

Sara Williams

A John Spyer
Mystery



The Serenoa Scandal

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BY

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A Novel By

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DEDICATION

For Bill, the real character in my life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The fictional world of Serenoa lies along the southern flank of Lake Okeechobee and borders upon The Everglades National Park. Detective John Spyer arrives via Highway 27 north, the Okeechobee Road out of Miami. Spyer enters a region that relies less upon the map and more upon the imagination. That is why the routes along the various waypoints are not to be found on any existing road map. I would like to acknowledge the many guides and advisors I found on the way to Serenoa country.



Author Barbara Oehlbeck, above all, who first pointed out the way to Serenoa and then helped me prepare the soil in which it took root. Through Barbara I met Frank Weed, a man who knows his snakes and

Gene McMillan, a man who knows his gators, taught me how to “chuckle up” some critters. *Fort Myers News-Press* sports writer Byron Stout taught me how to fly fish. Meanwhile, Alan and Ardis Hammock introduced me to the world of the sugar cane grower. The Hammocks recommended me to Ellen Wine Simms, former controller of the U.S. Sugar Company in Clewiston, who filled in some blanks about the economics of a region. Naturalist and author Mark Renz guided me through the swamps of Serenoa. Meanwhile, at Brighton Reservation, Stanlo Johns, Alice Snow and Madeline T. Gopher shared with me some vital elements of their ancient, but robust, Seminole culture.

As the plot thickened, I sought advice from friend and former commodities trader Richard Tuck who knew of a few two-legged snakes in the pits. Financial advisor Joe Fair directed me in an escape from Wall Street. Corporal Robert Shankland of the Lee County Sheriff's Department walked me through my own crime scene, and found some help for me from the practitioners of forensic science. Ft. Myers DEA chief Frank Crawford tested the Serenoa story against his lifetime of experience. When my case came to trial in fictional Calusa County, Ft. Myers criminal defense attorney Steve Taminosian offered me some tips on legal strategy.

On the technical end of things, I am indebted to my artist and photographer friend Anne Remington, and to Paul Holson and Suzanne McFarland Price, who helped me correct my gringo-style Spanish.

As for errors or omissions, those belong entirely to me and not to any of my advisors and sources.

PART ONE

MAYA

PROLOGUE

Hoots of owls and the beating of wings startled Maya Menecal awake. Her eyes opened wide. Could this be possible after what had happened? After such a day? She shifted on the pillow placed beneath her thighs to ease the throbbing in her hip.

Of course.

She had awakened because the pain pills had worn off. She lay very still in her bed, considering whether it would be time to take another. Beside her, David was sound asleep, breathing heavily. The poor man was exhausted. Maya nestled beside him, basking in his

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nearness, afraid that if she got up to take another pill she would awaken him. So long were the months they had been apart. David—with his campaign to bring the new university to the county. Maya knew how important it was, how much it meant, but it had taken David from her at the beginning of their life together. She had begun to hate the fact that he was so powerful and all his obligations.

But today Maya had triumphed.

Yes, she had succeeded in getting him alone the moment he arrived at the ranch. She had met him down at the entrance gate mounted on Fandango, the stallion he'd given her on their wedding day. David was thrilled at how she'd learned to ride. Claude Fayals rode with her on David's horse. Claude drove back to the ranch house in David's Navigator loaded with the mountain of gear David used in his campaign for the university site.

David left the other business right at the gate and turned his attention to her and Serenoa, his beloved ranch. They had ridden to the heart of the ranch where they'd dined in style on the bridge over the swamp. Maya had made his favorite chocolate molé and black beans and rice. They had danced to her favorite Cuban music and David had wrapped her in his arms and promised her their life would be different. Soon it would be over. In just a few months Governor Milne would be re-elected. David would retire from public life and turn his attention on Serenoa and on her.

"I'll be home to chase you around the dining table, Maya. Better be ready to run."

Maya had leaped aboard Fandango and spurred him

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on. David took to his big bay and came thundering after her. She headed Fandango out of the swamp, through the southern meadows and across the muddy wallow where the bison were pastured. Unfortunately, Fandango had stepped in a hole in the ooze and Maya had been thrown over his head and landed in the wallow. She'd ruined the beautiful new western cut suit she'd worn, and was more embarrassed than hurt, though she feared for her horse.

David had suppressed a grin. "I won't tell the boys at the roundup if you won't, Maya."

He'd waded right in after her. The slime and the mud roiled over his alligator boots. He'd slipped, landing beside her and they both sat laughing in the brackish water, and it was wonderfully cool against the sticky heat of the day.

"In the great spas of Europe people pay dearly for mud, Maya," he'd said, holding up a handful and letting it squish through his fist. "My dear, I believe you have discovered a new profit center for the ranch."

David dredged up handfuls of mud, laughing so hard he'd fogged up his wire-rimmed glasses and his deep brown eyes were filled with tears of mirth. Out here David Menecal was not the sainted hero of Calusa County, but simply David, a country kid enjoying the forbidden pleasures of the ooze and the mire. It was at that moment Maya knew she truly loved him for himself alone, and not for all his power, and all his wealth, and all the stability he'd brought into her troubled life.

"It seems not the first time you have saved me from the mud," she told him when they realized she had done

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something to her hip and could barely walk. He'd picked her up and set her on the creek bank where they would have, if not for her throbbing hip—

A sound?

Maya heard again the cries of the owls and the beating of wings. As she moved away from David in the bed, she saw a movement in the shadows on the ceiling. Her eyes opened wide and shifted toward the doorway where a beam of light gave shape to a shaft of metal.

It was the moon, focused on a gun barrel.

CHAPTER 1

Immobilized by terror, Maya drew in a breath but was afraid to expel it. Her eyes traced upward, past the gloved hand on the trigger, but the face of the intruder was lost in the darkness. She lay between this specter and David, now aware that the gun was trained not upon her but her husband.

No!

A scream stuck in her throat. Her heart pummeled the cage of her ribs. She tried not to stir, willed this apparition to go away, but something in her movement out of David's arms must have stirred him. David came awake, sat up on his elbows and saw the evil of this metallic threat.

She heard him roar, "What the—?" He reached across her body, batted at the gun barrel, pushing it away, shielding her.

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The blast rocked the room, sending shards of light stabbing through her brain. Maya squeezed her eyes shut but sickening images pulsed against her eyelids. The stench of powder hung in the air, the acrid taste of it burning her tongue.

David's body slumped over her, shuddering and rasping. She felt the slick warmth of his blood. Pulling him close, she compressed her body into his to stanch the bleeding.

Two more shots rang out, followed by David's shuddering and Maya's gasps. She felt a searing pain in her hand and found herself gulping air. Her hands tingled with pain, like an electric shock. Her ears rang and then shut down. It was as if from an impossible distance she heard the muffled demand for her murder:

"Shoot the bitch, Lew! Shoot her!" a voice hissed.

"I took care of her."

It was the timbre of the voices Maya focused on. These were *jovenes*. *One of them was just a kid*. David's body jerked and gurgled, convulsing in her arms, protecting her to the end. Death was rattling, writhing, tearing at him as he lay there thrashing. David gave up nothing easily. Choking down sobs, Maya lay beneath her husband, blocking the wound in his chest with her throbbing hand. The stench of blood was terrible. There was no way for the murderers, these striplings, to perceive that Maya herself was neither dead nor seriously wounded. She was terrorized but alive, choking down her own fear, praying, *Dios mío*, for them to leave. But until they did, there was no way to help David. Maya willed him to hang on. She would not let him go, never.

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David was not dead. Not really. No. It could not be.

“Shee-it, Lew, you killed him,” a third voice, a child’s, howled. “I want outta here...”

“Shut up!” the one called Lew replied.

“You crazy, man? We get caught we’ll...”

There was a sickening crack. The muffled, indefinite sound of wood grating on bone. A shocked silence was followed by moans and whimpering.

“I said shut up!” Lew said. “Sniveling little fuck. I told you to stay back at the car. Now where’s the pay-off?”

A search proceeded. They were tearing the room apart. The closet doors were flung open; drawers were opened and tossed on the floor. Maya lay on her back, the weight of her husband squeezing the air out of her. She watched flashlight beams dart across the darkened ceiling while this band of idiots carried out their murder and robbery. They moved into the alcove adjacent to the bedroom and rifled David’s desk. But the sniffing and the sobbing of the terrified child only became louder. His whimpering distracted the other two. They never checked again to see if Maya was alive.

And then it came, across the distance, a howl from the kennels. It was the baying of Prince, David’s beloved hunter, the demanding red dog that thought he was David’s alter ego. Prince had been banished from the house because he had not been all that friendly to Maya. Prince’s howling told Maya what she didn’t want to accept. Had David’s soul departed? Had he drifted past the kennel to say good-bye? Maya’s spirits plummeted. This was the end. David was gone. Beneath the covers,

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wracked by silent sobs, she clung to his final warmth.

More dogs yipped, then chorused in a primitive wail, as if they had reverted to a feral state.

“Shee-it!” It was the voice of the leader. The one called Lew. “We gotta get the hell out of here.”

Blessedly, they were gone, clattering into the hall, dashing down the stairs. Maya eased out from beneath David, grabbed the bedside phone, and tried to call out. The phone was dead. Moaning with despair, she threw the receiver to the wall. The ranch was twenty-five miles from town. It would take forever for an ambulance to get here. Then she remembered the radio, downstairs in the kitchen.

David lay face down, ominously still.

Maya rushed past him. She would put a call out. Someone would help her. She hobbled down the stairs, her injured hip jolting her at every step. At the window in the landing she could hear the commotion of the fleeing murderers. Something splashed in the pond at the foot of her rose garden. Beyond that she heard the distant sound of a truck grinding to life down by the bunkhouse.

“Claude, gracias a Dios,” Maya whispered. Claude Fayals, David’s trusted foreman, had a sixth sense when it came to trouble. He would know something was wrong. He would be arriving any second.

“David, don’t leave me,” Maya sobbed as she hobbled across the hallway to the kitchen. “Come back to me. I can’t lose you. I can’t bear it. Please. Not this. Not now!”

CHAPTER 2

Dawn was breaking, tinting pink the white sheet that enshrouded David's body. With the gentleness of pallbearers, a team of medics slid him into a station wagon. Blackened windows obscured the vehicle's grisly purpose—to take David to the morgue. Beside it was the Crime Scene Unit, a modified pickup truck that bore a pair of technicians in green jumpsuits and a load of gear housed in a camper unit set into the pickup bed.

Maya was amazed at the efficiency of this pair. In Calusa County, where cows outnumbered people seven to one, it was hard to imagine such individuals. What did they usually do? Follow poachers and horse thieves? At any rate, they seemed to know their business. They had measured, photographed, dusted for fingerprints, collected fibers, and swabbed both David's and Maya's hands for traces of gunpowder. A medic had bandaged

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Maya's hand where a bullet had passed through it. She had been given some sort of pain pill or a tranquilizer; she didn't know which. The pill made her feel spacey, as if she lived in some other dimension and was observing everything at a distance. They confiscated the bloody sheets and the beautiful bedspread, an antique quilt sewn by David's grandmother. A precious relic ruined, bagged and tagged as evidence.

Maya had been too stunned to protest the indignity when the female technician put her in the shower, asked her to remove her bloody nightgown and hand it to her through the glass door.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but we have to protect the chain of evidence."

She changed into a faded denim shirt and jeans. She was grateful to step into her battered snakeskin boots, molded to the shape of her feet after eighteen months of steady use. The boots had been an engagement present from David. He had teased her about the expense. Told her she'd have to make them last until their leather anniversary. Whichever that one was. Now, he was gone after a handful of days. Nothing was left of him but scraps of memory.

How he'd laughed when she first tried to walk in the boots: "My dear, you are as bowlegged as Claude."

The artificial light from inside the garage seemed garish against the pallid daylight. Maya stroked the station wagon, the damp cool surface of it, trying to maintain a connection with David. A uniformed woman embraced her, one of the medics, her face half in shadows, but Maya could see compassion in her eyes.

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“Take care now,” she said.

“*Adiós*,” Maya murmured. She wanted to say more. She wanted to tell these strangers how grateful she was for all their efforts to save David. She choked up instead.

As the medics left, Maya turned to Claude, tears welling. “I hid like a coward beneath David’s body. Much better I went with him.”

“*Sí*, for you,” Fayals said slowly, measuring out his thoughts as he slipped an arm around her waist. “For David, no. He would never want that.” Claude stepped back, took her by the shoulders, gently shook her for emphasis, then wrapped her in his arms. “What David would want now is, we catch these killers. Then you’ll see to Serenoa and build the university David started. David is gone, but his legacy must not be left to wither with his bones, Maya. These things that he left behind, they are now David.”

Though Claude meant to comfort her, Maya’s face contorted as she pulled out of his embrace. Empty words! Platitudes! Hadn’t she said similar stupid things to grieving relatives at funerals? Of what use was all this talk of high purpose? David was gone. He would never be there for her, to lift her moods, to read her thoughts, to tease her with his practical jokes, to gather her into his arms, to ignite her spirits as he shared his wonder. Above all, David took such pleasure in their life together. He wasn’t some repressed, boring *gringo*. Never.

Seeing Claude’s puzzlement at her grim expression, she was ashamed of herself. Claude loved David. What was she thinking? Claude was only trying to help. She threw her arms around his neck, kissed his cheek and

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said the expected thing: “What would I do without you, *hermano*.” Brother.

At least that part was the truth. It was how Maya felt about David’s number one man. Maya felt a deep bond with Claude. He was Mexican; she was Cuban. He was born in Coahuilla in the Mexican desert, near the border town of Piedras Negras, this anomalous blonde Mexican with his jug-eared, narrow-eyed Mayan features and his Germanic coloring and blue eyes.

Maya was *una Habanera*. But nothing came to her now about dear Havana, except the clicking sound you could hear out in the streets at night as the people inside played dominoes. Life was reduced to dominoes? Was she going mad? Ah, no. Not at all. Of course not. She was wising up. Life was a tumble of tiles on the table and she had just lost the toss.

“We’ll find a way, Maya,” Claude whispered.

Of course. She had to be the strong one. She had to bury David with the dignity that he deserved. However hollow the ritual, it was something to do, when she’d rather lie down and die along with David and be done with it.

“Mrs. Menecal?” A low-key, rumbling voice intruded.

Maya looked up.

“Agent Heape.”

She had already talked to this tall officer in the denim jacket. He was the detective with the Calusa County Sheriff’s major crimes unit.

“This county has a major crimes unit?” she had said.

“Yes ma’am, and you are looking at it.”

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Heape, with his easy manner and self-deprecating wit had won her over. She trusted the detective immediately. It had to do with his lack of pretense, his long, tied-back hair and seamed face. She wanted to help him, but what else could she tell him? Her mind was a blur. Behind the detective's baggy eyes, colorless in faint light, she nevertheless read a shrewd expression.

"Call me Roy, if you would, ma'am," he had said. "We're going to be talking to each other quite a bit, until your husband's killers are behind bars."

"Ah yes. Roy," Maya said. "Please call me Maya."

"Let me show you a couple of things," the rangy law man said. Claude excused himself to join in the search for the criminals. All around them droned the sirens from the road, bloodhounds baying in the woods and the canned, distorted shouts of search teams communicating on radios and bullhorns. The killers had fled on foot. They would not get far.



Maya followed Roy to the side of the garage. Though she was tired to her marrow, her senses were hyper-alert. She noticed the detective's stiff-backed, rolling walk as his feet listed to the outer edges of his cowboy boots. Heape trained his flashlight beneath her prized gardenia bush, redolent with the cloying sweetness of the flowers, a few blossoms glowing like snowballs in the waning dark. There, among shriveled brown blooms, spent and dropped from the bush, lay the big key ring to the main house.

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“This I don’t understand,” Maya said. “The key ring hangs on the wall, inside the garage.”

“I don’t understand it, either,” Roy said. Then he took her to the door, which led from the outside of the house into the garage. It stood open. He played his flashlight all along the edge of it.

“Looks to me as if they walked right in.” As he stared at her something in his expression seemed strangely oblique. It was because his nose had been mashed to one side of his face, Maya realized.

“Was the garage always locked?”

“Oh yes. David himself always locked it.” She shifted her weight, feeling again the pain in her lower back. Her horse had fallen, throwing her. She’d cracked three vertebrae. The doctor had given her pain pills. It was why they had missed the weekend in the Keys with Governor Milne. If only she had not fallen. David would not have been killed.

“*Dios mío*. I was the last through that door. It was around midnight. Until then, I had slept well on the pills. I already told you all this.”

“Right. Earlier in the day, your horse fell. You were thrown. I got that.”

“So I began to worry about Fandango. He was limping. I couldn’t sleep. I went out to the stable to see about his leg. My back hurt, but I made it.”

“And your husband didn’t know.”

“*No sé*, I don’t know. David had been on the road for weeks on the university project. He was exhausted.”

“About the garage door?” Heape said.

“I think I locked it behind me, but what if I didn’t?”

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Maya said, tears flowing. “My mind is a blank. What if I failed to lock the door? I would be the one. I could have killed my own husband.” She wiped her nose on a wad of tissue.

“And the big key ring?”

“Yes, that I do remember. I had to think about that. I opened the door to the kitchen using the key on the big ring—it’s the brass one—then I hung it up. It was such a long reach when my back was hurting.”

“Then you probably locked the outer door as well,” the detective said gently. “We’ll find out for sure when we catch these guys.”

“You will find them?”

“Without a doubt. Unless the gators get ‘em first.”

Roy said. “For now, I wouldn’t worry about it. If you’ll be good enough to come along with me, there are other things for you to see. This is just the first stop on our guided tour.”

Maya followed Roy to the edge of the pond at the foot of her rose garden. A compress in the form of a light breeze chilled her skull, beneath her hair, which was still damp from the shower. It felt wonderfully soothing, helping her focus her scattered thoughts. Not three feet into the shallow, brackish water was a set of car keys, mounted on a bright yellow reflector of the type found on a roadside fence post or a mailbox.

“Recognize them?”

“I’ve never seen them.” Water swirled around her boots as she stepped in to retrieve the keys. Heape grabbed her arm.

“We don’t want to move them until it gets light

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enough for the photographer to get a good shot.”

Then he raised his flashlight. The wobbly beam of light targeted an oddly rhomboidal object sticking out of the middle of the pond. “Not a pond ornament?”

It was a gun stock. Maya winced. “The gun that killed David?”

“Most likely.”

“Now, for the finale,” Heape took her arm. Maya was limping so badly that he helped her all the way to his car.

The sun was up, the sky a fleshy pink. Maya felt an aching helplessness and anguish as she stared out the window of the detective’s Jeep. They passed through natural hammocks of live oak and stands of shaggy Sabal palms, cabbage trees. Islands of saw palmetto ringed the trees and fortified fencerows, the *Serenoa repens*, the creeping palm, that inspired the name of the ranch. The road went through the nursery, a pasture where cows with newborn calves could be kept under close supervision.

Dear David. How he loved the mornings. They’d ride out to help in the roundups, and on the way home they’d dawdle along watching the changing seasons. Even in Florida, the seasons changed-- if you knew how to look.

Just yesterday, they had come across the first clumps of pale, saw palmetto blossoms arranged in their exquisite clusters, like living spumes of sea spray. David had helped her dismount Fandango so that she could sniff their nutty fragrance. Soon, they would gather in the lengths of tiny, creamy blooms for their housekeeper,

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Ma Taggert, Merle. Poor Merle. She had gone away for a few days, to see her sister in Jacksonville. She would be devastated. Ma Taggert had known David his whole life. She loved him like a son.

It was just over a mile from the ranch house to the main road. Roy's tires hummed as they crossed a cattle guard and drove through the wrought iron gate at Serenoa's entrance and turned left on the two-lane paved highway, S.R. 13. The electronic gate had been rolled back. A deputy with a walkie-talkie guarded it, who tipped his peaked felt hat as Roy lifted two fingers off the steering wheel in salute.

Roy pulled over, not a hundred yards south of the main gate. There, parked on the roadside in an overgrown turnout beside a culvert, was a battered station wagon. The hood was up. The color, in this light, was indiscriminate, maybe brown. Possibly red. "Corona," Maya read with a derisive snort.

"Do you recognize this car?"

Maya shook her head. "It looks like every other tired vehicle in Calusa County. Do you know whose it is?"

"It's registered to a Lewis Leaming."

"Ai," Maya said. "Leaming. This is the Lew who shot David?"

She got out of the Jeep, approached the Corona. The back window was lined with fast food wrappers and debris. There were dents in the driver's side door. The hood was up.

"Isn't that odd?" Maya said.

"The boys evidently got nervous." He huffed. "My guess is, the keys on the reflector in the pond are for the

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getaway car.”

“*Estúpido.*”

Heape raised an open palm. “Way I see it, they got out here, discovered they had no keys, and tried to hot wire their own car. That didn’t work, so they ran.” She wanted to yank open the door and comb through the vehicle, but Heape wouldn’t let her near it.

“We’ll have the fingerprint man dust it,” he murmured. “Now, Maya, these boys knew their way around. They knew to cut through the fence here, using wire cutters. They knew not to fight through the palmetto jungle back at the main gate. Could this Lew have worked on the ranch?”

“Leaming? I don’t know the name. Ask Claude. Tell me. Has this boy been in trouble before?”

“Got a list of priors a yard long. Shoplifting, fist fights, breaking and entering. That was for openers. Judi, his ex wife, dragged him into court several times on stalking charges. He’s a felon with three burglary priors and one grand theft auto.”

“Never a murder?” Maya said.

Roy grinned sardonically. “No ma’am. It’s a safe guess that when it comes to murder, the Leaming gang is strictly amateur.”

CHAPTER 3

Miami Jimmy was stuck in muck to his knees, crouching behind a thicket of pepper trees, clinging to a wild grape vine as if to a lifeline. Above him, not ten yards up the slope, he heard a rifle cocked.

Beside him, the hot metal of his panel truck sizzled in the muck of a roadside drainage ditch. The van sighed. A human sigh. It was as if the van had a soul. Shifting his weight in the ooze, Jimmy eased into the bushes. At first he'd thought they were drunken teens out on a bender. They'd chased him three miles, until he'd swerved hard to get away from them, blown a tire and nosed into the ditch on the wrong side of the road. Now his gut told him they meant to do serious harm.

They slithered down the steep embankment. The burly one opened the back door of the van and climbed in. The lanky one covered his buddy with the rifle. A serious scope on the thing. Jesus. He heard a scrambling inside the van. The burly one

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emerged.

“He ain’t in there.” Miami watched them scout the ditch while he sweated, skeeters buzzing around his head, drilling on his arms. The tall one whooped. They’d found his tracks in the mud. They slogged toward him, the thin one, his rheumy eyes glittering with all the depth of an empty beer can. “Them pepper bushes sure do look raggedy, don’t they? Think we should prune?”

“Hell yes,” the other one cackled. “Let’s us do that.”

Miami’s gut rumbled. His cowardly bowels let go.

And then, from the road above them, came the sound of salvation. The whish of a car passing by, stopping, the transmission whine of a car in reverse, backing up.

“Damn, let’s get outta here,” the burly one shouted, scrambling up the embankment.

Before he left, the tall one hissed, “Mr. Jimmy, boy. We meet another time...”



Miami Jimmy bolted upright in his bed, wiped the drool off his chin, the sweat off his forehead. It was a sticky, humid night. He could hear the dew dripping off the live oaks. He shut off the sickly glow from the TV and the static noise that went with insomniac viewing. These days he never slept more than three hours, four at the most. Was the static roar of the TV the source of his uneasiness? Something, he didn’t know exactly what, had brought on that terrible dream, which was no dream but a living hell. He was certain Mr. Beer Can Eyes was out to get him but didn’t know why.

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He pulled on his Levis, struggled to button them beneath his paunch, pulled on a flannel over his tee shirt, his motions deliberate. When in a state of dread, never hurry. He picked up his shotgun, where he kept it now, propped next to his pillow, double checked to see that both chambers held a red, brass-eyed cylinder. From a box of shells hidden among the socks in the bottom of his dresser he plucked two more cartridges and stuffed them in his shirt pocket.

He was careful not to disturb Red, his beloved rat snake coiled up in the drawer. In this light Red looked like a rag rug with a diamond pattern worked on the back of his coral-colored hide. Judging from his lethargy in the last few days, Red was sleeping off a feast, perhaps a nest of tasty field mice he'd found in some corner of Miami's tackle shop.

He picked up the bulky, Brinkman flashlight he kept charged now, until this hunt was over. Either he got the kids, or they got him. He went out, followed by Mutt, the toothless, three-legged brindle dog that finally stood up, stretched himself and came along, once he realized something was up. Mutt recognized that his boss's shuffling around at this odd hour was more than his routine insomnia.

Heading out the door, Miami dodged by the stove and hacked a chunk of *sofkee* out of the pan. As he wolfed down the fry bread—fresh made only last night—he realized the satisfaction he had sought from the dough wouldn't cure what bothered him. It wasn't hunger making his stomach feel hollow.

The screen door slammed behind them. Jimmy

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stepped out of the porch light, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. Man and dog started down the rut-carved drive toward his dock, where he thought he must have heard the voices or the footsteps that had awakened him. But once he'd stepped out of his house, his skin rippled. The cicadas were roaring. The whole night crawled.

There was a chopper up, its drone blanketing the blackened sky. Dogs were barking in a rhythmic, intent chorus. An ambulance *eeeeaaaawwwwed* past, heading north up the road toward Serenoa, the Menecal spread. Miami headed down his drive toward the blacktop road. He'd let the trouble carry itself his way. No sense going out scouting it. So he stood, stock still, out by his mailbox, his shotgun resting in the crook of his arm, the gun cracked open so nobody'd get nervous and take a pot shot at him. He kept the Brinkman aiming down, making a flaming circle at his feet.

Fear clawed its way up his backbone as Jimmy saw a ghostly Calusa County patrol wagon, with its lettering standing out in neon, coming toward him, but not too fast. The Jeep moved in a hesitant way. It made him think of his brindle dog on a scent, back in the days when his three-legged mutt was worth something. This was search mode, not pursuit. The fear slithered up and stood on Jimmy's head like a fright mask. He knew with the virtual certainty of a man born into a long line of shamans that he was tangled up in what was to come. How this was, or what it was, he had no earthly idea. Maybe because he was not half the man his uncle, Tigertail Jimmy was. Ol' Tigertail was so good that some

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anthropology student from the university clung to him like a horsefly to a stud, trying to write down what Tigertail knew so's he could earn himself one of them fancy degrees, which made no sense. Why not give the degree to Tigertail, who really knew what he was doing, instead of some white man, who couldn't possibly keep up with the Indian?

The car pulled up beside him, the window rolled down. "Evenin', Miami."

Miami nodded, relieved to see that Ted Smiley was riding shotgun, the rangy kid with the silly, turned-up nose that some whites were stuck with. Deputy Smiley stopped in at Miami's tackle shop, three or four times a week. Was partial to the snakeskin wallets and belts Jimmy made. Whenever it was time some snake yielded up his hide, that is.

"Some trouble?"

"Bad news. David Menecal's been killed."

A strangled exclamation made it out of Jimmy's mouth. David, for the love of the One above.

"How?" Jimmy croaked.

"Kids. Housebreakers, looks like. Took money out of the Missus's purse."

"She all right?"

"Shook up pretty bad," Smiley said. The deputy's voice was flat, deflated. His resigned tone brought tears to Miami's eyes. David Menecal had believed in them all, had carried Calusa County with him. To strike down David Menecal was like to kill the whole county. The deputy's hand lifted from the steering wheel, made a flat, cutting gesture. "David fell across her. Leaming, or

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one of his buddies, thought he'd gotten her too. She played possum. Only reason she survived."

"Leaming," Jimmy said. "Don't know him." Thanks be to the One above, this Leaming wasn't no res kid.

"Rangy kid, real string bean. Lew's tight as skin with his cousin, Carl, a beefy kid, shorter, more of a hunk. A younger one, real scared, was with them, too."

"Uh huh," Jimmy said. "I think I know the older two. Believe I just had a run-in with the same two no-goods."

"When was this?"

"Two—no three days ago. Ran me off ol' Route 7 as I was coming back to the res. Been to Tampa on business."

"The dumbshits ain't too experienced," Smiley's partner, the driver, said. "Tossed their rifle and the keys to their own getaway car in the Menecals' pond. Their Corona's off the road this side of Serenoa's main gate."

"Tried to hot wire the car but no go," Smiley said. "Took off on foot. Won't get far through the swamps."

Miami knew then. "They waked me up. Maybe ten minutes ago. They may have meant to take my airboat but she's chained up good. Only other way to Sabal Springs through here is the service road for the power lines. Comes out along the canal, just behind my tackle shop."

"Let's go," Smiley said.

"I'm deputized?" Miami said. He dipped his head toward the shotgun cradled in his arm. This was one roundup he didn't want to miss. "I know the road."

"You're deputized." Smiley said.

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“Go home,” Miami said, leaning close over Mutt, who lowered his ears and wagged his tail.

“Go home, Mutt,” Miami repeated, louder. Hanging his head, Mutt shuffled off on his three good legs.

“My partner, Hank Ryder,” Smiley said as Miami climbed into the back seat and felt himself jerked back as Ryder took off.

The driver nodded as he picked up his mike. “Car 4. Suspects headed due east on service road due west S.R. 13 back of Miami Jimmy’s tackle store. Ten-four.”

A crackle of barked orders and numerical mumbo-jumbo spewed forth, as the Jeep lurched into the deeply rutted road. Headlights illuminated cypress after cypress wading in the silvery waters. Spiked, gnome-like knobs appeared among the cypress trunks like so many spikes pegging the trees into a carpet of ooze. The vehicle seemed to mow tall grasses between the ruts, the stricken weeds pinging on the front bumper. They’d rocked and swayed along three miles or more before Ryder slowed down.

“We must be ahead of them,” Miami said.

“Not to worry. Backup’s in place. We’ve got them bottled up at both ends,” Smiley said.

“There’s a turnaround a quarter mile down, on the left,” Miami said.

“We’ll hole up there, wait for them,” Smiley said.



Ryder swung into the turnout, turned the Jeep around to face the road, fitted it nicely behind a dense

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stand of bayberry, which gave off a sweet, spicy fragrance, its silvery leaves serving as beacons in a menacing night. The men sank down in their seats, hats over their eyes. Ten minutes passed. Twenty, when they heard a slap outside. The deputies leaped out, guns cocked, and attempted the arrest of an otter.

Skeeters buzzed through the rolled-down windows of the Jeep, munching on them continually while the constant drone of the cicadas kept up the tension. Finally, Miami heard a stick crack on the other side of the bushes. The three of them slipped out of the vehicle. They watched the pair shuffling past, carrying something between them, mounted on a stick. As the smell wafted back, Jimmy knew what it was. His stomach knotted up in revulsion.

“Freeze,” Smiley shouted. “Hit the road, face down.”

The pair dropped, the burden falling with them. “We was just hunting snakes,” the beefy one whined as he was handcuffed. “No law against that.”

“Carl Womble, ain’t you?” Ryder asked leaning over the prone form.

“What of it?” Womble mumbled into the mud.

“Where’s cousin Lew?” Ryder asked, yanking him to his feet.

“Ain’t seen him all night,” Carl said. “Left town for a job up north’s what I heard.”

“Sure he didn’t linger on to pull one more theft?” Ryder murmured.

“How the hell should I know?” The bulky one said.

“Been a murder on the Menecal ranch. We’ll see

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what you know,” Smiley said. “We’re riding you back to headquarters.”

The smaller one, who said his name was Danny, was scared witless. Squeezed between the boys, Miami felt the younger boy’s whole body trembling. In the instant the light had flashed in the back seat, he’d seen that one whole side of the kid’s face was black and blue. One eye was swollen shut. The burly one, Carl, was stolid. Their eyes had connected momentarily when they got in the car. Jimmy was sure Carl recognized him.

“Hello again, boy,” Miami murmured. “Where’s your skinny buddy? Lew is it? Running someone else off the road?”

Carl turned away, his doughy face expressionless. Hell. There wasn’t nothing to him. A strong hand could have molded this lump of baby fat into something, but now it was too late.

Miami sat back, his mouth working as the odor came again. The swearing deputies had taken the snake as evidence. Miami could smell it in the rear compartment, the powerful musk—just this side of skunk—that most snakes gave off when cornered. The critter that they’d killed was a fine, strapping water snake, a round eye and therefore harmless, unlike the slit-eyed mocs, which were deadly. From the size of it, this round eye was a good six years old. Miami felt bad for the snake. Never would he kill a snake, not even a poisonous slit-eye, unless he simply had to. But since the deed was done, he’d ask the deputies for the hide. It’d make a fine belt, to honor a simple critter whose life was taken in such an evil way.

CHAPTER 4

Clutching his side, Lew Leaming flung himself down on a grassy knoll beside a silently moving stream. The current slithered in the moonlight, the water a swirlin' like them thoughts whirlin' in his head. Behind him, dogs was yowling. His skin crawled at the sound. Somehow them dogs had managed to pick up his scent. They couldn't be more than a half-mile behind him, twenty minutes at most. There was only one way to confuse them. He'd have to cross this murky branch, but the thought of doing it ate holes in his guts.

He wiped the sweat off his face, took off his backpack and pulled out his flashlight. The beam was fading even as he swept the surface of the water. He sucked in his breath as sets of yellow eyes glowed back at him.

“Have to be a fool to step into that,” he murmured.

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The stream was full of gators, feisty ones. This was mating season. Males were looking for romance. Females were building nests. He knew only one way to even the score on them reptiles.

He flashed the light along the edge of the cypress-strewn clearing, looking for the narrowest place to cross the stream. It looked to be off to his right, twenty yards or so downstream. Didn't seem to be quite so many gators there. Three or four maybe.

He took off another ten or fifteen yards in the opposite direction, to the left, upstream, found a big, mean-ass stick, wriggled it into a strap in his backpack, and set the flashlight down beside his feet.

Then he hunkered down on the bank, made a steeple of his palms, cupped his mouth with his hands, and made a deep, throaty, chuckling sound. To a female gator, this was the cricking noise that signaled a young'un in trouble. To a rogue male, it could mean a tasty morsel to eat. Gators were nasty. They'd chew on each other and eat their own kind.

Lew chuckled gators like he never done before. With a will. With serious intent. Until his throat hurt. Here and there he heard the splashing sound of tails hitting water. He could see the current parting around the snags of black knobby heads, but heard nothing. There was a lethal silence to the way a gator swam. He heard a grunt or two, over the roar of the cicadas, over the wing beats of nervous birds moving on, and above it all rose the baying of them hounds coming to get him. His skin crawled. He was shivering so hard his back hurt. The hounds were nearer. By now they'd be another ten min-

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utes up on him.

He flashed the light across the water. The glowing eyes were moving toward him, moving in unison, a platoon of gators, a regular formation. It was time to run, before them gators knew they'd been snookered. Picking up the stick, he slogged along the shoreline heading downstream, to the narrow point he'd picked out. Just before entering the water, he shined the light across it, the beam breaking on the ripples. Didn't see no gators, but he couldn't see the whole way across, neither.

"Lordy," he said, under his breath.

He stuffed the light in the pack, slipped one strap off his shoulder and started across, prodding the squishy bottom with the stick. A stray gator might be lurking there, or a water moccasin, or a snag that could trip him and pin him right there in that muddy branch. He yelped in panic as he sank to his knees in the ooze. Frantically, he pried himself loose on the stick.

The yowling of the dogs was right on top of him. Then he heard a roar that made his hair stand straight up and salute. It was the bellow of a bull gator, a growl like a big cat. Another big daddy gator took up the cry, then another. Lew was scared to turn his head, but he did anyway. By the light of the moon he saw a bull gator pumping himself up, just like a human doing pushups, as he stood on the riverbank cutting loose with a bellow.

He slogged on through the muck, legs aching with the agony of it. Just before hitting the shore, he heard the hounds enter the clearing, but for the moment the gators and their racket distracted them. He heard the handlers crashing through the underbrush, swearing,

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calling the hounds back. He leaped for the bank; fell flat on his face, crawled ahead, covered head to foot in stinking muck. Shit. The papers in the backpack would be all wet.

Lew's feet swam inside his boots but once across the stream he couldn't stop running. Behind him, he could hear the confused baying of the hounds as they dashed up and down the shoreline and the shouts of men over the thunderous bellowing of the gators. He slowed to a brisk walk, grinning so hard he wasn't nothin' but a jaw.

"Damn straight," he cackled.

Hell, he was safe for the moment. The caper had turned out better than he'd thought. No handler with a lick of sense would let any dog cross that stream with them gators riled up. His spirits rose when he spied the bony white, snaggle toothed dead pine he was looking for, clear as a lit street sign in the night. The dead tree, branching crazily, like a set of antlers off some giant kind of deer, marked the foot of the cow trail he wanted. It was a signal tree as he used to tell Billy.



He trotted along the narrow trail. A good twenty minutes passed. The yapping and yowling back by the stream had quieted down. He chuckled like some loony, talking right out about how he'd fooled them handlers and their fancy dogs.

He passed through a pasture strewn with clumps of palmetto and cabbage trees and entered a hammock of live oak. Then he found what he'd hoped for: the

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chickee.

“The hell you say, son.” He slapped gleefully at the thatched roof. One corner of it sagged, but the rest was fine, this pole and thatch shelter in the woods that bordered the back of his ex-wife’s property. Lew and Billy had built the chickee a few summers back, before things fell apart.

Now the kid would barely speak to him. Judi had gone and turned the boy against him. When the court ordered all their visits be supervised, he’d snapped. But as he entered the hut, poking his face through a veil of cobwebs, he could see that the chickee had meant something to the kid. There was a pallet bed in the corner covered with burlap. He tossed the backpack on the bed and sat down, sneezing in the rising dust. The musty smell set his nose to running like a faucet. He wiped it on his shirt and settled down. He had to take a few minutes to find what he needed.

Lew sat cross-legged on the sacking and scooped out the letters and papers he’d seized off David Menecal’s desk. By the light of the flashlight he quickly sorted out the soggy junk, the pizza coupons, the farmer’s catalogs, the magazine subscription bills and crap like that. Then he opened up the fancier mail. One slightly damp invitation to a private dove hunt for the governor, Cracker Milne. Fifteen-hundred dollars for the weekend? Shee-it. What a crook. Maybe he’d take Judi. He could afford it now.

A Visa card bill. Three-thousand dollars? All kinds of trips to Tallahassee and Miami? Christ. The man was a spender.

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A letter with a funny postmark. Havana, Cuba, by golly. Curious, he yanked it open, only to see that it was written in Spanish. He tossed it away.

A fat manila envelope. Drawings of buildings. Florida Intercoastal University campus. Hell yes. Maybe he could buy himself a college degree from Menecal's pet university. Just because he'd never gotten through High School didn't mean he wasn't smart. That was what Judi used to say. Before he'd dropped out of rehab and gotten arrested again. It was right then, when she stopped talking to him, that he'd gone crazy and went on a robbery spree.

Judi drove him nuts. She meant more to him than his pickup truck. When he'd sold the truck, the one decent thing he'd ever owned, and then used the money to make up back child support, he thought her attitude would be different. But even then she didn't want him. Judi didn't care a lick whether he had a life and was down to driving that stinking Corona he'd bought off a migrant.

Lew pawed through more stacks of bills. Feed for the livestock. Veterinary services. The Sheriff's Association. For five-thousand dollars, Menecal could have a billboard advertising Serenoa Ranch on the back fence at the State Fair. A church bulletin from St. Mary Catherine. Known locally as St. Cowgirl's. A letter from the food bank. The annual food drive to be held...

And that was it. Where was the payoff? Frantically, Leaming pawed through all the papers again. He dumped out his backpack. A jackknife, cording, duct tape and wire cutters fell out. Nothing else. Not one

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scrap of paper. Maybe it was too dark inside to see all the letters. He scooped up all the papers and ran outside. On the other side of the clearing was a log, bathed in moonlight. He sat down, began resorting everything. Kee-rist. Where the fuck was it? Damn whiney Danny, this was the kid's fault. If only the stupid kid had done as he was told and stayed by the Corona. Lew knew the right papers had to be there. He banged his head on an upright snag out of sheer frustration. When the back of his head commenced to bleed, he slipped off the log, deflated, too weak to move. What the hell had gone wrong? How had the damned gun gone off? Fucking Menecal grabbing like that. It was all his fault.

Lew stiffened as a chopper flew in, right down on the treetops. The dried fronds on a nearby cabbage tree shivered. That it was light enough to see fronds scared him shitless. The search was closing in. All he could do was run and keep running.

It was what he decided when they realized that stupid Carl had tossed away the car keys along with the ones to the house. He checked in his pocket for the money they had taken from Maya Menecal's purse. A hundred and change for each of them. Bus ticket money. Hitchhiker money. It was every man for himself.

As the chopper sped away, Lew worked through the trees. It was light enough to see the old logging road that led to Judi's trailer. As he came upon the sheds, where she boarded ponies and passed the exercise ring where she worked them, he checked the clearing for police rigs. Nothing so far. He was way ahead of them.



By the time Lew arrived at Judi's trailer it was light enough for him to see her mutt, Taffy, a fat, ancient cocker asleep on her rug out on the screened porch. As Lew opened the screen door, Taffy began yapping like hell and growled as he approached, her fur standing up.

"Taffy, girl. Remember me?" he murmured. He extended his hand. The dog bared her teeth. Lew stuffed his hand in his pocket but thought better about kicking the little bitch.

He knocked on the door and when that didn't get any response, he pounded and shouted. He didn't have any more time to lose. There would be roadblocks. He'd have to hide in the trunk of Judi's car to get through.

"Lew? Get the hell away from me," Judi shouted through the door.

"Honey. I'm gonna do that. Got me a day job, earned me 'nuf to ride. Gonna make a new start. Got a job waitin' up at Jacksonville. Shipyard. Big bucks."

Judi opened the door. She clutched her robe, ran her fingers through her spiked hair. God, seeing her like that made him want to touch her, take her. With profound remorse, he remembered how she smelled like baby oil this time of the morning. Just a few minutes. Would there be time?

"Judi," he said softly, reaching out to her. She backed away, her eyes squinting, mean and suspicious.

"What the hell you want from me, Lew?"

"Somebody stole my wagon last night. I just need a ride to the bus station. That's all."

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“You’re sure?” Judi said. She sidled away from the door as Lew stepped in.

“And I’d like to kiss Billy good-by,” he said. “You too. If you don’t mind.” He moved across the threshold and hadn’t taken three steps when he heard the door slam behind him and felt a cold prod at his back.

“Hold it right there, Lew,” a deputy hissed. “I don’t mind givin’ you a ride. Not at all.”

The whole damned place swarmed with cops. Two of them came right out of Judi’s bedroom and trained their Glocks on him, ordered him against the wall, made him spread his legs, and hold his hands high. He talked calm, like he knew to do. There was no sense puttin’ up a fight. He’d just get his head busted.

“I wasn’t trying to defy no restraining order,” Lew said, struggling to keep the fear out of his voice. “You heard me tell Judi I’m on my way out of town.”

“Sure you are,” the deputy said. “Right after you offed David Menecal.”

“The *hell* you say.”

“Found your car right outside Menecal’s gate.”

“Somebody took it last night. You got the wrong man.”

“Then you won’t mind answering questions about your whereabouts.”

“Hell no. I was right at home. Watching videos with Mama.”

The deputy rolled his eyes. “Lew, my man, your brain stuck, or what? Not that same tired alibi?”

“I swear. We watched *Seven* at ten and *Pulp Fiction* at midnight. Got the rentals to prove it.”

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“*Pulp Fiction*? Know what Lew? You’re the pulp fiction ‘round these parts.”

As he was shoved into the backseat of a patrol car, Judi came after him, shouting at the officers, “Lew might of hit me. He’s got a mean temper. He drinks too damn much, but I don’t believe he’s no murderer.” She leaned into the car. “Hang in there, Honey. I’ll bail you out.”

A deputy yanked her away and slammed the door. Hell. He was in awful trouble, but he couldn’t help but feel good. He rested his head on the back of the seat, stared at the roof and smiled. Judi had just revealed a secret side to her. She loved him after all, if only a little bit. Maybe? Didn’t she? She believed in him. Didn’t she reveal her true feelin’s just now? Maybe some good would come out of this mess. Looked like Judi understood she was his.

