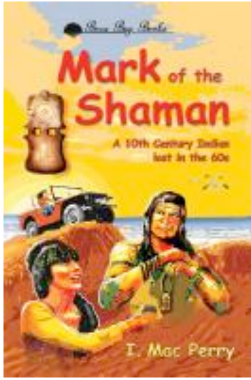
Mark of the Shaman

A 10th Century Indian lost in the 60s

I. Mac Perry



Twenty-five-year-old River McPhee is in a whirlwind of conflict with dark characters and a murderer searching for a recently discovered 10th century amulet that, in the hands of River, can save his childhood village from extinction. He drinks an elixir, and takes a spirit journey back to his 10th century ancestors to meet the old shaman who knows the mystery of the amulet. It's now up to River to find it, and release its power.

Mark of the Shaman

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MARK OF THE SHAMAN

I. Mac Perry

A Historical Mystery about a
10th century Indian lost in the 1960s

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First Edition

PROLOGUE

St Petersburg, Florida, Sunday, May 23, 1965

Close to midnight, fifty-two-year-old archaeology professor Hilliard C. Hancock stormed through his ground floor lab in the Social Science building at the University of Tampa Bay. He jerked open drawers, snatched up inventory forms, site maps, black and white photos, and hurled them into the air with a hailstorm of pencils, paper clips, and grease pens. Fluorescent lights buzzed in the low hung ceiling. Cabinet doors swung and creaked on their hinges. File cabinets keeled forward, their drawers glutted and open wide. Like an animated bear in a shooting gallery, Hancock wheeled and wambled back across the room.

"Where're those damn field notes?" His voice pinged off the gray masonry walls.

If he couldn't find his field notes, how could he give a summary to that jack-crap grant committee? They had some nerve calling him in the middle of *What's My Line,* telling him, "We'd like an update first thing in the morning." Hancock spoke in falsetto and rocked his head like a clock pendulum. But without their grant money, how could he do the lab work necessary to finish the Jungle Village dig? And how could he get published if he couldn't do the lab work?

For three months he'd been sweating and stinking, dragging dirt, shell, and useless artifacts out of that hell hole of a test pit punched into the trash pile of a bunch of dead Indians. And now, hundreds of pottery sherds to classify, thousands of tiny fish bones to identify: what species, how big, what season caught. And nothing of any real value except the four-inch spider amulet his assistant archaeologist Matt Lyons found in a pile of twisted bones during the first week of the dig. The bones looked like some Indian had been run through a taffy pulling machine. That little number was Hancock's ticket out of Florida. But he didn't own it; Lyons did. That was University policy: he who finds, owns it.

Lyons had that baby tucked away in a special hiding place where nobody'd find it, especially that deadbeat activist group who said the

amulet belonged in the hands of the American Indians. But Hancock knew where it was. And he didn't care what the American Indians or Lyons said. It was *his* dig, so it was *his* amulet, and he would get it *one way or another*.

He heard a sound down the hall. His head snapped around

"Lyons?" he said. But not very loud.

Hancock stared at the double doors to the lab but saw nothing. He waddled up the row between the cabinets, slammed doors shut with his lily white fingers and bumped drawers closed with his excessively broad hips, hips that made students call him "Bowling Pin Hancock", but not to his face. At the far wall, he threw the bank of light switches. The buzz stopped. The lab fell into darkness. He stepped into the corridor and waited for the latch to clink behind him, then he see-sawed down the hall.

Matt Lyons's office was at the far end of the hall near the exit door. The light was on. What was Lyons's light doing on at this hour?

"Lyons!" His voice a guttural grunt like a buck in the rut. He got no answer.

He tapped forward, bounced into Lyons' office, and then fell back. The room was a shamble. Floor full of books, reports, shell tools Lyons had been classifying, chair overturned, desk drawers thrown in the corner. Then he saw the object lying on the desk.

"What the…" Hancock's voice trailed off. He reached for the object and rolled it between his fingers. He studied it. It was a reed arrow, the kind used by primitive Indians. A patch of hairy skin was attached to the point. "Who did this?" He looked around but saw no one. He heard no one. He knew it wasn't an artifact; reeds decompose in time. He slammed the arrow back on the desk. This mess wasn't here when he'd arrived; someone had ransacked Lyons' office while Hancock was in the lab searching for his field notes. Probably those kids who'd been snooping around the dig on weekends come by looking for a pot or something. He should have locked that outside door when he came in. He'd better go check out the dig site. Lyons might have even taken the field notes there.

Hancock plowed through the exit door and out into the night. The air was heavy, breathless, and dry as oatmeal. It smelled of lawn

insect spray and dumpster rot. He stomped down the sidewalk, passed the cafeteria and entered the faculty parking lot. He flopped down into the front seat of his five-year-old Lincoln Continental, cranked her over, swung out onto Fifth Avenue, and steamed west.

The Jungle Village Indian mound was on Boca Ciega Bay little more than a mile away. The bay was the western wing of the much larger Tampa Bay. If you were going to do a dig, why do it out in the middle of some crapoid salt marsh where the mosquitoes are as big as dragonflies, where you have to drag your *cojones* through mangrove mire, stumble on prop roots, and swat spider condominiums just to get to the site? Why not do the dig near your office, up on a shell midden along a breezy bay? Only there hadn't been any breeze down in that test pit where sweat rolled off your back like rain on watermelon.

The big tires of the Lincoln crunched onto the shell parking lot next to the mound site. Hancock cut the ignition, flipped off the headlights, and rolled out. The heavy door clunked shut. The interior lights went out. Jesus, it was dark, late, too. What time was it?

The bay was black as ink. Lights from the barrier islands across the bay winked on its surface like fireflies in a dark valley. Where was the moon when you needed it? Where was any-freaking-body when you needed them?

Hancock went to the rear of his sedan and clicked open the big deck lid. He reached inside a canvas zipper satchel and pulled out a flashlight. He slammed the deck lid and snapped on the flashlight switch. Nothing. He banged the butt end against the heel of his hand. The light flashed in his eyes. Blinded him.

"Damn."

He threw the glow of light at his feet and pushed up the trail. After fifty feet, the trail forked. The right bend dipped down to the beach, the left wound up the Indian mound. Hancock turned left. It was still and quiet, except for the scrunch of his leather soles on the shell along the trail.

Then, a noise… a muted sound. Soft, somewhere up on the mound.

Hancock stopped. He swung the glow of the light up the trail. The light went out.

Wham, wham, on the back of his hand, but the light would not come on.

"Lyons?" he growled, but not very loud. His lips were dry. His tongue smacked off the roof of his mouth. His heart beat bongo rhythms on his temples. He curled his fingers into a fist and let out a breath of air. He uncurled his fingers and relaxed. Take it easy, he thought. He stepped forward again. Stopped again. No more sound. He continued. Cautiously.

So there was a sound. So what? Marsh rabbits and opossums lived here, didn't they? Raccoons and armadillos lived here, didn't they? Anyway, if Lyons was up there, there'd be a light. Even if those kids were up there, they'd have flashlights. But Hancock didn't see any light. What the hey, he still had to find his field notes, didn't he?

He pressed up the slope where the trail wound like a West Virginia backroad. Bushes brushed his arms. Vines tripped his feet. Just one more bend and he'd be there.

Then… a shuffling.

And a thud.

"Lyons… that you?" It was more like a hiss, this time.

A nerve behind Hancock's left ear smarted like he'd just been shot with a tiny dart. He craned his neck. He rotated his shoulders. Just a twitch.

The sound of running feet rustled in the brush. Someone was racing along the top of the mound. The sound became more distant.

That wasn't Lyons. That was those damn rock and roll kids getting into mischief. Hancock banged the flashlight again. It still didn't light. He wagged up the final fifty feet of trail onto the dig site at the top of the mound.

"You better stay your ass outta here!" he yelled. Then he listened… not a sound anywhere.

Where the understory had been cleared at the dig site, the canopy was sparse; grass had even begun to grow. Soft gray light drifted down and cast a glow on the grass. Hancock lumbered across the site. He banged his flashlight again and again, but the light refused to shine.

He came to the picnic table that he had appropriated, stolen actually, from the clump of pines near the campus cafeteria two months earlier. Students didn't need a table to eat, he'd figured. They sat too much as it was. A white five-gallon bucket half full of excavated earth sat beside the table. But his field notes were not at the table or in the bucket. He continued on to the tripod that dominated the site. From its center hung a three-foot square tray with a quarter-inch wire mesh screen bottom used to sift the troweled earth that came out of the test pit. The tray was swinging. No reason for it to be swinging. But there it was, sure as Sally Skiggums had crotch rot, swinging its ass off.

Plastic baggies hung from hooks on the end of the tray. Each had a grease-penned label: Shell, Bone, Pottery, Stones. The bags contained the artifacts that had been most recently screened out of the test pit. Wouldn't the kids have grabbed those bags if they were looking for something special—pottery sherds, chert points, bone hair pins? But they hadn't.

Hancock looked across the clearing; he faintly saw the end of the metal ladder sticking out of the test pit. It was a sixteen-foot ladder. He and Lyons had recently reached the pure sand bottom of the mound. The dig was over, and the quicker he could clean up all of this crap and get out of there, the better.

He shuffled toward the test pit, an elevator shaft to Hell, bum hole of the earth. Its perfectly vertical walls slowly came into focus. He stopped at its edge, leaned precariously over the rim, and peered into the endless chasm. It was black down there; he couldn't see a thing. He banged the flashlight on his thigh. Nothing. He banged it again. It came on. Blinded him again.

"Damn," again.

He blinked and pinched the corners of his eyes against the bridge of his nose. He tossed the beam down along the ladder rungs.

Two, four, six. He counted the rungs.

How many times had he climbed down into that sweat hole?

Eight, ten. He continued to count the rungs as the light moved lower.

His eyesight remained blurred, but his peripheral vision working the outer rim of the beam told him the pit was not empty. A white bucket sat at the bottom. Were there kids down there? Not a chance.

Those little spots all over the ladder. What were they?

Then the light fell full on the floor of the pit.

“Holy Shhh…” Hancock leaned to get a better look. He blinked. He nearly lost his footing. Nearly fell headfirst into the pit.

There at the bottom of the test pit lay the jumbled body of Matt Lyons, the flesh on his face melting away like someone had dipped him in acid.

Beside him lay a reed basket, its lid lying upside down. And crawling all over his body, the floor of the test pit and up the ladder rungs, dozens of dark, creepy specks with peculiar markings on their backs, like…

Red widow spiders.

ONE

May 28th, 1965

I was a dozen or so miles north of St Petersburg, Florida on a lonely stretch of blacktop when I saw the plane in my rearview mirror. It was just a dot at first when it dropped down into the silver funnel of sky between the tall cypresses that bordered the two-lane behind me. Then it began to zig in the funnel like a metal ball falling through the bumpers of a pinball machine. When it got close, I could hear the engine sputtering. Before I knew it, it was on top of me… literally. The right tire of the plane hit the roof of my '46 Ford pickup and made a sound like a pallet of bricks dropped from a third floor apartment building onto a tennis court.

My vintage pickup was brush-painted baby blue and was the only thing I owned that wasn't mortgaged a hundred and ten percent. The bed was eaten up with rust from spilled fertilizer bags, and one end of the rear bumper jutted out like a giggie finger. But the radio worked fine. I was singing along with Freddie and the Dreamers' *I'm Telling You Now* at full volume, trying to stay awake. Papa Mac's Elgin hung on the rearview mirror; it said 4:40 P.M. I had left McPhee Fields twenty-six hours and forty minutes earlier. My fingers were stiff, my knuckles were white on top of the steering wheel, and the ligaments in my arms felt like rusty baling wire. The Raleigh Times bounced on the seat beside me. It reminded me of why I had left Piedmont North Carolina and headed south.

After driving all night, my brain was rocking on the lap of Somnus somewhere in a deep valley where the sun never shines. The pickup tires hummed a sweet, luring song of the sirens, and the cracks in the asphalt had begun to look like giant spider legs laid out to dry. Someone in the Land of Nod must have thought I needed a wakeup call.

The plane punched a pocket in the cab roof big enough to hold a basket ball, and then it seesawed up the stretch in front of me. I held my speed at a steady thirty-nine, thinking that in a few more minutes

someone up the road was going to need a can opener just to see daylight again.

I was wrong.

The plane steadied, made a perfect landing, and then did an about-face spin like a tractor at the end of a row. The engine revved, and before I could say Amelia Earhart, I was playing chicken with a spinning propeller mounted on speeding wheels not more than a hundred yards in front of me. Then I saw the pilot inside. He was pulling levers and slamming knobs. Suddenly, both of his hands went up as if someone had just made a touchdown.

"Screw it," I saw him mouth but using the alternate spelling for screw.

They say *This is Your Life* previews in your head just moments before you pass over to the other side. I never believed it, but for one brief moment on that lonely stretch outside of St. Pete the curtain went up and there I was: River McPhee, born American Indian twenty-five years ago, who knows where? Abandoned and put up for adoption by who knows who and who knows why? Adopted by Mac McPhee, a first generation paddy whack from County Down in the east of Ireland and Sally Mae Sumter, a country girl who Papa Mac met and married at River-low-grounds east of Durham. Worked at McPhee Fields, the family tobacco farm most of his life. At ten, witnessed his mother getting hosed by Louis the Negro overman while leaning over the corn crib. The next day his mother decided that life outside the Fields was better than tying and stringing leaves onto tobacco sticks every day from sunup to sundown. She packed and left. At seventeen, joined the Navy and tried to change their rules but couldn't. After the court-martial, moved in with Shelly Winterbottom, a sidewalk saleslady in Norfolk, and tried to rehabilitate her, but couldn't. After a year, took Shel and went back to River-lo-grounds. Before long, Shel ran away, Papa Mac died, Fanny Fungus turned the tobacco to pulp, River went broke and courted Cap'n Lige's moonshine a couple of years, then came the morning he saw the Raleigh Times. River McPhee hauled ass to Florida in a tin dinosaur to try to find some answers about life. End of movie.

A simple movie that lasted only three seconds, simple except for the part about someone, somewhere, for who knows why, planting a red infant into a white world and expecting him to grow up pink as a Smokey Mountain rhododendron.

The plane was bearing down on me faster than a courting rabbit. The pilot, still signaling touchdown, apparently didn't seem to be bothered that he was about to enter the fourth dimension. There was no room for me to pull off; trees pressed close to the road, and knobby cypress knees lined the shoulder like teats on an old sow. By applying the principles of dead reckoning, I figured I had about four seconds to live.

Teats and trees be damned, I hit the brake. I swung off the side of the road and hooked one of the cypress knees with my giggie-finger bumper. The bumper twanged free and pulled the entire exhaust system loose just as the left wing of the plane shaved a layer of paint off the cab roof. The pickup humped over four or five more cypress knees then choked to a stop. When I looked back through the mirror, I saw the pilot open the cockpit door, leap to the road, and do a perfect forward roll ending up on his feet.

The plane continued on another fifty yards, swerved to the side of the road, caught its right wing in a limb, spun around, broke off the left wing, and tilted on its side. The good wing jutting skyward reminded me of the broken wing of my old banty rooster after he'd had one too many fights with the piney woods chicken hawk. The engine continued to sputter, and the spinning prop clacked on the side of a cypress trunk like a playing card clothes-pinned into the spokes of a bicycle. The engine coughed, backfired, and quit. The prop broke free, struck the pavement, and pole vaulted off into the dark of the cypress swamp.

Then everything went quiet. A dragonfly marked time over a log at the edge of the thirsty swamp, the leaves of the cypresses hung like feathery lures at the ends of bending rods, and the air smelled of fern spores, lichens, and shed snake skins. Papa Mac's Elgin swung on the mirror. It said 4:42. The entire incident had taken only two minutes. But somewhere in those two minutes my life had changed; I could feel it in every corpuscle. I exhaled. I sweated. I needed a drink. But I

had promised myself I'd eat hyena hockey before I'd take another drink. I looked back into the review mirror. I wondered what new face was about to enter my new world.

I folded the Raleigh Times up under my arm, patted my shirt pocket to be sure the photo was still there, and got out of the truck. I checked the suitcase in the truck bed. It seemed unaffected by my near brush with the grim ferryman. I waited at the tailgate.

The pilot whisked his bellbottoms and silk shirt and slicked his black hair to be sure every shiny strand was in place. He checked his shirt collar; it was still pulled up against his neck. Then he strutted toward me as cocky as if he'd just fondled himself to a three-quarter and was walking into a happy hour bar full of young nurses.

Then came the explosion. The fuel line on the plane sprung a leak and the fuel reached the hot engine. The entire front end of the plane boomed into flames. The pilot turned and stared at the flames with great intensity, as if he were visiting another world via teleportation. He didn't stop looking until the fuel had burned out

He gestured to the plane. "That's heavy, man. They don't make 'em like they used to. If I'd'a had another pint of avgas that thing would have made it back to St Pete Airport."

His skin was the color of a fresh plowed Carolina field and smooth like a Puerto Rican's. His eyes looked like two buckeyes in a pail of buttermilk. A vein the size of an earthworm tapered from his hairline down to the bridge of his nose, and the taps on his patent leather boots clicked on the blacktop with the cadence of his voice. He stopped four feet in front of me. He exhaled. His breath was potent enough to gas a bee hive. I was envious.

He pulled a plastic flask from his rear pocket. "If I'd'a had another pint of this hooch, I'd'a flown by myself," he added. He unscrewed the cap, emptied the last drop onto the road, shrugged his shoulders, and tossed the empty container into the swamp. I watched the flying flask until it whooshed into a patch of cinnamon ferns.

"That fuel tank ain't big enough to hold the outflow of a mornin' piss," he said. A thin scar at the corner of his mouth twitched. "Then the honkie throttle had to go and stick. Whole system's tweaked out. Problem is, manufacturers are hiring too many Klaners. 'Stead of

screwing parts together when it comes up the line, they're sitting around on their mufflers, getting punched on tiger piss, playing with their Thomas, collectin' unemployment, sucking up to some social worker about how the system's got 'em caught in a downward spiral, and if they don't get help from Johnny Taxpayer real soon they're gonna have to move their stuff over to the mission house and get logged in as a permanent drain to society."

Then he stopped. He looked me in the eye for the first time.

"I'm Earl Cloud." He thrust out his hand.

I shook it. I could feel that half the index finger of his right hand was missing.'

"River McPhee," I said.

Earl Cloud's hand was cold but his grip was gentle. His eyes had the same glaze I'd seen on alligators at a truck stop in north Florida, like air bubbles pushing through pond scum. We talked a few minutes, but he never once mentioned the plane or my truck. He never even looked back at the wreckage. It was as if that was history, and now he was ready to move forward. He asked if he could hitch a ride to wherever was that I was going, he didn't seem to really care where that was. I told him I was going to St. Petersburg.

A haze rose out of the arrowroot and leatherleaf ferns, and epiphytes clung to the trunks and branches of the cypress trees, their long curving leaves looking like exploding fireworks. The distant sound of a siren drifted up the corridor. A ribbon snake slithered under a rotting log.

I hoped Earl Cloud wasn't going to be one of the new faces in my new world.

"Let's make like geese and get the flock outta here, Hoss," Earl Cloud said.

"Leave the scene of an accident? That's cool."

"We have to. Cain't explain right now, but we need to split in *that* direction." He pointed in the direction opposite that of the siren. "The fuzz won't follow us. They'll stay here with the sinking ship. They train those pigs to do that. Put them in school, suck the embryonic fluid out of their ears, wipe their noses, teach them to parallel park, give them real bullets, and then put them on the street. They actually

pay those dorks to take care of us. It's like having a six-pound crab scratch your nads." Earl Cloud leaned in. "And big jimmies don't exactly use the tickle-the-itch method."

I knew I was making the wrong decision by leaving, but there was a certain sound of desperation in Earl Cloud's voice, like if I didn't help now, I'd be sorry later.

I hopped onto the front seat; Earl Cloud pounced onto the other side. "Haul ass, man," he said.

I turned the switch, the engine roared, and the pickup banged back out onto the asphalt. In my side mirror, I saw my bumper now sticking out like a gate arm at a railroad crossing. And beyond the bumper sparks flew from the dragging tail pipe. I had a feeling my old pickup didn't have much longer to live.

When I'd left Durham, I had decided to stay off the interstate and keep to the back roads. That way I'd be closer to a garage or at least a phone in case the pickup decided to let go of life. Old man Hutchinson up at the Richfield station on Wake Forest Highway where I'd filled up said he used to haul oranges from Tampa to Durham. It took him fifteen hours in a one-ton stake truck. I figured on about eighteen if I kept my post-war Lizzie below forty—the clutch wanted to slip beyond that—and didn't catch too many red lights in the sixty or so small towns I had to pass through.

Then on 301 outside of Fed'ville the fan let loose, whacked through the hood, and cart wheeled down the road in front of me like a Popsicle stick pinwheel, the fan blades tapping out a drum cadence on the highway. The fan took a chunk out of the radiator, and the radiator blew water the color of snuff spit across my windshield. It took me six hours to find a bone yard with a radiator that fit "Ole Blue" and another three to get them to fit it. I was still an hour from where I wanted to be in St. Petersburg on the west side of Tampa Bay. Not that I was in a hurry. Not that what I'd come for was even there.

I never found a fan. The mechanic at the bone yard said I wouldn't need one as long as the belt stayed on the water pump and I kept her above thirty-five. I figured I could hold Blue above thirty-

five and below forty and drive to the gates of hell… if a plane didn't land on me.

"Someone musta called for help when they heard your plane sputtering," I yelled. Earl Cloud apparently didn't hear me over the muffler noise, and I couldn't see his face around the fruit basket pocket that hung down between us.

"Should we look for a phone?" I yelled I louder.

"I know a shortcut through the swamp," he yelled back. "Old Jeep trail. It'll take us across the north of St Pete and dump us into the heart of nig… colored person's town. It's just up the road a piece."

Through the snuff spit windshield, I could see the whirling red light of a second sheriff's car coming toward us.

"Pull over to the side of the road so he won't hear your pipes," Earl Cloud yelled. "He'll go right by, I guarantee it. Those dips have the brains of a wasp."

I pulled off the road as far as I could and cut the engine. When the deputy passed us, he did a double take, popped his brake, did a u-ie, and wheeled in behind us.

"Don't worry, Hoss," Earl Cloud said. "I'll take care of this. Stay in your seat. Probably some cherry right off the line."

He opened the door and got out. I shoved the newspaper up under my arm and got out, too.

"Afternoon, deputy," Earl Cloud said. He walked toward wasp-brain. "Fine day, ain't it?"

Wasp-brain pointed his finger at Earl Cloud's chest. "You, Fancy Pants. Keep your mouth shut and get back in the truck." Then he fingered me. "You, Long Hair; come here. Show me your license." I walked over to him and gave him my wallet with the license showing through a window pocket. He pointed to his left front fender. "Stand there. Put your hands on the hood."

I stayed where I was. I put my hands in my back pockets. I spit. The deputy reached through his open window and grabbed his microphone. He read my name to the dispatcher on the other end and told them it was a North Carolina license. Earl Cloud dove into the pickup on the driver's side. He fired up the engine, ground her into

low gear, shot out onto the two-land, and fishtailed down the stretch with the roar of a Harley Davidson weekend in Nag's head.

"Judas priest!" the deputy barked. He sounded like a beagle. He threw the microphone back inside his patrol car and jumped behind the wheel. I stepped back. The car leaped out onto the road and banzaied down the stretch after my pickup. Ten seconds later, Earl Cloud wheeled off the road into an opening between the trees. He disappeared into the cypress forest. There went my suitcase, my clothes, and my only means of transportation.

The deputy disappeared into the forest behind him. There went my wallet, my identification, and my money.

I stood listening by the side of the road as the siren and the roaring exhaust fused into one muted tone then decrescendo into nothingness. All I had with me were the clothes on my back, the Raleigh Times tucked under my arm, and a black and white photo Papa Mac had given me the day he died. It was my invitation to Florida.

The sky was the color of an unripe cantaloupe now, and from somewhere deep inside the ghostly swamp, where great clumps of Spanish moss hung like silver garland, the *teakettle, teakettle, teakettle* song of a Carolina wren drifted out of the mist and played softly against the chirp of a tree frog.

Welcome to the Sunshine State.

TWO

I hitched a ride on a John Deere tractor pulling a four-wheel trailer full of Valencia oranges. The farmer thought I was a politician running for office, walking across the state, kissing babies. He shook my hand twice and told me where I could find some more babies. I jumped off at a one-pump Spur station about a mile up the road. I deposited what change I had in my pocket in an outside pay phone and called Dana Sidbeck, a Realtor in St Petersburg I had spoken to before leaving Carolina. Dana was going to help me find a short term rental for my short term stay in Florida. I told her my pickup was out of commission.

"I'll send a cab for you," she said. "I know that Spur station. I'll meet you at the train depot in St. Petersburg in about an hour. I have to drop off a client there."

I stepped out of the booth into the silence of the late afternoon. I was fagged. I wanted a smoke. But I had promised myself I'd eat camel crap before I'd take another smoke. I inhaled deeply through my nose. The smell of rotting citrus rinds, sulfurous irrigation water, and decomposing snails roiled in the back of my throat. I looked down. The gastropods were embedded in curled pancakes of dried mud lying in the ditch that ran behind the phone booth. I looked up. The land was parched and the air was dry, and I could see a film the color of an old nickel hanging over the distant city of St Petersburg. I leaned against the side of the booth and opened the Raleigh Times. I read the article again:

Associated Press: Tampa Bay, Florida

Archaeological Research Assistant Matthew Carl Lyons was found dead early Monday morning at a dig site in the Jungle area of St Petersburg, apparently bludgeoned with a blunt object and thrown into the 12-foot test pit where the young archaeologist had earlier excavated a rare spider amulet. The amulet, believed to be the motive for the murder, is shown safely in the hands of Professor Hilliard C. Hancock, director of the dig. MUNA, a local Indian activist group, claims the amulet is a religious object and belongs in the hands of the

American Indians. Hancock disagrees. No murder weapon was found, no arrests have been made.

I stared at the newspaper photo of the amulet cupped in the professor's small hand.

Seeing the photo for the first time in the front room of the Old Place back in Carolina, I knew immediately I'd be leaving McPhee Fields. It was my only shot to end the long struggle that had left me knee deep in 200 acres of black shank fungus.

I told Naomi, the colored lady who did our cooking and cleaning for as long as I could remember, to pack my things, I was going to Florida for a few weeks. Then I went out into the fields to see if an angel had visited me in the night. Fat chance.

The disease had gotten into the fields four years earlier, about the time Papa Mac died. The county agent told me he thought it was Granville wilt. I believed him. The next year I switched to Golden Harvest, a tobacco variety resistant to Granville wilt, but highly susceptible to black shank. The county agent was wrong. The misdiagnosis was the kiss of the executioner. By the end of the year black shank spores had gotten into my irrigation pond and were spread to all the fields. The county agent said the soil was dead, couldn't be planted again for at least five years. Even then it would be just a matter of time before the fungus would spread back into the new crop. I didn't believe him. Over the next two years I tried crop rotation and resistant flue-cured varieties, but nothing helped. He was right.

He said the water mold had first appeared in the 1920s near Winston-Salem. By 1955 it had reached epidemic proportions all over the state. Hundreds of small farms were forced out of business. In 1961, it struck McPhee Fields. Papa Mac had seen the handwriting on the wall. I hadn't.

After four years of fighting Fauntleroy Fungus, Shel walked out. She went back to Norfolk. That's when Brother Jack moved in. A couple of nips in the evening shouldn't hurt. But those nips turned into a shot of Jack in my morning coffee, a couple of whiskey sours for lunch and a half a fifth on the rocks in the evening chased down with a pack of Camels. But for the last two weeks I'd been dry as beef

jerky. The screaming meemies attacked me every evening and rode my back all through the night, but I refused to succumb. My lips made a dragging sound when I slept. I dreamed I was sucking air in the middle of a tobacco barn that was slowly smoldering. But I refused to drink and I refused to light up.

My body felt like a snowman in July, now. It longed to stretch out on a riverbank somewhere, pile up a few Zs to the sound of water rushing over smooth, slick river rocks.

Suddenly, the crunch of tires on crushed shell interrupted my thoughts. Hardly five minutes had passed since I had hung up the phone. A late model, black and white Ford Fairlane wheeled into the Spur station lot, swung a wide arc, and slid to a stop at the phone booth.

The door behind the driver fell open and I heard a voice.

"River?"

I assumed the car was the taxi Dana Sidbeck had called, but it had no markings. "Train Depot in St. Pete," I told the driver and got in.

I tossed the newspaper on the back seat. Then I saw the old woman. She was there opposite me. She was short, robust, and wore a simple cotton print dress with apparently nothing underneath but solid flesh that looked to have the toughness of whitleather. Her face was round, blissful, and unpretentious. Her amber eyes were aged and framed by deep crow's-foot wrinkles that raced to the sides of her head like sharp crevasses on an eroding hillside. She reminded me of an engorged tick ready to pop. She looked like she wanted to reach out and squeeze me till I popped. For a moment, I felt sorry for her. She seemed out of place, like she'd just fallen out of a nest and didn't know how to fly.

"How'd you know my name?" I asked her.

She paused, perhaps too long. "The driver, he tell me." The jolt of the cab pulling back out on the road gave her voice a tremolo.

The driver never said a word. He just stared at me through the rearview mirror. Dana Sidbeck must have given him my name. He looked Cuban, mid twenties, short, arms like link sausages; skin the color of wet acorns. I detected somewhere in the car, the faint scent of naphthalene, an insecticide I used in my greenhouse to control thrips.

"What you doing on this lonely road?" the old woman asked.

I told her I'd just driven from North Carolina, and I'd had car problems.

"What was favorite part of trip?"

I figured I might as well humor the old lady for awhile; I had nothing else to do. "The rolling hills up around the Ocala National Forest," I said. "They reminded me of the Piedmont foothills and my home."

"Your home has bigger hills than that, River."

The old woman's comeback had an edge to it, like razor blades in a bowl of chowder. After a moment of pronounced silence, while she stared at the side of my face, she spoke again.

"Land of red widow."

"What?"

"Ocala. Ancient dune country. Scrub, red widow country. Deadliest of all spiders. No escape once you bitten."

Spiders, my favorite subject. I didn't even like to think about them much less talk about them. "Are you from Florida?" I wondered where she was going with all this. She didn't answer. I watched closely out of the corner of my eye. You can't be too cautious with moss maidens.

"Have you ever been bit by window spider?" she finally asked.

She wouldn't leave the subject alone. "Matter of fact, I have, when I was twelve. A black widow crawled up on my arm in the woods behind our farm."

"I thought so. You have look in your eye. Where he bite you?"

I held out my left forearm and pointed. She inspected the pale scar like it was an unlicked newborn puppy. Her fingers were callused, brown, and steady. She pushed my skin left, right, down.

"I got arachnophobia from that bite. Hate spiders. They give me the Shanghai Shivers."

"You must be Imposed," she said.

Now what was she talking about?

"Indian legend say if widow spider bites you and you don't die, she impose special power 'pon you."

Then slowly she reached down to a frayed reed basket with a lid that sat at her feet and removed an object. She concealed the object in her hands. I decided to change the subject, but I kept her hand under close scrutiny. You can never trust a moss maiden.

"You say those hills are dunes? What're dunes doing way over here in the middle of the state?"

"Florida all ocean once—long time ago. Except for dunes up on ridge. Underneath, like cheese. Underground rivers, grottoes, caves. It is world of endless nights, blind cave troggs, and twin bats. Florida bats born twins, you know. Indian legend say twins sacred."

I wanted to change the subject, get away from spiders and bats.

"Indian call bat caves Lowerworld, lair of Masters of Outer Darkness who steal your soul." The old woman leaned close. She smelled like wet ashes and wood rot. She whispered, "Beware Masters of Outer Darkness."

"You seem to know a lot about Florida and Indian folklore. Are you a teacher?"

She paused again. She stared straight ahead. Then, proudly, "I am Old-fisher-woman."

She was quiet for awhile. She kept her hand out of sight. I gazed out the window. The traffic had thickened as we neared town. The sun sat on the tops of the distant pines like an egg in a nest. The car tires hummed Row, Row, Row your boat, and the air smelled of salt and oil slick.

My thoughts drifted to the photo in my pocket and the day Papa Mac gave it to me. It was four years ago, when the troubles first entered my life. I'd been living in Norfolk a year to the day the Navy decided they could operate quite well without me. I had just turned twenty-one. It was the week Fidel Castro stopped free elections and announced Cuba's alignment with the Communist bloc. There went the neighborhood. It was the week President Kennedy sent 400 Green Berets out of Fort Bragg to train 320,000 South Vietnamese in order to avert U. S. involvement in Vietnam. That didn't work.

It was the week Naomi called me. I took Shel and went home to River-low-grounds.

* * *

The sun never appeared that morning to melt the dew that hugged the freshly planted rows of tobacco that stretched across McPhee Fields at River-low-grounds. I lit a Camel and watched from the upstairs window at the Old Place where I sat by Papa Mac's bed. I puffed and waited, giving him all the time he needed. Papa Mac was dying.

"Looks like big caterpillars, don't it, lad?" His voice was feeble, had no sinew, but the drugs had eased his pain. His imagination was starting up. "Them earth orange rows with the little tufts of Bright Leaf sticking up. North Carolinians have been putting in Bright Leaf a hundred years, don't you know. Before that it was dark Spanish Leaf, come over from Jamestown, up from the Caribbean. Bloody-awful tasting stuff. Spaniards never grew tobacco like North Carolinians."

Papa Mac coughed. He spit a wad of phlegm into a can, then lay still; he could talk only a little at a time. A fat stogie rested on the table beside him. Its end was frazzled like a hammered stob. Papa Mac loved his tobacco. As long as I could remember he'd rolled it, dipped it, chewed it, smoked it, and like all good Irishmen, snuffed it. But the leaf that had given him such an enjoyable life was now butting him out. I lit another Camel and blew a doughnut into the air above my head.

A dark cloud appeared that morning high in the foothills to the west. The cloud swooped off the hills like an eagle catching a thermal. It spread its wings over the Piedmont area where thick topsoil gave rise to great pine forests and homestead tobacco farms chopped into quarters and eights for the heirs.

"We'll be cutting and tying, stringing and curing, d'rectly" Papa Mac said. "That's the way things has always been at McPhee Fields, eh, lad?"

"Yes they have, Papa Mac." I took another drag. I continued to stare out the window.

The cloud rolled up the lane off of Wake Forest Highway. Thick raindrops began to hammer on the tin roof like popcorn under a tent of heated tinfoil. The rain spilled in broad sheets off the big porch roof below the window and splattered in the ocher silt of our front

yard. As a kid, I had shot marbles in the silt trying to knock each marble out of the circle and stick my bowlie in the center. I always felt good in the center of things, balanced. But things were being jolted out of kilter that morning. I watched the thirsty silt drink its due then belch the excess water into rivulets. The rivulets joined brooks that raced to the river deep in the forest. The river was my sanctuary. It was the voice of the forest. It sang to my soul.

Growing up at the Fields, I had a habit, every afternoon, of racing through the forest, shouting the name of every tree and shrub I passed. It's what I did. Then I'd sit by the river, stare into its deep, shadow pools, and recite the names of all the plants and birds and mammals and soil creatures that lived from Virginia to Florida, I.D.'s I had learned from books. I had even studied all the plants of the Caribbean. I memorized over a thousand names.

On Sundays I'd go to mass with Papa Mac and listen to the priest speak in Latin, then the next week I'd go to the Pentecostal church with Mama Mac and watch people get slain in the spirit. The preacher would tap them on the head and they'd fall to the floor and come up healed of their infirmaries.

Papa Mac jerked, I flinched. A log tumbled in the fireplace.

"How you feeling, Papa Mac?"

"You'll not be doing any weeping when I'm gone, will ye, lad?"

"You wanted to tell me something. You sent Joseph to get me." Joseph was the five-year-old son of Naomi.

Papa Mac was propped up in his old feather bed. His balding head, once a fiery nest of locks—the Irish are said to have more than their fair share of testosterone—now freckled and pale from being covered by the Tam o'Shanter he wore from sunup to bedtime every day of his life. A faded patchwork quilt lay across his lap. One hand held a photo face down on the quilt. The other reached out and took my hand.

"I ain't your real papa, River."

His words bit like a cottonmouth—deep, stinging.

"Don't be knowing who your real papa is. I shoulda told ye years ago. You see your mama and me, we couldn't have any wee ones of our own, and so the church sent us down to this place in Florida. They

said we could adopt you. They said your name was River. They made it River McPhee on the papers. They said you were going to be a McPhee from now on so might as well start right then. We brought the likes of ye home and took your picture first thing."

Papa Mac handed me the faded black and white photo of Mama Mac holding me wrapped in a baby blanket out in front of the Old Place. The blanket looked worn and had an odd design on the corner, and Mama looked younger than I'd remembered. On the back of the photo someone had handwritten: United Missions of the World, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1940.

"As God be my judge, you were a good laddie, River. I'll be thanking ye for that. Now, bring me a wee drop of porter before the good father arrives."

I watched Papa Mac die that morning. I held his hand till his grip slipped away. But not before he told me the rest of the story: I was Indian and my people once lived around Tampa Bay. With my darker complexion, I'd always thought Cuban blood had been grafted into the family tree somewhere. I never suspected Indian. Then Papa Mac told me the blight had come to the soil, just like in Ireland in the 1840s. The fields were dying, and soon I'd be forced to leave.

* * *

"That why you come to Florida?" The old woman said. She pointed a finger at the newspaper article on the seat between us.

"Actually, it was the photo in the paper that caught my eye."

She picked up the paper and looked at the photo. "Mark of the Shaman." She stared at me. Her eyes were distant, glowing, the color of caramel syrup on vanilla ice cream. "Spider amulet shows the Mark of the Shaman. It has power over 'Curse of a Thousand Years'." Then the old woman made her move. Her free hand lashed out and grabbed my arm. She snatched my arm to her lap. She slipped the hidden object over my wrist. It was a crude, pounded copper bracelet with an image scratched into its upper surface—an image just like the one carved in the face of the amulet in the newspaper photo.

"The power is yours, River," she said. The driver's eyes penetrated from the rearview mirror like pitch fork tines.

"What is this?"

"Bracelet show Mark of the Shaman just like amulet. Tawá Takko say it belong to you."

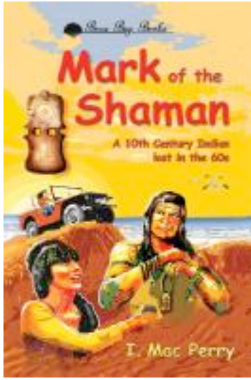
"Taco who? I can't take a gift from someone I don't know."

The old woman smiled. She patted the bracelet on my wrist. "But you do know him, River."

The cab drove under an overpass, turned left into a feeder lane, and pulled into the parking lot of a yellow brick, flattop building with white trim. An overhead sign read: Atlantic Coastline Railroad.

Was this what Florida was going to be, moss maidens who slipped through your key hole at night, sat on your chest, and read the backside of your soul? I decided not to take the old woman seriously, simply thank her for the bracelet and be on my way. But I couldn't help but be intrigued that the design on the amulet and on the bracelet had a name... the Mark of the Shaman.

When the cab came to a halt, I told the driver to wait and I'd be right back with his fare. I got out and walked across a dirt lot pitted with mud holes dry to the bed. I heard the cab ease away behind me. I turned in time to see it slip out onto 38th Avenue and disappear into the eastbound traffic.



Twenty-five-year-old River McPhee is in a whirlwind of conflict with dark characters and a murderer searching for a recently discovered 10th century amulet that, in the hands of River, can save his childhood village from extinction. He drinks an elixir, and takes a spirit journey back to his 10th century ancestors to meet the old shaman who knows the mystery of the amulet. It's now up to River to find it, and release its power.

Mark of the Shaman

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