

HELL'S BAY

James W. Hall



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“James Hall’s writing is astringent, penetrating, and unfailingly gripping long after you read the last page. Explodes with the brilliance of chain lightning.”

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HELL’S BAY

“Fast-paced . . . Hall’s ability to evoke the deep, primeval essence of the Bay and Glades—the water, air, wildlife, feral excitement—are unmatched . . . All the ingredients for a thoroughly indulgent and hardy stew of a thriller. With his unerring sense of place, and a frighteningly sure grasp of the dark side, nobody cooks it up like Hall.”

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“A white-knuckle thriller that draws on our deepest fears . . . There is no such thing as a bad Thornton novel, but this is one of the best of an excellent bunch.”

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“A solid, action-packed story about eco-terrorists, the past’s pull, and family ties . . . Each [Thornton] sequel has surpassed the previous for its depth of character, scenery, and plot . . . Hall knows how to make evil ooze off the page. With *Hell’s Bay*, Hall delivers a true rip-roaring adventure.”

—*South Florida Sun-Sentinel*

“Hall is in fine form here. The plot twists like a canoe trail through a mangrove forest, and his evocation of south-central Florida and the Everglades is so vivid you might start itching from imagined mosquito bites.”

—*St. Petersburg Times* (Florida)

“A standout thriller as brilliantly crafted as it is plotted.”

—*Providence Journal*

“Fans of Hall’s lengthy series will find lots to chew on in this fast-paced tale of murder and mayhem in the mangroves. Newbies will finish *Hell’s Bay* and quickly seek out its predecessors.”

—*News & Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina)

MAGIC CITY

“A gripping tale of dirty politics, love gone wrong, murder for hire, and international intrigue that is impossible to put down. Highly recommended.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Damn good.”

—*Miami Sun Post*

“The quintessential South Florida novel.”

—*Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*

“Fast, entertaining . . . Hall offers lively characters, livelier dialogue, and an excellent depiction of contemporary south Florida.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Another outstanding chapter in one of the genre’s most consistently first-rate series.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Hall’s action scenes are starkly poetic.”

—*Baltimore Sun*

“From an opening scene that charges out of the box like a greyhound on amphetamines, to the climactic denouement that will leave the reader as limp as two-month-old kale, the pace . . . never slows.”

—*New York Sun*

FORESTS OF THE NIGHT

“Complex . . . chilling . . . [Hall’s] prose style becomes almost cinematic . . . don’t put this one aside.”

as a beach read. A long winter's night is a better bet."

—*New York Daily News*

"Hall's finest work to date. It's serious, gorgeously written, and deftly plotted. It leaves you wanting another book instantly. Hall's work is being compared to *Cold Mountain*, but it's a whole lot better. He has the lyrical style of a Southern storyteller, reminiscent of James Lee Burke."

—*Boston Globe & Mail*

"A page-turning thriller."

—*Tampa Tribune*

"Absorbing . . . fascinating . . . intriguing."

—*Raleigh News & Observer*

"Breathless and fast-paced . . . brisk, suspenseful."

—*Providence Journal-Bulletin*

"A successful departure from [Hall's] usual style . . . [Hall] leaves the reader wanting more."

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"A thriller of the first magnitude."

—*Miami Herald*

"[Hall is] a writer who carefully measures out the answers in clean yet elegant prose. Hall used to be a poet. In all the important ways, he still is."

—*Denver Post*

"A multilayered, richly characterized, and compulsively readable story . . . Is it too early to pick a best book of the year?"

—*Rocky Mountain News*

"A first-rate literary thriller in the tradition of Stephen Hunter's *Dirty White Boys* and Wayne Johnson's recent *The Devil You Know!*"

—*Booklist*

"The kind of story meant to be read around a campfire, providing you have a lot of wood stockpiled. Only the bravest souls would want to venture into the darkness in search of kindling after they've read the first few chapters of *Forests of the Night!*"

—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"A suspenseful, sharply detailed blend of history, family drama, and thriller, *Forests of the Night* cuts across a wide literary swath, and does it with élan and passion."

—Russell Banks

"*Forests of the Night* moves like an arrow—lean and swift—toward its amazing target. James W. Hall is at the top of his form; he's a wonder to watch."

—Reynolds Prioleau

"Compelling . . . with action scenes that bristle with visceral intensity . . . nearly everyone has read it with depth, and the author's appreciation for history and its reverberations adds further complexity."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"In the crowded and talented pool of South Florida suspense writers, James Hall pretty much has the

deep end to himself. Out of reach for most, it's a place of nameless primal fears and murky evil, from which Hall shapes compelling characters in riveting stories. You get caught up in the light and color of the movement of the unfailingly taut action, but you are always aware of something very old and dark beneath it all. His latest novel is wonderfully disturbing in just this way . . . all of which make this carefully crafted, darkly resonant *Off the Chart* stay with you."

—Miami Herald

"After years of tussling with metaphorical pirates of every stripe, fly-tying South Florida swashbuckler Thorn finally gets to go up against the real thing . . . the combination of world-class villainy, exotic locations, quick-march pacing, and studly heroism also suggests Thorn's channeling James Bond."

—Kirkus Review

BONES OF CORAL

"Hall takes this high adventure a step beyond the limits of the traditional action novel. . . a thoughtfully multifaceted novel that should not be missed."

—Library Journal

"Brilliantly suspenseful . . . Hall raises mystery writing to its rightful place of honor alongside the best of American fiction."

—San Francisco Chronicle

BLACKWATER SOUND

"Nautical action sequences [are written] with cinematic vigor."

—The New York Times

"Compelling . . . A well-crafted thriller."

—Miami Herald

"From dramatic beginning to chilling ending, Hall's never been better . . . the result is suspense, entertainment, and high-quality literature."

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"Terrific."

—Scott Turow

"I believe no one has written more lyrically of the Gulf Stream since Ernest Hemingway . . . a wonderful reading experience."

—James Lee Burke, author of *Bitterroot* and *Purple Cane River*

"Gorgeous and compelling."

—Robert Crahan

"Sleek and relentlessly propulsive."

—Dennis Lehane

"With beautiful prose and a heavily muscled story, it moves with the grandeur and unpredictability of

a hooked marlin. Make that a killer marlin.”

—Michael Connel

ROUGH DRAFT

“A thoroughly satisfying thriller . . . Strong and engaging characters.”

—*The Washington Post Book Wor*

“Lots of action, some of it gruesome, and an intriguing plot.”

—*Chicago Tribu*

“Good, old-fashioned, hideously violent fun . . . remarkably original . . . The creepy hit man Hal is one of Hall’s best psychos.”

—*Miami Hera*

“Veteran thriller master Hall exhibits a new dimension . . . solid suspense . . . an expert creator of grotesque villains and fast action, former poet Hall raises the crossbar with his sensitive insights into the human condition.”

—*Publishers Week*

BODY LANGUAGE

“*Body Language* seduces you, then it grabs you, and it never lets you go. This is a first-rate thriller by a masterful writer.”

—James Patterso

“Alexandra Rafferty is a fabulous addition to the ranks of law enforcement. She is smart, competent, the consummate professional, and her job as a Miami P.D. photographic specialist places her at the heart of the crime scene, with a cold eye for detail and a passionate commitment to justice.”

—Sue Grafto

“*Body Language* is a sizzling tale of sex, blood, and obsession.”

—Stephen Coon

“A well-plotted mystery . . . Past hurts and current passions come into play in a riveting way that simply won’t allow you to put the book down.”

—*Tampa Tribune Tim*

“Hall fans will be more than reimbursed by his poetic imagery in the landscapes and love scenes. Alexandra is a heroine with enough endearing attributes to sustain yet another long-running character series.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Suspense and forensic detail with a near-flawless grasp of character.”

—*Bookli*

ALSO BY JAMES W. HALL

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For information address St. Martin’s Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2007039977

ISBN: 0-312-94417-9

EAN: 978-0-312-94417-9

Printed in the United States of America

St. Martin’s Press hardcover edition / February 2008

St. Martin’s Paperbacks edition / March 2009

St. Martin’s Paperbacks are published by St. Martin’s Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Geoff Colmes, my guide

*We are the children of many sires,
and every drop of blood in us
in its turn . . . betrays its ancestor.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

JULY

*Summerland,
Florida*

CHAPTER ONE

Twist for twist, curve for curve, the two-lane road tracked the ancient meander of the Peace River through the sun-battered Florida scrubland. Steering one-handed, Abigail Bates reached up and cocked her rearview mirror off-center to better ignore the white pickup riding her bumper.

She eased back in the leather seat and held the Jaguar to thirty-five and returned to spying on the river through the cypress and pines. In the full sun its dawdling current threw off a silver glow against the riverbank trees and lit the belly of a great blue heron as it slid upstream with ungainly ease. Kingfishers stood watch in the highest branches of the pines, each bird staking out a stretch of water. From the southwest a warm wind breathed through the foliage, shifting leaves and smoothing down the tall grasses.

To her mind, this landscape had a stern grandeur, but go fifty miles west and pluck an average sunbather off the white sands of Siesta Key, drop them on the seat beside her, and most would be hard-pressed to find a trace of beauty in that stark countryside. *Godforsaken* was how she had described it as a defiant teen, seventy years before, serving out her childhood in the land of cattle prairies, citrus groves, pine flatwoods, cypress swamps, and marshes. Back then this wilderness was home to a wealth of scrub jay, sandhill crane, little blue heron, indigo snakes, and any number of species that these days were near extinction. Extinct as well were the leathery cowmen who'd settled that land-roughneck dreamers like her father and his father before him. Although they'd never been glamorized by moviemakers, Florida wranglers like her ancestors were cracking whips over vast herds of cattle a half century before longhorns grazed the prairies of the West.

Despite her youthful scorn of that rugged terrain and its rural isolation, eventually Abigail succumbed to her old man's coaching and learned a measure of appreciation for the hard-scrabble aesthetics of the place.

Apart from the garish aberration of Orlando, the vast interior of the state was thought by most to be a desolate wasteland. Finding champions for those millions of acres of scrub and palmetto and cypress swamp was nearly impossible. Indeed, that lack of care and legal scrutiny was in large measure what allowed Abigail's family to amass their empire.

As she steered the car around another sweeping bend, her foot softened on the gas pedal. On the gravel shoulder a bloated possum lay on its back, its paws reaching skyward as if pleading to the indifferent sun. Unperturbed by Abigail's car, a pair of buzzards plucked at the remains.

If she'd had any sense, she would've braked hard, U-turned, and headed back to the penthouse on Longboat Key. She was a firm believer in omens, and if that possum wasn't one, she didn't know what was.

But damn it, for months she'd promised her granddaughter she'd complete this journey, take a firsthand look at what was at stake. Not that a three-hour paddle down the Peace River was going to alter her decision a whit.

Despite the prickle of unease, she pushed on, and in another ten minutes she saw in the distance her first waypoint, the canoe outfitter's shack.

A good half mile in advance she put on her blinker for the benefit of the yahoo behind her. As she made her turn into the gravel lot, the truck thundered past and she glimpsed the driver, a woman with chalky skin and a long braid.

She parked in front of the dilapidated cabin with a rusty sign over the door: canoe safari. The man who stuck his head out the doorway at the sound of her car had blond hair that trailed across his shoulders and a scraggle of hair on his chin.

He stepped into the doorway and watched her climb out of the Jaguar. Except for the creaky knees and the steady throb in her left hip, she judged herself as supple as any woman half her age.

For this outing she'd chosen one of her long-departed husband's fly-fishing shirts with all the silken pockets and air vents, a pair of frayed jeans, and pink Keds. She'd pinned her silver hair into a bun and fit a Marlins cap atop. In that getup and the right light she might pass for seventy.

With a squint of wariness the man watched her cross the gravel lot.

"Help you?"

"I'm looking to rent one of your boats."

He gazed at her for several seconds as if waiting for her to break into a grin and admit she was only teasing.

She stepped closer and said, "In case you're wondering, I'm eighty-six. I'm fully insured, but if it'll make you feel easier, I'll sign a release."

The man drew a strand of hair off his cheek and looped it behind his ear.

"What's your fancy? Red boat or one of the yellows?"

It was agreed that the young man, Charlie Kipling, would rendezvous with her downstream at the state park landing at noon and would haul out the canoe and return her to this spot. That would give Abigail a three-hour drift down the Peace, quite enough time to take in the views and remind herself what the fuss was about. All she'd have to do was paddle a few lazy strokes now and then to keep the boat straight.

After she was safely aboard a scarlet beauty, Charlie squatted ankle-deep in the water, holding the stern. He had a simple smile but seemed more weary than a man his age or profession ought to be.

She looked down the corridor of tea-stained water and trickled her fingers through the warm stream. Two canoes slipped past, father and son in one, mother and daughter in the other. The kids chattered to each other while the adults paddled, everyone snug in orange life preservers.

"It's as lovely as I remember."

"Oh, it's picturesque," he said. "For the moment, anyway."

She gripped the paddle, waiting for him to release her into the current.

"But things keep going like they been, won't be long before I'll be shopping for another river."

She held his eyes, and after a few seconds she watched them harden and grow bleak. Once again she'd been recognized.

He licked his lips and licked them again as if fetching for a curse.

"I'll be damned. You're that woman, Bates International."

"That would be me. Abigail Bates. Nice to meet you." She didn't bother holding out a hand.

"Well, goddamn it all to hell."

"Go on," she said. "Say your piece."

“I’ve seen you at the meetings, sitting with that shithead lawyer, Mosley.”

“Nothing’s settled yet.”

“That’s a damn lie. It’s a done deal. Train’s left the station. It’s already chugging down the rails there’s no turning that big-ass monster around. From the governor on down, the fix is in. Permits approved. Those meetings are just for show. Letting people think they got a choice in the matter when we got no choice in hell.”

She sighed and shook her head and looked into the river’s wavering shine. What he said was true, of course. The meetings were a sham. The people would be patiently listened to, but ultimately the decision was not theirs. Such as it was, such it had always been. The few deciding for the many.

She wanted to reach out and give the young man a reassuring pat but felt sure he’d swat her hand away.

“This river’s been taking care of itself for a long, long time.”

“Never been any threat like this. Not even close. Already this year it’s down another foot. It’ll be dribble before you people are done.”

Abigail stared out at the steady current. She’d heard it all before, every dire prediction.

“Anyway, it’s more than the damn river,” he said. “Way more than that. It’s where the river goes and what it does. All the people who depend on it whether they know it or not. Goddammit, I don’t believe you just walked right up and thought you could rent one of my canoes.”

“Maybe I should’ve called in advance. You could’ve written a speech.”

“Or brought my gun.”

He held her eyes for a moment, then his face went pale and he swung away as if appalled by his own rage.

Abigail bent to her bag and dug out the Beretta.

She gripped it by the barrel and offered it. She’d been shooting all her life but only lately started carrying a pistol as the death threats mounted.

“There’s no safety. Just aim and shoot.”

Charlie Kipling pivoted back and stared at the pistol. His shoulders shook as if he’d felt a cold draught across his back. He looked into Abigail’s eyes. Then with the mix of dread and boldness a man musters to snatch up a snake, he shot out his hand and wrenched the pistol from her grasp. He fumbled with the Beretta briefly before he found the grip.

It surprised her. The young man had struck her as another spineless tree-kisser with no muscle behind his convictions. But as she watched him raise the trembling muzzle and direct it at her body, Abigail drew a resolute breath and saw again that damn possum on the side of the road, a clear warning that any country girl should’ve taken seriously.

Charlie was panting, a bright sheen of sweat on his cheeks.

“If I took you down, I’d be a hero to a lot of people.”

“I’m sure you would.”

She watched his eyes flick right and left as if consulting the river spirits.

“If I thought it’d make any difference, I’d do it.”

“I’m not trying to talk you out of it,” she said.

A gold dragonfly whisked between them.

Over Charlie's shoulder, Abigail saw a minivan pull into the lot and park beside her Jaguar. After a moment, the side door slid open and three girls leapt out followed by two young mothers in shorts and T-shirts.

Charlie glanced over at the arrivals, keeping his aim fixed on Abigail.

The red-haired woman in the lead noticed the pistol in Charlie's hand and swept up the children and herded them back to the van.

"Hey!" the other woman called out and took a couple of steps toward Abigail. But her friend shouted and she whirled and trotted back to the van.

"You lost some paying customers," Abigail said.

After the van screeched onto the highway, Charlie tipped the pistol toward the muddy bank and fired. Muck splattered the side of the canoe and dotted Abigail's shirtsleeve. He gritted his jaw and squeezed the trigger again and again. When he'd emptied the clip, he dropped her pistol into the shallow water at his feet where it sank to the bottom and gleamed within the swirl of mud like the flash of fish scales.

The glow drained from Kipling's face.

"Noon at the ramp," he said, his voice vacant as a sleep-walker's.

Then he shoved her canoe out into the moving water and Abigail straightened it and felt the current take hold. She tested her stroke, port side then starboard, felt her heart struggling to regain its cadence.

If Kipling didn't show, it was no tragedy. She'd phone her security people in Sarasota to come fetch her. An hour drive, no problem. But she believed Kipling's fury was spent, and he had every intention of keeping the appointment—if only to present his case in a more calculated manner.

A hundred yards downstream she turned and looked back and he was still standing in the shallow water watching her go. After a moment, he swatted at a bug near his ear, then turned back to his pine shack.

She traveled almost an hour downstream before her killer appeared.

CHAPTER TWO

By then Abigail Bates had spotted three deer in the brush along the river. An eagle, four osprey, a red-tailed hawk feasting on a plump dove, numerous ibis, a handful of limpkins, and a large creature rooting in the shrubs along a section of private farmland. Probably a feral hog, one of the descendants of the creatures Hernando de Soto's conquistadors introduced centuries before.

Despite the tannic tint, she could see the bottom of the river in most places, twenty to thirty feet deep, and the fish were visible—a snook, one huge catfish, bass, bream, hundreds of minnows flicking by in nervous, synchronized schools.

Because it was midweek and not yet tourist season, the river traffic was light. Only a single kayak passed her, a stalwart young woman in a skimpy swimsuit who was paddling with the sharp, focused strokes of an athlete in training. The air smelled of snakes and damp mud and an occasional gust of sharp, insistent citrus scent that made her think of a teenage boy's first cologne.

A few feet ahead the river narrowed and the cypress and pine and flowering shrubs crowded close to the water's edge. Abigail steered the canoe around a tight corner. And there, standing about ten yards to her right on an outcropping of rock, was a woman with flesh so white her body might have been carved from cheap soap.

She was long and bony and wore a green one-piece bathing suit.

Abigail paddled two hard strokes on the starboard side to angle away from the woman's perch on the bank, though at this narrowed spot, the shoreline where she stood was only twenty feet away.

When the canoe was almost abreast of the woman's position, she dove. Five feet down she frog-kicked toward the canoe with powerful strokes.

When she surfaced nearby, a mouthful of water drooled from her lips. She treaded water and gave Abigail a cheerless stare. The woman had heavy eyebrows, a braided rope of coal-black hair, hollow cheeks, and harsh cheekbones. She was in her mid-thirties and had the gaunt look of one who'd known more than her share of rough treatment. Peasant genes. Italian, maybe Greek. A woman who would be a great attraction for certain peckerwoods in the region—men with a fascination for the exotic.

Almost certainly this was the driver of the pickup truck who tailgated her to the canoe shack. After Abigail turned off, she'd driven down the highway until she'd come to this place where the canoe would be pinched between two banks. Perfect spot for an ambush.

No crime of impulse. This was not the sort of woman who carried a swimsuit in her pickup for river frolics. Which meant she'd followed Abigail with full knowledge of her destination and had brought the required equipment. Abigail's lungs hardened. Only one person knew where she was headed today. Only one who might have betrayed her.

For a moment they floated parallel, eyeing each other in silence.

At that juncture, with two solid strokes she could be a boat-length beyond the woman and it would be a race downstream.

But she hesitated, for it had never been Abigail's way to dodge a battle. A fighter as a girl, a fighter

still. You didn't swerve from conflict. You took it on and overcame. Those were her daddy's lessons passed on from a long line of hardass daddies. ~~Back down once, it becomes a way of life.~~

She shifted her grip on the paddle, finding a hold that once, many years before, she'd used with a garden spade to hack off a rattler's head.

The swimmer blew a mist from her lips and slid toward the canoe on an angle that would bring her into range in a second or two.

The moment was gone when Abigail might have fled, and a ghost of gloom swelled within her for she saw she'd erred. She should have raced this lanky woman to the next bend, used the river's flow to her advantage. But she'd behaved the way old people so often do. A stubborn attachment to habit. Failure to adapt. She'd made that mistake a lot lately. Treating the new world as if it were still the old.

With two precise strokes the woman closed the gap and her hand shot out for the edge of the canoe. Abigail chopped the paddle blade against her bony wrist and knocked her away. While she recovered, just out of range, there was another window for escape. But again Abigail faltered.

Sculling one-handed, the young woman rubbed at her damaged flesh and squinted at Abigail with the stony indifference of one who'd absorbed greater pain than any this old woman could deliver.

"Last chance," Abigail said. "Go back where you came from."

The woman smiled bleakly, then glided to the bow and took hold. With that effortless act, she had Abigail in her control. No way in hell could she work her way forward in that tippy vessel to attack the woman.

"How long can you hold your breath?" The woman's voice had a country flavor.

"What?"

"Thirty seconds, forty? How long?"

The woman rocked the canoe back and forth as if testing its balance. Abigail gripped both gunwales and held on. At each tip she was only a degree or two from going over.

"Tell me what you want. I can make it happen. Whatever it is."

"What I want," she said, "is to see how long you can hold your breath."

Like she was taking down a steer at branding time, the woman slung her arm across the prow and twisted the boat onto its side and Abigail slid across the metal bench and sprawled headlong into the river.

The woman looped an arm around Abigail's waist, securing her with a grip both solid and restrained as if determined to leave no crime-scene bruise. Abigail balled her hands and hammered at the rawboned woman, but she absorbed the blows with the forbearance of a parent enduring a child's tantrum.

Blind beneath the river, all she could make out was a fizz of bubbles as the woman dragged her toward the sandy bottom, ten feet, fifteen, swimming with one arm, the other locked around her waist. Strong as any man her size, this woman seemed at home beneath the surface, knifing down with an easy power.

As they sank, the water cooled. A swirl of dizzy light spun around her, then she released half the air in her lungs, the glittering froth lifting in a cloud to the surface.

Doing that for the woman's benefit. If she could make her body go limp, the woman might mistake her for dead and drop her guard.

Through slitted eyes she saw where the woman was dragging her.

A cypress root that bowed out from the bank like the handle of a large door, the door to a bank of some impressive office building like so many Abigail herself had entered. A woman of authority. Doormen holding them open for her. The long car waiting while she did her business.

Abigail watched the young woman take hold of the root as if she meant to open that door for Abigail, show her into the next world.

Above her the riverbank jutted out and put them in shadows and out of view of any passing paddle. She willed herself motionless, though the pain in her chest was vicious and her consciousness was dimming fast.

After a moment more, the woman relaxed her grip and Abigail thought she'd fallen for her ruse. She jerked hard against the woman's hold, threw an elbow at her face. It missed. She tried a savage kick but that failed too. The toe of her sneaker wedged in a crevice and came off.

In that spasm of exertion Abigail lost control of her lungs and watched with black horror as a fine bubble burped from her mouth, and rose shining toward the sun.

She felt her mouth slacken as the iron in her veins dissolved. Letting go of her ferocious determination, letting go of everything. Her lungs filled and she felt the gentle tug of the current across her flesh. Abigail Bates shivered hard and surrendered.

CHAPTER THREE

Sasha knew the woman was dead but waited just the same, holding the root in one hand, the woman in the other.

The old lady's clothes rippled in the current, and her hair broke from its bun and flowed forward long and white like a ghost in a windstorm.

Sasha checked the surface and saw nothing passing, then she let the body go. With water heavy on her lungs old lady Bates drifted near the bottom, arms loose by her sides, feet tickling the sandy bottom like a drunk tiptoeing home from an all-nighter.

High in Sasha's throat a knot began to tighten.

It would be as simple as taking a deep swallow. A tempting thought. Sasha and Abigail Bates could go arm in arm on a long death march down the Peace. Miles from here their remains would wash into Charlotte Harbor, spill out into open water, then catch the tide as it fanned into the Gulf of Mexico and in the following days they'd be swept up in the loop current that filtered south and east through the Keys, then the Gulf Stream would catch them and whisk them along on a long clockwork tour of the globe. The large unfailing mechanisms of the sea churning on, carrying the two of them along for the ride.

That simple. Open her lips and inhale. A beautiful journey.

Sasha watched the dead woman stumble and drift, sun-light rippling along the sandy river bottom before her.

The throb in her throat grew. But no. Sasha wasn't ready to hitch that ride. Soon, perhaps. But not now. There were promises to keep. Miles to go.

She released her grip on the root and the water lifted and propelled her twenty feet downstream. With a wild gasp she broke through the surface and swam to the bank.

Her tracksuit was tucked under a bush nearby and her Ford F-150 was hidden a half mile away on an abandoned logging road. She dressed and jogged to her truck. She saw no one. When she was back on the highway, she held to the speed limit all the way to work.

In the women's dressing room she changed out of her tracksuit, hanging her damp bra inside the locker on a metal hook to finish drying. Her security jumpsuit was sandy brown, the color of the landscape she would patrol. A camouflage that made her feel invisible as she roamed the property.

Out in the hallway, she nodded hello to the four guys coming out of the men's locker room. Couple of nods in return. Sasha stood to the side and listened to their small talk about the Buccaneers' new quarterback, listened to one guy's racist joke, then walked out to her Jeep Cherokee.

The vehicle was painted the same ashen shade as her uniform, same as the earth and the gray soot that coated the trees and made the sky hazy for miles around. There was real color underneath it all but it was muted and dull, the way a black-board gets after years of chalk dust films it over.

She took the access lane for half a mile, went another mile down the public road and parked in the shade of a loblolly pine near the long border of cleared land that ran along the shoulder of the

highway.

A mile away the dragline was at work—its massive bucket scooping up tons of earth in single swipes. She felt the thunder rising from the earth, quaking through the frame of the Jeep. She watched her coffee cup tremble in the holder. She rolled up the window, but it did nothing to still the rumble.

Sasha was one of five members of the Bates security team who earned a meager wage making the rounds of the three-thousand-acre mining operation. Her afternoon task was to police the perimeter of #309, one of the gypsum stacks where 80 million tons of toxic sludge were stored. Its earthen walls soared twenty stories and its base covered three hundred acres. Today she was dispatched to check for settling, cracks in the surface of the berm, any sign of a sinkhole opening up or weakening in the structure, and to keep watch for eco-warriors trying to photograph one of the gypsum stacks or climb its banks to take air samples.

Sasha was lean, white-skinned, with eyes the gray-blue of wood smoke. Muscles more solid than most men's. In high school she'd tried out for the wrestling team, pinned every boy in her weight class and ten pounds above. The coach was fine with it, but some fathers protested and she was gone.

Six months after graduating she married C.C. Olsen, eight years older, a science teacher at the high school. Biology, chemistry, physics, whatever needed to be covered, he could do it. Brilliant man, her hero. Wasting his talents in that hick school. But C.C. was dedicated to his hometown, the place that got him started on a life of learning.

First year of marriage, Sasha got pregnant with Griffin. Money tight, they rented a one-bedroom house on Highway 60, dump trucks blasting by day and night, hauling phosphate rock up the road to Tampa to be processed into fertilizer. Sasha spent most of her daylight hours wiping up the gray dust that coated the furniture, the baby's crib, the few plastic toys.

When Griffin was six, heading off to first grade at Pine Tree School, Sasha snuck over to Sarasota and filled out the paperwork for the National Guard. Partly for the spare cash, but mostly to cover tuition to junior college. Study hospitality management, that was her dream. Nab a job in one of the plush beach hotels. She didn't have the brains C.C. had, but hell, she could smile nice, check people in, check them out. She never thought she'd see war.

But as Griffin was turning fifteen, a scrappy kid, and brilliant like his dad, and Sasha was of course shy of her hospitality degree, she got her call-up.

Started out as an eighteen-month rotation, then those eighteen turned into a thirty-month tour with the Florida National Guard, 143rd military police, trained to provide battlefield circulation control, area security, prisoner of war and civilian internee operations, and to maintain law and order on the battlefield. Iraq was a dismal place, a gray crumbling country, the devil's sandpit. Savagery and valor. In the end Sasha lost the ability to tell the difference.

She might still be doing an endless hitch, circulating through the western provinces and Baghdad neighborhoods, if C.C. hadn't been struck with lung cancer. The man never smoked his first cigarette, but his disease was so virulent and swift, Sasha's emergency leave barely got her home in time to hold her husband's hand on his deathbed and give him a parting kiss.

Within a week of her return, Logan Hardee, the editor of the *Summerland Times*, got wind of her service record and showed up at her house. He wanted to splash her across the front page: LOCAL WOMAN IS SECRET WAR HERO. He proposed a parade. Whole town could celebrate her heroism—float with confetti, marching band, speech by the mayor. Put her medal on public display.

Sasha listened in silence, standing on the front porch. When Logan was done, she told him no. She

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