used to decorate the hilt. But not a hundred dollar's worth. It's not that."

"Then what is it? What is all this?" I asked. "Why does Del Taylor want to pay a lot of money to find it.?"

Arledge shrugged his narrow shoulders again. "As far as Del is concerned it's strictly for the historic significance. Carl probably feels the same way. He doesn't need money. But I've read that swords or other artifacts of that time period, in no better condition and with good provenances, have brought up to a half-million U.S. dollars at auctions in New York, London, Beijing, Singapore."

"Come on. Who would buy half of an old sword for a half-million bucks?"

Arledge smiled. "It is hard to believe, isn't it. Wealthy history buffs, mostly. No one ever knows who the buyers are. They buy through intermediaries and the artifacts never show up in museums, so I assume they go privately."

"Would this sword have that much historic value?"

"Who knows? Any antique dealer will tell you that a good story — which is all that a provenance really is — and a client with a fantasy about the time period, can make for a big payment. But we don't really know if that's why it was stolen, do we? I mean, you have to find that out."

I spread my hands. "I just have to find the sword. Why it was stolen doesn't matter, though it might help me know where to start looking. But why else would anyone want to steal the sword?"

"Who said there could be another reason?"

"You did, John, when you said the money angle was just one guess. Why else would anyone want a 16th century piece of rust with a fancy handle?"

"Well, there are jealousies. There's the history aspect. Who knows?" Arledge glanced around and lowered his voice. "I could tell you more later, if you get my meaning."

I didn't. Then he winked at me and I decided that he was either propositioning me, or he didn't want to be overheard inside this building.

"Sure." I handed him one of my business cards. "Call me when you can. In the meantime can I get a photograph of the sword?"

"Of course. Photos we have. The real thing, we don't."

Chapter 3

Dolores Fuente, the secretary, sole employee, and guardian of the door, gave me a glare as I walked past. She was five-two and heavy and had that gravitas that Spanish matriarcas wore like plate armor. She let me out, barely cracking the door against the wind and then relocking it behind me. It was late March and, officially, it was Spring. Personally, I thought the government could have done a better job with it. I walked around the building through either a light rain or a heavy mist that was coming horizontally from the direction of Cancun, Mexico. I was whistling cheerfully. Del Taylor had transferred my fee to my bank account and I had a client and an interesting case. I'd left my van parked on the side street next to the locked gate to Florida Archaeological's parking lot and I wished I'd remembered to wear the jacket from my foul weather gear.

Florida Archaeological was in the warehouse district between downtown Tampa and the older ship docks. The port had migrated out to Hooker's Point, some distance away and where there was deeper water. The neighborhood here had gone to the rats. The rats were probably immigrants off the ships.

A black Trans-Am, the only car in sight, cruised slowly down the street toward me. Half of the old warehouses had been torn down, or had fallen down, and weedy weeds struggled to raise their yellowed leaves to the sun. But so much salt spray, lube oil and carcinogenic chemicals had soaked into the soil that even the weeds could barely grow. The surviving warehouses leaned together like sheep hoping to hide in the center of the flock where the wolves wouldn't cut them out and finish them off. The wolves in this case were office and condo developers with bulldozers and eyes for waterfront property.

A vagrant, young and wearing an out-at-the-elbows grey wool suit, stood near a tired-looking shopping cart. Our suits, the colors at least, nearly matched, but mine had less dirt ground into it. His hair was short and raggedly cut, and he was clean-shaven. He was five-six, skinny as only street people and supermodels can be skinny, and the suit might have fit me, but it looked like he would have to take two steps before the jacket started to move. The cart was half-filled with empty aluminum soda cans.

As I stepped out onto the sidewalk he put his hand out and looked up at me. "Hey Jack. Got a dollar?"

"Yeah," I said. "I do."

I walked past his outstretched hand. By the time his smile of anticipation had turned to puzzlement and then to a scowl, I was around the corner and at the door of my van. I stood a moment my hand on the door handle. Why do you do that? I asked myself. Who do you think you are?

I got out my wallet, extracted a dollar, and walked back around the corner. I was just in time to see the fatter of two teenagers kick the wino's feet out from under him.

The kid was wearing a black denim jacket with the sleeves ripped off at the shoulders. His pudgy left biceps sported a crude tattoo of some initials and a swastika. His companion, taller, thinner, and wearing an expensive leather jacket, bent to feel in the wino's pockets. They both had shaved heads and the chubby one had something in his left earlobe. The Trans-Am was stopped in the middle of the street, both doors open.

"Scrounging for gas money?" I asked.

They spun toward me. "Get the hell outta here," Skinny suggested. The wino rolled onto his stomach and started to crawl away.

"Laurel and Hardy skinheads, what is the world coming to?" I said.

"Well, looka that," Fatso said. "He's got money. What say you gimme that. For our gas."

Probably too young for Laurel and Hardy. I glanced down at the dollar, still in my right hand. "What say you two get back into your nice muscle car," I said. "And what say you get your upper-middle-class butts back to wherever your worthless parents live." I pulled my wallet out of my hip pocket, replaced the dollar, and slowly replaced the wallet inside my suitcoat jacket, glad now that I'd forgotten my foul weather gear.

Fatso blinked and looked me up and down, which for him entailed some neck-stretching. I could see his beady little brain working on the problem. Fooled at first by the suit and the rain, he hadn't noticed the shoulders, the hands, the height and my ultimate terror weapons, the scar on my neck from when I had forgotten to dodge some shrapnel, and the powder tattoo on my left cheek, up near my eye, where a .50 caliber machine gun with a bad headspace adjustment had once surprised me with an exploding cartridge. I've been around the block a few times, and this fact was just dawning on him.

But he had appearances and honor to maintain. And I did have on the subdued suit. Both kids walked toward me. Behind them the wino got shakily to his feet and sidled sideways to a pile of trash.

"Hey, a mouth." Fatso said, trying it for how it sounded. "He's got a mouth on him." Up closer I could see that he had neck tattoos on both sides and the thing in his earlobe was a safety pin. Skinny was no treat either. He had the worst case of acne I'd seen all day.

"Yeah," said Skinny. "Wonder what else he has."

"He's got money. That's enough," Fatso said. "What say you hand over the wallet, asshole." He produced a butterfly knife, flipped it around in front of his face and pointed the open blade at me.

"That's a neat trick," I said. "You must practice in front of a mirror. Can you make it go away just as fast?" Behind the two skinheads the wino bent and came up with a piece of pipe. I heartily approved, but I couldn't let this go on.

I pulled the Colt Commander .45 out of my shoulder holster, racked the slide to jack a round up into the chamber, and aimed at Fatso's belly. "Drop the pig-sticker," I said. "And don't even think about throwing it."

Fatso stopped. Skinny bumped him from behind. Both of them stood looking stupidly at the pistol. Firearms have that effect on people, causing them to rethink their priorities.

"Holy fuck," Skinny said softly, goggling at the gun from over Fatso's shoulder. I didn't like it that I couldn't see Skinny's hands, so I took a few steps to one side.

"Drop the knife. I'm not going to count to ten. I'll count to one, and by then it'll be too late." I extended my right arm and sighted carefully along the barrel, lining it up with Fatso's left eye.

He dropped the knife.

"Good boy. Now both of you take your clothes off."

They looked at me in amazement. "Do what?" said Fatso.

"Take your clothes off. This isn't some TV show. I'm not going to try to pat you two down."

The wino came over to watch. When the two kids were shivering naked in the drizzle I had him retrieve their wallets and the car keys and give them to Skinny. I herded the two punks, all goose bumps and pimples, back to their car and made them wait while I checked for weapons under the seat and in the glove compartment. Then I got them loaded up. Naked people, even skinheads, tend to be meek and cooperative, especially in a cold drizzle.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Skinny asked, his pale face looking at me from the driver's side window.

I shrugged. "I don't care what you do. Just get out of here and don't let me see you again."

"That's a three-hundred-dollar jacket," Skinny pleaded. "Give me a break."

"I already have. I didn't shoot you. Move it out."

The Trans-Am rolled slowly away. When it was around the corner, I wiped the pistol as best I could on Skinny's undershirt to get the rain off and then put it away. I picked up the other clothes, the knife and a set of brass knuckles that Skinny had donated, and headed for the back of Florida Archeological Associates. The ship channel was just a block away, across an empty field and it seemed like a good place to toss used clothing and weaponry.

I'd forgotten my assistant. "Hey Jack," he said, pushing his shopping cart along after me. "Wait up." The cart had a bad wheel and progressed in a series of cheerful squeak-squeak-thumps.

I stopped and turned. "I'm not Jack, but thanks for the help," I said. I laid my bundle on the ground, took the dollar out of my wallet and held it out, "I'm sorry I was rude. Sometimes I think I'm too big for my britches." I looked down, "Or even for Fatty's britches here."

He took the dollar with a muttered thanks and turned back to his cart.

"My name's Cord MacIntosh," I said. "What's your name?"

He turned back and, for the first time, looked into my eyes. He seemed puzzled. "Danny?" he made it sound like a question.

"Danny what?"

He stood a little straighter. "Belton. Danny Belton."

I extended my hand again. "Mr. Belton, will you forgive me?"

He looked down at my hand. He had a last name and someone who wanted something from him. He probably hadn't had either of those in a long time.

"Sure," he said. He shook hands firmly. I liked that.

"Now, Danny, would you tell me why those punks were roughing you up?"

He shrugged. "They don't need no reason, Jack. That's skinhead fun. Beat up street people and steal their money if they got some. How come you got a gun?"

"With creeps like those guys running loose, everyone ought to have a gun. But I'm also a private investigator."

"Yeah? Well I'm glad you came by. You needin' those clothes? I can get some good money for that jacket."

I looked down at the bundle in my arms. "Sure. But not here. Our friends might come by again. I'll drop you somewhere on my way home."

He looked doubtful. "What about my cart? I don't go nowhere without my cart. I need it for my 'cannin'."

"Put it in the back of the van."

"I can't do that, Jack. Mess up your van."

"You haven't seen the inside of my van. Let's go. And stop calling me Jack."

We stopped opposite a pawn shop on Nebraska Avenue and unloaded the cart from the van. Belton went squeaking and thumping his way across the street. I shouted after him.

"Danny, tell me. Why didn't you just take their wallets when you had them, and run?"

I didn't think he heard but he turned back to me when he got to the other side. "Well, Jack, I don't steal stuff. You didn't take their wallets neither."

"And now?" I gestured. "The clothes?"

"Hell, man. You were gonna throw these duds in the ship channel. I ain't no thief, but I got, like, environmental conscious. You know."

Chapter 4

Home is the Black Pearl, a forty-foot pilothouse ketch docked, when I'm in town, at the city yacht basin on Davis Islands near downtown Tampa. Black Pearl had a small dinghy hanging off the stern but I also had an old 13-foot Boston Whaler that floated, with a cover on it, next to my pier. I did a lot of work around the several seaports in Tampa Bay and sometimes, being a rag-man wasn't enough and you needed a stinkpot. I was one of the few liveboards here and the boat next to mine, a 35-foot sloop named Dawn Treader, was home to Dawn Crane, a computer programmer at Tampa General Hospital on the north tip of Davis Islands. Dawn had arrived just a few months earlier. It was nice to have company.

When I climbed aboard, Spots bounded out through the swinging cat door I had installed in the pilothouse. Spots told me all about his day, then followed me below. Before Spots moved in I'd thought cats were supposed to be standoffish. And quiet. But then Spots, a 25-pound Savannah hybrid, was not your regular cat. I had grown accustomed to Spots, but he put newcomers off considerably.

It was cold below and I turned on the heat. The boat had an air conditioner with a heat-strip in it, and when I was docked I plugged into a shore power connection, so there was no reason, other than cuss-headedness, not to run the thing. At sea I either had to crank the generator at intervals to top off the batteries or get by with the propane gas stove, and a terracotta flower pot I upended and put over it, as a heat source. Spots, of course, had his own heating pad to sleep on, on the vee-berth bunk I also used up forward.

"Would you like my opinion of the Case of the Swiped Sword, the Filched Foil, the Purloined Poniard" I asked Spots. I'd made that up on my way back to the boat and was rather proud of it. Spots yelled at me for some food and I tended to that instead. Dogs have masters; cats have staff. Then I changed into some old wool pants, a flannel shirt, and an oiled-wool sweater, sat in my tiny office in the stern of the boat, looked at the photo of the sword, and tried to think of what a competent private investigator would do to get started. After a while I gave that up and oiled my gun instead. That made me feel I was doing something useful. I called Taylor and asked to meet with Wallace Berle. He didn't like it.

"I can't have a private detective badgering my clients," he said. "You must understand the need for the utmost discretion here. I'd rather not involve Mr. Berle."

"Private investigator," I said. "I'd just bet you wouldn't. Have you told Berle that the sword's gone?"

"Well, no." There was a long silence on the line. "We'd hoped that you could find it quickly. Before our position with Berle Development was further compromised."

"Dr. Taylor, you can't hire me to investigate a crime and then tell me how to do my job. Let me talk with Berle in your office. I won't 'badger' and I won't blab around town. And you'll be there anyway."

He didn't like it, but he did call back shortly to tell me to be at his office at eight that evening. I was finishing up the dinner dishes at seven-fifteen when John Arledge phoned.

"Can I meet with you after you talk to Taylor?" he asked.

"Sure."

"That would be just peachy keen. Where can we meet?"

"Ten o'clock at the Conch Club on Bayshore Boulevard," I said. "Do you know where that is?"

"I can find it. See you then. Please don't mention this to Del or Carl." He hung up. Just peachy keen?

Chapter 5

The door was still locked when I returned to Florida Archaeological Associates that evening. Del Taylor let me in and offered a drink from his dusty cabinet. I turned him down. Carl Shifter was sitting on the tattered sofa with a drink already half-finished. There was a bottle on the table in front of him and I deduced, by the melting ice cubes in his glass, that he had topped himself off at least once. I sat beside him. Arledge was in his chair as before and an extra chair had been moved in from another room. It was vacant.

"I have briefed Mr. Berle by telephone," Del Taylor said to me. "He now knows about the sword, about us finding it and then losing it."

"How did he take the news?"

Taylor grimaced. "Badly."

Wallace Berle showed up twenty minutes late. He was a beefy man, five-eleven, two-thirty. He had thick black hair cut medium with a wave in the middle, and dark brown eyes. He must have been the last white man in North America to grease his hair, and I could smell the hair oil from where I sat. Taylor offered him a drink, which he declined with an impatient glance at his watch.

"I gotta go in a few minutes," Berle said. "I'm due at a political fund-raiser."

Shifter helped himself to a another drink while Taylor made the introductions. Berle perched on the edge of a chair and looked at his watch again. It looked like an expensive one, maybe a Rolex Oyster, I thought, not that I knew what a Rolex Oyster looked like. When he pulled his coat sleeve back I could see that his shirt had French cuffs with huge scrimshaw ivory cufflinks. If Berle had heard that elephants and whales were in short supply in the world, he didn't care. He had type-A impatient body language, seeming about to surge forward even while sitting still.

"Ah-hmm," Taylor started. "Mr. MacIntosh, I've briefed Mr. Berle and told him that you had questions for him, and he's been kind enough to make time in his busy schedule to be here."

"We all have to make sacrifices," I said.

"I also assured him," Taylor continued, his voice sharpening, "That you would be discrete with the situation."

Before I could say anything to that Berle coughed. Discretely.

"What exactly is this MacIntosh guy supposed to be doing for us?" Berle asked Taylor. He hooked a thumb in my direction. I didn't answer and neither did Taylor. After a moment, Berle sighed. "In business," he said to Taylor, "I've learned that money talks and you gotta put your cash where your mouth is. I'll buy in on this. Whatever you're paying this bozo, count me in for half."

Taylor shrugged. "Half it is."

I smiled. "This would be the bozo talking. I agreed to work for Dr. Taylor. I don't care where he gets the money to pay me but let's not confuse renting my time with buying me."

There was a silence. Then Taylor spoke up. "I'm told he is very good at what he does."

After a moment Berle gave me a low-budget smile. "You're just a grubby little gumshoe. You do what you do for money. Don't get your shorts in a knot. If I decide to buy in on your hustle, what do you care?" He looked at Taylor. "I'll talk to you later about this."

"I have to wonder what's pinching you about this," I said to Berle. "Do you care about the sword, or are you angry because this is delaying the construction of your building?"

"Why, we want to find the artifact, of course ..." Taylor said from his desk.

"I don't give a damn about this sword," Berle said. "I do give a damn about my construction loans. The clock is running and my interest charges are mounting up while Del and his crew screw around."

His face reddened. "I hired Florida Archaeological Associates to solve a problem, not to create new ones. If it were my call, I'd forget the sword and forget the report to Tallahassee. I've gotta get those buildings in the ground."

"Come on, Wallace," Taylor protested. "You know I can't ignore this. Carl was just doing his job, and so am I. Those are the rules."

Berle gave a derisive snort to show what he thought of rules.

"I'm curious," I said. "Why did the city of St. Petersburg sell you a public park?"

Berle smiled, and it was a predatory smile. "Because they need money. That's why everyone does everything. Besides, it isn't a real park. It's just a bunch of jungle in there. Probably someone died and willed the lot to the city. Happens all the time. Any city owns dozens of little parcels like that. I did the city a favor, taking it off their hands."

"But why did you hire Florida Archeological Associates? There was always the danger they might turn up something historic."

"I thought you'd been told that."

"Tell me again, then. In your own words, if you please."

"Okay, but quick. I gotta run. I hired Florida Archaeological Associates because my development — it's four condo buildings — is big enough that state law says I gotta have studies done."

"I've heard of DRIs, developments of regional impact," I said.

Berle gave out his feral grin and shook his head. "No more of that bullshit. Me and some buddies got the whole DRI concept tossed by the state legislature. We ..."

"Why, bribing our legislators must have cost you, oh, hundreds of dollars."

"... got the state back on the pro-development track. Got rid of most of those petty restrictions."

"Yeah. Must have been annoying to not be able to pave over a beach or build a bunch of cheap apartments on a state park. I mean, what do tourists spend here anyway?"

"You're being an asshole," Berle said, "but you're not far off. 'Highest and Best Use' is the requirement. A beach or a swamp or a river or a cattle-ranch is little or no money in taxes to the counties, and the old Florida families sitting on those things like the money I pay them to get off. But we still have some annoying little rules to follow. Some permits to pull."

I nodded. "And this, in turn, requires an archeological survey of the site?"

"That's only part of the bullshit. There's environmental, drainage, traffic, and a bunch of others." Berle waved a careless hand. "I got experts for all that. None of them have balled me up like this, though."

"Come on, Wallace," Taylor protested, "You bought a parcel with an Indian mound on it, for God's sake. We didn't have any choice in our actions."

"Sure you didn't. Like you couldn't have taken the damn sword home and not told anybody about it." Berle looked at me. "I've used Florida Archaeological Associates before. They're quick on the site, and quick with the paperwork. But not this time. This time they're killing me."

"You neglected to mention," Carl Shifter drawled, "that we're accurate. The reason our paperwork comes back so fast is that the state trusts us to do a conscientious job." He had a little trouble pronouncing conscientious and I darted a glance at his glass. Nearly empty. "And that's just what we're trying to do for you now," Shifter said.

Berle glanced at his watch. "Can we get to some kinda point here? I got a city council candidate waiting on me."

"Yes, let's," I put in. "There was no sign of any forced entry when the sword was stolen. Who's got keys to the front door here?"

Taylor thought a moment. "I usually open the place each morning. Sometimes Carl will be here before me. And either myself or Carl or John Arledge is here every evening. The only full-time employee is Dolores Fuente, our secretary. She comes in at nine-thirty and leaves at five. She hasn't got a key. For other jobs we have a list of part-time people we call in at need. But they're only here when one of us is here."

I spread my hands. "If what you say is true then either you, or Carl Shifter, or John Arledge stole the sword."

Taylor shook his head. "No. I don't believe it. The thief either had a key, obtained earlier somehow, or broke in using a technique not obvious to the Tampa police."

I turned to my left. "What about you, Carl?" I asked. "Do you agree with Taylor?"

Carl Shifter took a last swig of his drink. He was drinking straight bourbon, and I didn't think he was handling it well, which was why I wanted him to talk. There were spots of color high on each cheekbone, hard to see under the tan, but there if you knew where to look.

"I think Del's right" he said, looking into his empty glass. "Because I know who took the sword."

That got everyone's attention.

"Well?" I said into a thunderous silence. "Don't be shy. Name the thief."

Shifter put the empty glass aside. "We know who wants that sword to disappear. Wallace Berle." Shifter pointed a trembling finger at Berle. "And he also has a key."

Taylor and Berle started squawking at each other. Shifter raised his voice over them. "Wally borrowed my pickup truck the Friday after I found the sword. Last Friday. Some ... somebody from his office dropped him off and he spent an hour wandering around the site. I told him about the sword then. I was excited."

Del Taylor shot a glance at Berle. "When I called you this afternoon, you didn't tell me that you already knew of the sword."

"Must have slipped my mind," Berle said. He grinned his feral grin.

"Then Wally came to me and said he needed to get back to his office," Shifter was going on. "He borrowed my truck and left. Later, two of his secretaries came by the site, one driving my truck, the other following in a car. They gave me back my truck and keys and left in the car."

Berle and Taylor had fallen silent. Shifter, his long speech over, looked around a little defensively, picked up his glass, and looked startled to realize that it was empty.

Berle was glaring at Shifter. Taylor was glaring at Berle. I picked Berle and focused upon him. I wondered if the politicians he gave money to called him Wally.

"Don't you see," Shifter said plaintively. "My office key was on that key ring. He had plenty of time to have a copy made."

Berle was on his feet. "I don't have to take this from you, Shifter," he spluttered. "First you try to screw over your boss with a takeover attempt. Then you try to blame me, one of your best clients."

Taylor was patting the air with both hands. "Please, please. Carl, Wallace, calm down." Neither paid him the slightest attention.

"You forget that you got competition these days," Berle told Shifter. "Maybe next time I'll use Bill Shote. Hell, maybe I'll use him to finish this job."

Shifter had folded his arms across his chest and was glaring defiantly up at Berle. He clearly didn't take threats very well. I could relate to that.

"Wally," he said, "you have the morals of a warthog."

Warthog? I thought. It seemed unfair to warthogs.

"What would a creep like you know about morals," Berle said. "Try cleaning up your own personal life." He turned to Taylor. "I'm leaving. Call me on the phone if you want to talk to me again. And get this maggot out of your organization." He stalked out.

I heard the front door open and close. One less warthog on the premises. We maggots and gumshoes sat and looked at one another.

"Great," I said brightly. "I think that went very well."

Taylor seemed shrunken in his seat. "Carl, what is it about Wallace Berle that so offends you?"

I could have told Taylor myself but he hadn't asked me.

Shifter seemed lost in thought, staring at the floor. Then he glanced up at Taylor. "You wouldn't understand, Del," he said softly.

Taylor seemed suddenly to remember me, for which I was sorry. "Mr. MacIntosh," he said. "I guess your meeting hasn't been all that productive. I'm sorry."

"Do I still have a job?" I asked. "If Wallace Berle has fired you, then do you still need me?"

Taylor waved that away. "Mr. Berle is, ah, impetuous. He'll be back."

"In that case, you and Berle are going to have to decide, at your next tête-a-tête, what to do about me."

Taylor had the decency to look embarrassed. "I'll calm him down," he said.

"I understand the sword could be worth quite a bit of money. Does Berle know that?"

Taylor looked even more embarrassed. "I haven't said anything to him. No one can really say what the sword's value is, or if it has any at all, or if the state would even let us keep it. All that still awaits evaluation."

"Us? Doesn't the sword belong to Berle. It was found on his property by his hired contractors — you."

"Yes." Taylor leaned back in his chair to give his stomach more room for a big sigh. "He's really going to be upset when he finds out that we not only lost the sword, and thus precipitated this crisis, but that the sword itself is potentially valuable."

"You did not "lose" the sword. It was taken from you." I turned to Shifter. "What did Berle mean by your "takeover attempt," Carl?"

"Nothing. It's nothing" he said sullenly, looking at the floor again. I looked to Taylor and raised one eyebrow.

"Ah-hmm. I'm thinking of retirement some day," Taylor said. "I'm still the largest stockholder though. We've occasionally discussed the possibility of my being bought out. But that won't happen for some time yet, and has nothing to do with this problem."

"Who is Bill Shote?"

Taylor waved a hand, dismissing. "Competition. Just as Berle said. He's president of Shote Archeology. Ah, he does the same thing we do."

"Is he the only competition in this area?"

"Er, yes, for all practical purposes."

"Did Shote steal the sword? If he's your competitor, he might get a kick out of embarrassing you."

Taylor shook his head slowly from side to side. "No, he wouldn't. He's not that kind of person."

"I don't have a lot of experience with stolen antique swords," I said. "Do you mind if I look Shote over?"

Taylor spread his hands. "As you wish. Did you not, er, tell me earlier today not to set constraints upon your investigation?"

I smiled. "I said you shouldn't tell me how to do my job. Keep that in mind next time you talk to Berle."

Chapter 6

I was walking to the van when I heard a squeak-squeak-thump in the darkness behind the adjacent building. It was Danny Belton, pushing his shopping cart along from Dumpster to Dumpster, looking for aluminum cans. He waved cheerfully.

"Got a good price for that coat," he said. "Better'n cannin."

I got a flashlight from the van and held it for Belton for a half-hour while he filled the battered shopping cart. I learned that Belton worked at day-labor sometimes and despised people who didn't work at all but who just "flew cards" at the curbside. Belton had a "card" too — a cardboard sign asking for money — but he preferred to go 'cannin' or scrounging for aluminum cans or other metal for resale. Belton knew the price-per-pound for glass, copper, and aluminum, and, when I joked that he was, in a way, in the commodities market, he actually knew what the commodities market was.

When we were done I handed the flashlight to Danny. "Keep it. How can you find an honest man without a light?"

"Huh?" Danny said. Not up to speed on Diogenes, apparently.

"Speaking of light. Why don't you do this in the daytime?"

"'Cause the cleanin' people throw this stuff out after dark," Belton replied, "and the truck comes to empty this Dumpster first crack 'o the morning."

"How do you know that?"

In the glow from the flashlight Belton looked scornful. "'Cause this here is my turf. It's like, my job to know."

I nodded. I appreciate competence, in any form.

Chapter 7

The Bayshore Conch Club faced away from Tampa's downtown waterfront toward the homes and condos on Davis Islands and Harbour Island. An expanded bungalow house, it had ferns, revolving ceiling fans, staff desperate to tell me about their specials, and lots of double-hung windows with wooden Bahamas shutters. Tonight the windows were closed, but in nicer weather everything would be open.

John Arledge was perched on a stool at a small, high, round table in the back of the bar section, a beer in front of him. I told him to move to a table in the restaurant section and we sat at one by a window.

"Rules, I said. "Can't sit at the bar while carrying a concealed weapon."

"You're armed?"

"Often."

He looked toward the bar. And back at me. "The bar is twenty feet away. And they'll bring all the drinks you want, over here."

"I don't make the rules. Don't ask me to explain it."

He looked at me a long moment. "What was your first name again?"

"I don't know that I mentioned it. It's Cord. Didn't I give you a card?"

I whistled up a server and asked for some Laphroig on the rocks, neat. I liked the Conch Club because they actually carried that brand.

"Is 'Cord', like, short for something?" Arledge asked.

"Short for Cordwainer," I said.

"What an odd name."

"Not to me."

"Here's your waitress," Arledge said. A woman slid my glass onto the table in front of me. I could smell the peat from where I sat. "I believe you're supposed to call them servers now," I said once she was out of earshot.

"Single-malt scotch," Arledge said, looking at the glass. "Grow hair on your chest."

I nodded. "Laphroig would grow hair on a billiard ball. I've read that it's like drinking a smoked kipper."

"What's a kipper?"

Southerners can be like that; they want to talk about the family, the crops, the hunting dogs, in this case my libation of choice, before they consider the possibility of thinking about maybe getting down to the business at hand. I nudged him into action.

"You mentioned collectors or jealousy as possible motives for someone to steal the sword," I said.

He nodded. "That was why I wanted to meet with you outside of the office. You need to know about some things if you're to do a good job."

I waited. I was always happy to have people tell me how to do a good job. Eventually Arledge continued. "The presence of that sword in that shell mound, at

that depth, could establish that Hernando de Soto landed in St. Petersburg first. In what was to become St. Petersburg."

"De Soto?" I said. "I thought the place was named Narvaez Park."

"It is. Narvaez was another Spanish explorer, earlier than de Soto. We know for a fact that Narvaez landed along the coast somewhere near Narvaez Park, possibly at the park site itself."

"Well," I said. "If I was Narvaez, and there was a park there named for me, I'd land there too."

Arledge shook his head. "You don't understand. The park wasn't called that back then. It was named for him later."

"I was joking, John."

"Oh. Sorry. I guess I don't have that much of a sense of humor."

"Never mind that. I thought the official site of the de Soto landing was near Bradenton," I said. Bradenton was on the Manatee River, on the south shore of Tampa Bay. A huge concrete cross marked the supposed landing site today and there was a popular sailboat anchorage nearby where I had slept many a night.

Arledge nodded. "The official story is that he landed at Shaw's Point, where the Manatee River meets the bay, on May 31, 1539. There's a national historic site and park there. The archeological community has long thought that the Bradenton site was correct."

"Is this where Max Sohn comes in?" I asked.

Arledge's eyebrows went up. "I'm surprised that Del Taylor would have told you about that."

"He didn't. Carl Shifter mentioned it this morning."

Arledge thought a moment. "You don't miss much."

"So tell me about Max Sohn."

He took a sip of beer first. "Professor Maxwell Sohn worked out, many years ago, the proof that de Soto landed in 1539 at Bradenton. That proof was confirmed by the Smithsonian Institution, and the Shaw's Point site is the start of the de Soto Trail, established by the Florida Department of Natural Resources. It runs up to the Florida panhandle and you can hike parts of it.

"But there's been suspicion for years that Sohn may have been wrong. For one thing, it wouldn't make sense to land south of the entrance to Tampa Bay, when de Soto planned to march north anyway. Why walk all the way around the bay? And why not land on familiar territory? Narvaez had landed north of the bay entrance eleven years before, in 1528, and de Soto was perfectly familiar with that expedition."

"I've heard their names," I said. "But what happened to those guys?"

"Narvaez and de Soto? Narvaez fought with the natives here, then marched into north Florida and Alabama, where he was attacked by the natives up there. Then he built some small boats to sail along the Louisiana and Texas coast. It was a disaster. Of the more than four hundred men and women, and eighty horses, that landed here, only four men survived to reach Spanish settlements in Mexico. One of the survivors, Cabeza DeVaca, wrote a book about it."

"Which you've no doubt read," I said.

"Actually, no. But I understand that it was rather fanciful, exaggerating his own heroism, and speaking much about the silver and gold to be had in North America. He is the origin of the tales of the Seven Cities of Cibola. Those wild tales were, in turn, what brought de Soto here."

"Now we're making progress," I said. "Tell me the wild tales of gold and silver."

Arledge sipped his beer to wet his throat. "Simply put, there wasn't any. There was never any gold in Florida. There were even a few instances of natives handing over gold ornaments and the Spanish getting all excited until they learned the items had been given to the natives by earlier Spaniards."

"Sounds sort of comical."

John nodded. "I suppose it does. But, anyway, other Spaniards had already conquered the best spots, Cortez in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru. In fact de Soto had already been a conquistador in both Central America and Peru. "

I took a sip of Laphroig. "Tell me more about de Soto."

"De Soto wasn't much smarter than Narvaez. He landed with nearly six hundred men and more than two hundred horses, marched north and then explored the southeast before making his way toward Mexico. He died along the way, as did about half his men."

"What's all that got to do with us, here today?" I asked.

"Both men, but de Soto especially, were important early European explorers of America," Arledge said. "If Carl could prove that de Soto landed at the present site of Narvaez Park, and get his proof published in the proper journals, it would make his reputation in archeological circles."

"And destroy Professor Sohn's at the same time," I said.

"Well," said Arledge, "it would certainly discount Sohn's theory."

"I have two questions. Will that sword actually prove what you say? And will the journals publish the proof? You implied that they might not."

Arledge shrugged. "Sohn is a popular and well-respected man in his field. But if the evidence was good enough, the journals would have to publish it. From what I understand the sword was damned good evidence."

"Come on," I said. "Every Spaniard had a sword. This one might have belonged to anyone."

Arledge rotated his beer slowly. He seemed to be reading the label.

I waited. Since he was only drinking a Michelob, either he didn't drink much or he was thinking of something else. Through the window and across the broad lawn I could see the lights of passing cars on the Bayshore and, beyond and higher, the lights of the hospital on Davis Islands.

"I guess I need to explain more fully," Arledge said. "The sword wasn't just any sword. Carl may be able to establish ownership."

"Do you mean to tell me," I said, "that this was Hernando de Soto's personal sword?"

Arledge smiled. "No. That would be a coup. That one's probably at the bottom of the Mississippi River, which is where his men dumped his body when de Soto died. This sword probably belonged to one Juan Velasco. Velasco was de Soto's ship pilot. These conquistadors were pretty much amateurs, relying on the services of knowledgeable seaman to lead them. Juan Velasco was one of the most experienced

shipmasters, having been pilot to many expeditions before de Soto's. He had even served with Pizarro in Peru. Very experienced conquistador.

"Velasco actually visited the Tampa Bay area — which de Soto later called La Bahia de Espíritu Santo — several months before the main expedition landed. Velasco's job was to scout out the best landing sites and the friendliest natives."

"From what you've told me," I said, "they weren't too friendly."

"Well, they hated each other more than they hated the Spanish. There was always room for an accommodation if you were a smart diplomat. Apparently Juan Velasco was just such a man."

"And Velasco's sword?"

"It's obvious now that a prominent Spanish pilot, a lieutenant of de Soto, gave his personal sword to a native chieftain. He would not have done so lightly, and the chieftain would not have traded away a gift that would bring him such prestige. So the odds are ninety-nine to one that de Soto sailed right up to that same beach a few months later."

"So this Velasco guy needed a new sword," I said. "Or maybe he had several, just for gifts."

Arlidge smiled. "Maybe so. But he didn't need a new sword for long. He came back with de Soto and then died of fever while the ships were anchored at the mouth of Tampa Bay, just as de Soto was putting his expedition ashore. The ship's crew buried him at sea just inside Egmont Key, at the mouth of the bay, to keep the natives from getting at the body."

"How do you know that?"

"It's recorded in the ship's logbook."

I raised one eyebrow. "Carl Shifter read a 500-year-old logbook? I can't believe it would still be around."

"It is, in the archives in Spain. Carl hired a Spanish researcher to look it up for him. It's standard procedure."

I digested this. I'd have to treat Black Pearl's log with more respect.

"And how do you know it was Velasco's sword?" I asked.

"Because of the ship manifests. A lot of gold was smuggled out of the New World without paying the royal tax to the Spanish crown. The men had their loot fashioned into jewelry, or eating utensils, or even sword parts. Chains were popular, not only because a returning conquistador could wear one around his neck under his clothing, but because the links could be pried loose, one by one, to pay for small purchases.

"The king's agents cracked down on this by requiring detailed manifests of everything loaded aboard any ship. Men like Velasco, wanting to stay on the good side of the authorities, would carefully detail their personal possessions on those manifests. They might have to pay the tax, but they wouldn't fear confiscation. Copies of those manifests were filed in Spain and have since been used extensively to track New World artifacts."

"It sounds like the Spanish are a nation of pack-rats."

He smiled. "There's a lot to be said for good accounting." He took a manly swig of his beer, in honor of the great accountants of history.

"And the sword Carl found matched the description of Velasco's as recorded in the ship's manifest?" I asked.

"Yes. But without the actual sword Carl cannot present his claim. The photos alone won't do it. You can imagine how upset he is."

"Not to mention that he's missing the potential for a half-million-dollar sale," I pointed out.

Arledge shook his head. "Remember, it's just another sword until we can confirm its authenticity. There's no provenance yet."

"Nor would it be Carl Shifter's to dispose of. It is, I assume, Wallace Berle's property, since it was found on his land."

"I suppose so," Arledge said.

I took a sip of scotch. "Listening to you and ignoring for the moment any monetary value for the sword, the most logical suspect is Professor Sohn. Where does he live?"

"In Sarasota. He's semi-retired now. He teaches at the University of South Florida several days a week. When he made his name he was at Gainesville, at the University of Florida. Carl was one of his students."

"So he comes up here regularly?" I said. The University of South Florida was in Tampa; Sarasota was about fifty miles to the south. "That's convenient."

Arledge held up a hand. "You're getting the wrong impression. Professor Sohn wouldn't steal the sword. He's a scientist to the core. He'd help Carl in any way he could. If new information makes what we all thought obsolete, well, he'd understand. It's no reflection on him."

I almost choked on my Laphroig. "Do you believe in the tooth fairy too?"

"Please. I'm serious."

"So give me another suspect."

Arledge obliged. "Del Taylor probably stole the sword."

"That seems unlikely. Del hired me to find it."

Arledge shrugged. "Del is out of touch with modern archeology. He needs to retire. But the fact is that he owns the largest interest in the company. Carl and I want to buy him out. I think Del took the sword to make us look bad. Or to hold over our heads to make us pay more for his stock than it's worth. Or to control our votes at the board meetings."

"Making it into a Sword of Damocles." I was pleased with myself. Arledge just stared at me.

"He might also have stolen it as a sort of retirement policy," Arledge, the ever-vigilant accountant, added. "Taylor certainly knows what the sword could bring on the private market."

"But it still needs the proof. The provenance. Could Taylor arrange that by himself?"

"Sure, he could do it. It's just a matter of assembling the description of the sword from the manifest, and the ship's logs from both the trip where Velasco gave the native chief the sword and the trip where he died. Any evidence of the actual manufacture and sale of the sword to Velasco would be nice, but I doubt that can be had."

I couldn't stand it. "Then this provenance stuff is just a fairy tale. None of it is proof, real proof."

Arledge smiled. "Maybe not proof in the legal sense that you're accustomed to dealing with, but it will be good enough for some collectors."

I thought a moment. "OK, I said, "Meantime, give me the breakdown on your company's voting stock."

"Well, that's easy since it's privately held. Del has forty-five percent. Carl owns thirty-five percent, and I have twenty percent."

"Then you and Carl Shifter could outvote Taylor."

"We could. We could force his retirement. Carl has always been reluctant to do that but lately he's been reconsidering. Now, Del can talk to Carl privately and tell him he'll get his sword back if he supports Del. Maybe Del will even make Carl turn over some of his stock to him and regain the fifty-plus percent he used to have. Then Del would be safe."

"Taylor could do the same with you."

"He could if I would let him. But I want to own at least a piece of the business, while Carl doesn't care. Carl bought his stock just to do Del a favor when the business needed money. Carl's the weak link as far as Del's concerned."

"How did Del Taylor come to sell so much of the stock anyway?"

"Del needed money to modernize the operation. This was some years ago. We needed some very expensive equipment. Carl had money. He's quite well-off in his own right. He inherited a lot of money when his parents died ten years ago."

"How did his parents die?"

"Plane crash. Carl's father owned a private plane. I don't know the details, but I certainly remember when we heard about it. I gather that the airplane crashed in the mountains in western Massachusetts, killing Carl's parents and his sister. Carl is the sole survivor of the family."

I mulled this over in my mind for a moment. "Look," I said, "this is pretty iffy. Losing the sword makes Taylor look bad too. And if Del Taylor stole the sword, why would he call me in to look for it?"

Arledge shrugged. "If he stole it he can certainly hide it where you won't find it. It may be embarrassing, professionally, but now he's got something worth a lot of money that he can sell privately. You would be hired just to provide cover for the theft. You won't find it and he'll dump you in a few weeks and still look good. But that's just my theory. I'm not the detective."

"Well I am. What if this Shote guy took the sword?"

"Bill Shote, of Shote Archaeology? Now that's an idea." Arledge thought about it. "No. What would be the point?"

"Well, I can see two possible motives. First, Shote could make up the required provenance himself, and sell the sword. And second, he might want to embarrass your firm, to get you people at one another's throats. To do the two together, destroying his competition while at the same time secretly selling the competition's find, would be a neat trick."

"Nah. He hasn't got the brains. By the way, you remind me. Bill Shote has tried to buy Florida Archaeological Associates."

"He has? How?"

"He's made overtures to all of us, Del, me, Carl. Del told him to take a flying leap. But Shote still calls me or Carl occasionally. If he could buy our combined stock he could absorb Florida Archaeological Associates, its contracts, and customers, into Shote Archeology, whether Del agrees or not."

"Pretty hard-nosed," I said. "Would Shote do something like that?"

"I don't know him well. You could ask Carl. Shote was a year behind Carl at the University of Florida. Shote came out, worked up north a year or two, and came here to set up his own company."

I thought back to my visit to the office when Wallace Berle had gotten nasty and then left in a snit. "As long as we are speaking of Carl Shifter," I said, "Tell me about his personal life."

Arledge's face turned pink. He struggled with a swallow of beer until he had it headed down the proper tube. Bingo, I thought. Sometimes you just get lucky. Now what do I do?

"What are you talking about?" Arledge said, putting his beer down carefully.

"Come on. It's common knowledge. If Berle can be privy to the information, so can I. And digging things up is what I do, much like you guys."

Arledge looked at the table top. I waited. "Come on," I told Arledge after a moment. "We're big boys. It isn't as though you're going to shock me. Give 'til it hurts."

Arledge nodded reluctantly without lifting his eyes. "Linda and Carl's marriage hasn't worked out."

"Linda would be Linda Shifter?"

Arledge nodded and met my eyes. "They separated about a month ago," he continued. "Carl's living in a hotel somewhere."

"Tragic," I said. "So what's this to you?"

"Well, I'm the other man, I guess you could say."

I was shocked. "Oh man," I said. "This is all we need."

"Actually, it is all I need too." Arledge took his glasses off. "Linda and I love each other with ... a special passion."

"Providing at least two sturdy legs to the proverbial lover's triangle. But these things are never static. What does Carl think about all this?"

Arledge frowned. "Carl no longer enters into the equation." He put his glasses back on. It seemed to me that, between us, we'd wandered away from the missing sword and into Euclidian geometry.

I looked at a small neatly-lettered sign nailed to the wall beside one of the windows. *Please Do Not Feed the Squirrels* it said. I wondered if it applied to Arledge.

"John," I said. "Are Carl and Linda getting a divorce?"

"Yes. Any day now. Carl treats her badly. With me to stand beside her, she feels she now has the strength to free herself of him. She talked to him a month or more ago and then she filed for a divorce."

"Florida's a no-fault divorce state, I said. "Easy peasy."

"Yes. Easier to get divorced than married. Just have to wait for the paperwork on her divorce, get the marriage license, and then any notary can marry us. I can't wait for the wedded bliss."

I shook my head like a horse shaking off flies. This conversation was threatening to drop my I.Q. by thirty points. A thought crossed my mind. "John, this may seem irrelevant, but have you ever been in love before? Or married, which is not the same thing in some cases."

He shook his head. "Neither. You don't get a chance to date much when you're getting an accounting degree."

I gawked at him. "Are you saying that you went four years without a date?"

He smiled. "Six years, actually. I have a masters degree."

"All right. Six years. But that was long ago. What about since then?"

"No. I guess I've been too busy. Sorry." He looked at his watch. "Whoops, got to go now. 'Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise'."

"I like that," I said. "Mind if I use it?"

"Not at all." He threw some money down and scrambled to his feet. "I'm glad I told you about Linda and I," he said. "We'll be getting married just as soon as she's free of Carl." He made further polite noises and headed for the door.

"Me," I told my Laphroig. "It's Linda and me."

Chapter 8

The next morning, the sun and I crawled out of our respective bunks at about the same time. The bad weather had moved on and Florida was once again the sunny land advertised on billboards up north.

The yacht basin was halfway down Davis Islands on one of the ship channels. Across the channel, Harbour Island was newer and yuppier, an aged phosphate terminal and rail yard reborn as condo chic. I ran half the length of Davis Islands, over one of the bridges to the mainland, over another bridge across a river, past Tampa's big convention center, then right onto the bridge to Harbour Island. The body is a machine and like all good tools needs proper care. I learned long ago that it was better to sweat than bleed. Easier on your dry-cleaning bills too. After an hour run-through on the machines and the hand weights at the Harbour Island Athletic Club, I swam my fifty laps, ten underwater and no, not ten all at once, and then ran home on wobbly legs.

At nine-thirty, clean of body and mind, I walked into the lobby of the Tampa Police Department headquarters, a converted office building downtown whose blue exterior actually preceded the department's ownership. It was the only police station I knew of with an entire airplane hanging from the ceiling in the lobby. A black detective named Osmond took me upstairs to his office in the Burglary squad room. Osmond shared his office with five other guys, though they were out on the street at this hour. I had the "blue slip" the investigating officer had given Del Taylor, and Osmond borrowed it long enough to punch the case number into a computer.

Osmond was eating a hamburger and drinking a chocolate shake. A cardboard container of French fries sat upright on the desk in front of him. Grease, coffee and doughnut batter are the major cop food groups. It's not a healthy occupation.

There were no visitor chairs. I scrounged one from an unoccupied desk. A poster taped to the wall depicted some famous brains on drugs. Someone had tried to brighten up the dreary cubical with an oversized gumball machine. It must have dispensed candy the size of ping-pong balls but I could only suppose, as the detectives had long since eaten all the gumballs. There was a Bible on the corner of Osmond's desk.

I pointed to the Bible. "Unusual reading for a cop," I said.

He nodded. Sincere. "For some. I'm studying up. Corinthians this week. I teach an adult bible class."

I nodded. "What can you tell me about the Florida Archaeological theft? The sword. I have been hired to look into it for them."

"Not much," Osmond said, looking at his computer screen. "This is an odd one, isn't it?" He gulped the last of the burger, wiped his fingers on a paper napkin, and turned to his keyboard. A nearby printer spit out a few sheets and Osmond rose, pulled those out of the printer tray, and handed some interview sheets to me.

"That's it?" I asked. "Just a few supplementary interviews, no continuation sheets?"

"That's it," Osmond said. "We did file several AFIS requests through FDLE. For some fingerprints the officers lifted. They came back negative. Anyway, an officer responded, followed by a sergeant. They took notes and dusted a few likely places for fingerprints. After eliminating the staff, there remained a few prints of other people. Old. Oil dried out. None of them were of known felons."

"Whose prints are they?"

"Don't know. Not anyone who works there. The prints are likely from someone who has nothing to do with the crime at all. We'll keep them on file. Maybe something or someone will turn up."

"I see by the report that Detective Smeal has got this one." I said. "I assume he's out on the street, turning Tampa over to find this sword."

Osmond laughed. "Well, he's out on the street, anyway. He probably is trying harder than usual. Beats looking for missing laptops and bicycles day after day."

"There was a photo with this report."

Osmond nodded. "I think we gave it to our pawn shops man. You never know. He could turn something."

"So what are you — or Detective Smeal — doing now?" I asked.

"What you see is what you get. Do you know how many things get stolen in this city?" Osmond asked. "We have forty thousand cases a year, although we only get enough information to really investigate about eighteen thousand of those. Do you know how many guys there are to work burglary? Nine. Plus one to cover 185 pawn shops. And that's just Tampa. In fifteen minutes you can be across Tampa Bay and in St. Petersburg or Clearwater. A little longer drive and you're in Orlando or Sarasota."

"It's interesting, I admit, a sword and all. Historical. But let's face it, unless it turns up somewhere, about all we can do is file the report. I guess there's not even any insurance on it, is there?"

I had to smile. "It would be a very old policy by now."

Osmond nodded and took a bite of his hamburger. He chewed and then swallowed. "Yeah, guess it would be at that. Now, your turn. What can you do that we haven't done?"

I shrugged. "You've done all I expected you to do. I'm not getting more than a hundred new cases each day, so it's a lot easier. I guess I could talk to people, hang around. That's how I work most cases, just keep talking, listening, hanging around. And I have more time to think about it. You should see me when I get to thinking."

Osmond nodded. "I'd like that. I could do all that too, even the thinking part, if the department could afford to hire three dozen more guys just to work burglary. Want a French fry? If they're cold I can zap 'em in the microwave."

"No, thank you," I said, rising. "Is that your breakfast?"

Osmond nodded, chewing and swallowing. "Are you my momma?"

"It seems unlikely. Cops usually don't have that much use for private investigators. Why are you so happy to show me the file?"

Osmond shrugged. "Keep those printouts. It never hurts to have another set of eyes looking for stuff. And one brain. And you're free. Good deal for the citizens of Tampa."

Downstairs, Osmond showed me out into the lobby. "If all that talking and listening turns anything up, hear, you call me," he said, smiling. "That way I get all the credit."

"Something will turn up," I said. "Someone will say something. Someone always does. Just remember, 'Many have fallen by the edge of the sword; but not so many as have fallen by the tongue'."

Osmond looked blankly at me.

"Ecclesiasticus," I said. "In the Apocrypha."

Chapter 9

Carl and Linda had shared a home in Temple Terrace, a bedroom community northeast of Tampa. I decided to investigate, that being what it said on my Class C license. After missing the Shifter address twice I zeroed in on a narrow opening in the jungle-covered roadside. A tiny-but-tasteful sign beside the driveway announced the existence of Côte d'Azur. I turned in, wondering if there was a rule about how big a house had to be to have its own name. I suppose I could ask the same question about boats.

Fifty feet in, the jungle dropped away to reveal a wide lawn. Côte d'Azur wasn't the Tara of *Gone with the Wind*, but it would do in a pinch. The lot, facing the Hillsborough River, was big enough to graze cattle on. A long driveway of cypress bark mulch led to a house and a small separate garage. I stood by the van a moment listening to the silence. The van's engine creaked as it cooled.

Côte d'Azur, like most of its neighbors along Riverhills Drive, was hidden from the passing working class and from one another by thick barriers of wild foliage. The greenery was effective; if there were houses on either side you'd never suspect. In Florida all you have to do to raise a hedge is not mow for six months; the dominant color everywhere is chlorophyll. We even have air plants growing on telephone poles and power lines.

The house was a Spanish-style fortress that would cost two million dollars to buy and twenty thousand-plus every year to keep from falling down, not to mention the taxes. At the moment it looked as though someone had been scrimping on the maintenance budget. The yard was supposed to be the short-bladed St. Augustine grass so popular in Florida. But some Bahia had crept in, and the seedpods were sticking up fifteen inches.

Beyond the house was more lawn running down to the river. Across the river I could see the edge of a cypress swamp. This meant no worry about anyone building anything across the river to ruin the view. Wetlands were sacred. It also meant learning to tolerate the occasional alligator or water moccasin crawling up into the back yard, raccoons in the trash cans and possums scampering past the back door. Spring was the worst, when amorous gators were on the prowl and no French poodle was safe, and licensed trappers were kept busy roping and hauling off in pickup trucks those lusty alligators that wandered into traffic or took dips in swimming pools.

The woman who opened the door at my ring wore a grubby yellow knitted tube top that barely covered the essentials, and a pair of purple denim shorts that looked spray-painted on. Her dirty-blonde hair was permed, and the perm had died weeks ago. She looked up at me without focusing. A blast of music, country-western stuff, ricocheted down the hall and out the door. Someone was unhappy over his lost love, or his broken-down truck, or both.

"Linda Shifter?" I asked, putting on my best smile. My size tends to intimidate people and I have learned to smile a lot, especially at women, and most especially at

young women wearing minimal clothing. It's probably some sort of character defect. Maybe it was just Spring.

She put one forearm up along the door frame, and the other on her hip, which she cocked out to one side. She looked up at me. "Get the fuck outta here."

Well, some people were more intimidated than others. I removed my sunglasses and my smile and looked down at her a long moment. She was a foot shorter than me. She exuded a sensuality that would have made a Cub Scout snort. But I could tell by looking at her bare stomach and her triceps that she would go flabby in a few years. She was simply well-proportioned, not physically fit. You can get away with that when you're young.

"What is it," I asked. "My face? Or did you see the copy of Watchtower in my back pocket?"

She thought that one over. "Who are you? Whattya want?"

"Now we're talking business," I said. "I'm Cord MacIntosh. I'm the investigator Del Taylor hired to find the missing sword. And I take it that you are Linda Shifter."

"Yeah," she said after a pause. "I'm her. Don't know nothin' about no sword, though."

"Why don't we do this," I said. "I show you my identification so that you won't feel threatened. You invite me in. We sit down somewhere. And I tell you more. What can it hurt?"

She thought about that. "Oh, shit," she said. She turned and walked away, leaving me to close the door and trot after. Her shorts were worn thin in two spots on her rear end. Being a trained detective, I could see a flash of green panty through the threadbare material.

Inside, I realized at once why the lawn and house exterior looked ratty. Linda had let herself go. Dirty dishes lay on the furniture as well as on the dining room table. There were clothes strewn everywhere. There was dust. There was unopened mail and empty envelopes from mail that had been opened.

Linda led the way to the living room, plopped herself onto a sofa that would have been perfect for Paul Bunyan, and picked up a cigarette from an ashtray on a coffee table. There was a rack of expensive stereo gear built into the far wall. Some thin mylar Magnaplaner speakers about the size of Black Pearl's storm jib were vibrating every air molecule in the room.

I found a chair that didn't seem to have anything sticky on it and sat facing her. She hadn't offered me anything to drink, for which I was grateful.

"The sword," I shouted, "is the one Carl found last Friday. Don't you know anything about it?" I admit I was just testing. I had the printout Detective Osmond had given me of a telephone interview with Linda.

"What?"

I got up and found the right button and pushed it, cutting the cowboy off in mid-divorce. The sudden silence was almost as shocking as the noise had been. I sat down again and repeated my question in a normal voice.

"Oh sure," Linda said. "That sword." She had picked up a huge stuffed teddy bear from one end of the sofa and was holding it to her chest with her left arm.

"That sword," I said. "It's missing, as I'm sure you know. I've been asked to find it. I'll be talking to everyone, so don't feel picked on. I'll leave if you really think I'm bothering you. But I need your help." It sounded like a good line to me.

Linda grabbed for the cigarette hanging from her lower lip, stood and tried for the ashtray on the table in front of her. The ash fell on her shorts instead and she absent-mindedly brushed it off. As always, when around someone smoking, I wished I still smoked. And as often, I was glad it wasn't me making such a mess.

"Well, sure I'd help," she said. "But what do I know?"

"For starters," I said, "I'd like to rule out Carl as the thief right away. But to do that I have to know where he was during all of the past weekend."

Linda turned and paced across the floor, still carrying the stuffed bear. "Give him an alibi you mean." She snorted. "I dunno where he lives. How would I know what he did last weekend?"

"Good point," I said. Establish a common bond, the psychology books all say. "Well, maybe I can at least check your name off the list. Can you give me some idea of what you did last weekend?"

She sat, took in a big drag on her cigarette and carefully blew a smoke ring at the ceiling. I suppose she thought it a sophisticated gesture. I know; I used to think the same.

"What I was doing was minding my own business. You oughta try it yourself."

I smiled. "I couldn't do my job if I did that. And anyway, I might be able to help you. Like it or not, you're on the list of people who had access to that sword. If I could eliminate you right now, I can get on with the real work of finding the guilty party."

"Whattya mean?" Her voice climbed an octave. "I didn't have, like, access to that sword."

"It's just the routine, you must understand, Linda. But you are assumed to have had access simply because you've been married to Carl. Obviously you could have copied his office key at some time." I held a hand out as she started to protest. "I said it's just routine."

She thought that one over. She sure was a thinker. Then she proceeded to tell me about her weekend. As alibis go it was pitiful — but, then, they almost always are. She'd watched TV. She'd gone shopping. She even dug around in a purse and found a gas receipt to prove that she had been at a Shell station on Saturday.

Not once did she mention doing anything with any soon-to-be second husband.

"I don't mean to pry into your personal life any more than I absolutely have to," I said. "But if you could help me clear John Arledge's name too, I'd appreciate it."

She frowned. "Whattya talking about."

I spread my hands. "Linda, it's common knowledge. You and John are about to be married. After you divorce Carl, that is. I find it hard to believe that you didn't see John all weekend."

I wouldn't have been surprised if she had laughed at me, and I admit I was just running it past her to see how she would react, but apparently John Arledge had been telling the truth.

She stubbed her cigarette out and, to my relief, didn't light another. "You're right. 'Sides, if I don't tell, you'll bug me, which I don't need. John was with me all weekend. I wasn't lying about the shopping and that other stuff, though."

She started to gulp. "I'm sorry. It's just that it's been so hard living with Carl, and I don't want nothing to come between John and I, now that we've found each other." She started crying softly, head high and tears trickling down. If the lovebirds have one thing in common, I thought, it's bad grammar.

"I'm not here to bother you about John," I said hastily. "I'm only looking for a lost sword."

She sobbed now. "You don't know what it was like, living with Carl. He saved me from a poor life and I know it. But he was such a ... a cold fish. Everything he did or said was, like, part of some plan. Finally I couldn't stand it no more, and I asked for a divorce. I wanted a good life, but I wanted love, too."

I stared at her. I wondered what it would be like to want to be in love. If I had ever felt that, I could not recall it. I stood. "I don't want to upset you any more, Linda. Maybe we can talk again sometime. I'll buy you lunch."

She smiled. She had good teeth and her smile was dazzling, and she was one of those people who manage to look beautiful even with dirty hair, even while crying. "That would be nice. I could use a friend."

"That's my girl," I said as I left. "So could I."

I got the van turned around and rolled slowly out to Riverhills Drive. In the rear-view mirror I could see her standing on the porch in the bright sunshine in her teeny-bopper outfit, tears running unashamedly down her face. She gave a little wave and I tooted the horn. I'd never been in love, I thought. People talked about love all the time. I wasn't even sure what that felt like, all I had was descriptions of it to go by. I would just smile and pretend to understand. Maybe that's how color-blind people coped, I didn't know. I'd had a violent and bloody life, intermingled with the occasional semi-serious girl friend. I wondered if any of them had loved me.

Chapter 10

My next stop was Narvaez Park, 35 miles away on the western edge of St. Petersburg. Narvaez Park was little more than a large wooded lot choked with underbrush, and I had to search for it. I knew I was getting warm when I spotted a dilapidated sheet of plywood someone had put up a long time ago, with crude lettering announcing that Panfilo de Narvaez had landed here. Maybe Narvaez put it up himself.

A city street skirted the north side, between the park and a 1920s Spanish style motel. Beyond the motel the street turned into a boat ramp, dipping abruptly into the water at Boca Ciega Bay, a trick Florida highway engineers use to keep drivers on their toes at night. There was a short wooden pier and some signs ordering citizens to park here but not there. A solitary car with a boat trailer was parked where the signs said not to, the owner having no appreciation of the need for crowd control.

Two pickup trucks, the crew-cab kind, with Florida Archaeological Associates airbrushed onto the doors, were pulled well off the street into the weeds. I parked behind one of them and walked into the jungle along a well-worn path.

The path soon slanted up. In south Florida there's nothing taller than a Washingtonia palm that isn't man-made, and this hill was no exception. A lot of sand and oyster and conch shells had been piled up to create what had been the centerpiece of a thriving Indian village. As I climbed I saw exposed patches of the shell where shod feet had scraped the thin sand aside. I also saw lots of trash, some empty pop and whisky bottles, and one crushed plastic syringe.

At the top, the underbrush had been cleared away, leaving stately oaks for shade. Carl was sitting on a log at one side, using a small horse-hair brush to carefully clean a shell fragment. There was another log opposite Carl's. I kicked it hard to run off any snakes, brushed the top off, and sat. Across the clearing a young man and a middle-aged woman were shoveling crushed shells from a small hole into a wheelbarrow. There were other small groups digging holes all over the hilltop and the sides.

Carl hadn't looked up but after a moment he spoke. "This is a scraping tool."

"If you say so," I said.

He glanced up and grinned. "I guess you have to know what to look for." He leaned forward and handed the scraper to me.

"Thus, education," I said. I turned the scraper over in my hands. To my uneducated eye it looked like a large and very old oyster shell. "I'm glad I don't have to scrape any hides with this thing."

"It's lost its edge," Carl conceded. "And we have metal tools today. But we have bombs, too. There might be worse things than not having modern technology."

"Yeah. Like typhoid and childbirth fever. Shellfish poisoning. Dysentery and nutritional deficiencies. No dental care. Early death."

Carl nodded. "The Tocobagans — those are the people who built this mound — had some of those problems. But their diet was varied, they rarely fought, and their average life span was in the forties, comparable to the Europeans of the time. Comparable, in fact, to many societies today. And many of them lived as long as anyone does today."

Through the tops of the oak trees I could just see the blue flash of Boca Ciega Bay. In Velasco's time this hill would have been bare and the pure white shell of the facing material would have made it visible for miles around, almost too bright to look at in the afternoon glare. There would have been a few huts on the top, the chief's and other important officials. The trees and scrub at the base would have been tilled fields and a village of wooden huts with thatched roofs. Dugout canoes, used to harvest oysters and fish and to move people and goods along the waterways to other villages, would have lined the shore. But the hill had been more than the chief's house, more than a religious center. It had been a necessary precaution. When hurricanes came — and they came without warning — the natives would have scrambled up here and waited out the storms that even today kill people too stupid to evacuate when told to do so.

"What's the plan for this hill?" I asked. "The view is pretty good. Is Wallace Berle planning to build a condo up here?"

"Not a chance. The hill is all shell; his pilings wouldn't hold in it. He'll scrape it down to the same level as the rest of the site."

"That sounds expensive."

"No, strangely enough, that part of the job would actually earn Berle money. Shell like this is always in demand for road-building aggregate. In fact that's what happened to all the rest of the mounds around here. Would you like a tour?"

"Sure."

The tour surprised me, not because Carl and his crew could find Indian artifacts, but because of the sheer abundance of artifacts. Once I knew what to look for, even I could pick out the dark-colored pottery shards, though they averaged perhaps a half-inch in diameter. Someone had broken a lot of crockery up here. Then about a thousand people had walked on it. I soon realized that mere shards and shell tools were too common for recovery. An artifact had to be truly special to rate a trip to the lab. Thus, education; they all looked alike to me.

"So where's the buried treasure?" I said at one point.

Carl laughed. "Didn't you mention that the other night?"

"I mention it every chance I get. I have trouble believing that you guys are really hiring me to look for a lost sword with half a blade and no value unless you can make up a fairy tale to go with it."

Carl frowned. "It has great value to history. It has great value to me and to my career. It's also potentially worth a lot of money. But if it were solid gold it wouldn't matter to me. Would that matter to you?"

"No, not really. My job is to find it, not own it. But I would like to hold a piece of history for a few minutes."

Carl smiled. "I know just how you feel. The sword can help my career. It might even make me money, in an indirect sort of way. But none of that compares to the thrill of holding it. Or of finding it in the first place."

I changed the subject. "Have you heard back yet from the State Historic Preservation Officer?"

Carl nodded. "The Shippo called first thing this morning. He wants additional tests on this site before making a final decision."

"And then what?"

He shrugged. "Anything from closing the book on this one and letting Berle bulldoze it, to a full-scale excavation. Essentially, taking off the top of this hill, and some work around the base. Or he may want the mound retained intact."

"Ouch. Would there be room for Berle's condos on the site without cutting this hill away?"

"Not for all of them. It would hit Berle Development pretty hard. They'd have to scale back dramatically."

"Can the Shippo make that stick?"

Carl shrugged. "It's politics. But probably yes. They're serious."

"Have you told the Shippo that the sword's missing?"

"Yes, and he's really pissed about that. You see, artifacts found on historic sites are considered public property until such time that the state releases them back to the land owners or, in the case of underwater sites, the finders."

That derailed my brain a bit. "Do you mean Berle isn't the rightful owner after all?"

"Well, he's the rightful owner. But the state has priority and can hold and display the artifact in one of its museums if it so chooses. Berle would be credited, on the display, with the 'loan' of the item."

"Wow. He won't like that. He doesn't know how valuable the sword can be, does he?"

"Nope. We don't know either. All that's just speculation. We would have followed up on that aspect, just to have a happy client, except that it was stolen before we got around to it."

When we finished the tour I invited Carl to lunch. We found a yuppie restaurant where most of the drinks involved rum and fruit juice and tiny umbrellas.

"You really enjoy your work," I said, once we had a turkey club sandwich and ice tea apiece. "It isn't just something you do for a living."

Carl chewed on his sandwich a moment and swallowed. "I don't do anything for a living."

"What do you mean?"

I let him tell me about himself. How his father, an ambitious roustabout, had made a fortune laying water and sewer pipes in Boston. How proud his father had been when Carl went to college, and how disappointed and angry when Carl studied archaeology instead of business and then refused to take over the family firm. How his father had always wanted to be an important businessman in appearance as well as in deed, which was one reason he decided to learn to fly his own corporate airplane. How father, mother and sister had died when his father crashed the airplane in bad weather, leaving Carl with a lot of cash and no roots.

He was more reticent about his marriage, rising to the bait only when I asked why Linda wanted a divorce.

"She's not divorcing me," he protested. "I'm divorcing her. My lawyer says it should be final any day."

"So why are you doing it?"

"Because she's impossible. I met her when I was on a dig down on Marco Island. She was living in Goodland." He glanced up. "Do you know where I'm talking about?"

"Marco Island, of course," I said. Marco was one of Florida's biggest real estate schemes back in the days when the rule was to fill in mangrove swamps, pave over them with asphalt, plant a few scattered palm trees, and name the resulting parking lot something like Palm Estates. "And I even know Goodland. I always wondered how they let that old fishing village survive, next door to the condos and golf carts."

Carl smiled. "If you know Goodland, you know a lot about Linda. Her mother worked in a laundry; her father could have been any of about fifteen local mullet fishermen. Linda was working in a marina, in the marine supply store. I went to private schools; her feet don't fit into shoes. We have nothing in common."

"So why marry her?"

"Stupidity. She was gorgeous, once you washed her face. And in bed? She was unbelievable."

"So, as the saying goes, why buy something that you could just rent?"

"That's pretty goddam crude."

"Yes it was, wasn't it? But it's still the big question."

"I could have had all that and not gotten married, I suppose. But poor, preppy me. I wanted to make an honest woman of her."

"There are worse reasons for marriage," I said. How would I know? I thought.

"Not many. And she's extremely manipulative. I didn't realize that at first. She can seem as supportive as can be when she wants to. But there's always another motive behind the first." He stared at the table top. "And she's crazy about money. I suppose it's her poor upbringing. Whereas I have all I could ever use, and could get along just fine without any of it."

"Life's weird that way," I said. "But you have a profession to support you. What's Linda got?" It was a question that I've noticed most men never thought about.

He shrugged. "Have you talked to her?"

I nodded, "This morning."

"Was she playing that godawful country music?"

"Yes. Nice speakers, though."

He smiled. "To be honest, that was part of it. It's not always the big things that do in a marriage, but the little things, like your choice of music, that grate and grate and wear you away. She and I had such radically different tastes."

"Love never dies a natural death," I quoted. "It dies because we don't know how to replenish its source. It dies of blindness and errors and betrayals. It dies of illness and wounds; it dies of weariness, of witherings, of tarnishings."

"Exactly. You must have been married too."

"Actually, that was the author and feminist Anaïs Nin. I've never been married. I've never been in love."

He stared at me. "Everyone's been in love."

"I suppose so," I said. "I used to love hate." He paused, his ice tea halfway to his lips, his expression puzzled. "It's a long story. Past tense." Sure paid well, I thought. So long as you didn't get killed. "Tell me about Linda."

He held out a palm. "I'm not putting country people down, or saying that I'm better than Linda in that respect. But we sure as hell were different. She's very immature, too." He looked at the wall a moment and then smiled. "I bet she was holding Pookie while she was talking to you."

"Pookie?"

"Big, ratty teddy bear. She brought it with her when we got married. She left her mother to live with her husband, but she brought her big teddy bear along. Now that's what I call immature."

It was what I would have called touching. We all try to stay the little girl or little boy inside. I flashed back to a battlefield in a desert country off-limits to me now, where I had found a dead teenager — barely a teenager — afterwards, holding an AK-47 in one hand and a toy truck in the other. There had been tiny toy-truck tracks all around his foxhole, now scattered with spent shell casings from his rifle. I had killed my fair share of child soldiers and never thought much about it; they were as dangerous as the grownups; even a just-hatched rattlesnake can bite. I had never thought about it before, but now I wondered if, before I killed him, the kid had dreamed of growing up to be a big land developer.

"So what happens now?" I asked. "After the divorce."

Carl shrugged. "Linda doesn't get half of all my money just for marrying me. We have a pre-nuptial agreement. But I'll see to it that she's taken care of until she remarries."

"You'll take care of her until the next man takes the burden off your shoulders. Is that it?"

He nodded and chewed a moment and then swallowed. "I'm not being sexist here. Some women could get along on their own. But Linda hasn't got a lot of options. As you noted, she hasn't got any marketable skills — unless you count fucking. She needs another man or she needs to go back to her mother. Either way, I'll see that she doesn't suffer.

"She will have to find a new place to live, because I'll sell that house. It's in my name. I assume she'll marry John Arledge; she's obviously picked him out as her next big fish."

"And you?" I asked. "What will you do?"

He poked with his straw at the lemon in his ice tea. "I'll move on. Probably to another state. I don't mind, much, Linda's marrying John, but I'm damned if I'll work in the same office with him."

I thought about that a moment. "I understand the company stock is split three ways. What will you do with your shares?"

"You've learned a lot in a short time." Carl drained his glass and got to his feet. "I've got to be getting back."

I gulped the last of my ice tea and we drove back to Narvaez Park.

"What about the stock, Carl?" I asked as I dropped him off at the base of the shell mound.

He was looking up the hill at one of his teams. Finally he turned back to me.

"I suppose I'll sell it back to Del. Things are looking up for the business. He'd have no trouble getting a bank loan to buy me out. And I'll give him a good price."

"Would you sell it to Bill Shote?"

Carl laughed. "No way. That guy's a barracuda. He's an embarrassment to the profession." He started to walk away.

"What about John?" I shouted after him. "He told me that you and he were thinking of combining your votes and forcing Del out. Would you sell to John?"

Carl turned. "That was always a fantasy of John's. But I wouldn't have done it before, and I'm damn sure not going to do it now."

I started to ask more, but Carl had turned and walked away. It was the last time I saw him alive.

— end sample —