

THE RIPTIDE

ultra-glide



TIM



DORSEY

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The Riptide Ultra-Glide

Tim Dorsey



WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

For Dave York

Epigraph

It would be a bitter cosmic joke if we destroy ourselves due to atrophy of the imagination.

—MARTHA GELLHORN

The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.

—STEVEN WRIGHT

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Prologue

FLORIDA

The hookers were slap-fighting a Hare Krishna up at the intersection when the bullet came through the windshield.

Until then, the tourists' rental car didn't have a mark and would have passed the damage inspection back at the airport, but this was unusually hard to overlook.

It was shortly after eleven on a hot Thursday morning, and the hole in the glass was neat and small, just above the steering wheel, with a tiny circle of cracks indicating a high-velocity round. The Chevy Impala continued straight for almost a block before the horn blared from the driver's forehead. Then it veered over the centerline and clipped an oncoming Nissan. Both cars spun out in opposite directions, sending other traffic screeching toward curbs and sidewalks and hookers.

Finally it was still.

Two surviving tourists in the Impala stared at each other in shock. "What just happened?"

Then it was unstill.

The driver's-side windows exploded from more gunfire, this time a MAC-10 submachine gun preferred throughout the metropolitan statistical area. The tourists ducked in a spray of glass. A twelve-gauge blasted open the trunk. The pair spilled from the passenger door, onto the burning pavement, and scrambled on hands and knees up the middle of U.S. Highway 1.

More bullets raked the car; others took chunks from the street around the fleeing tourists. The attack came from a black Jeep Cherokee with all the fog-light trimmings. It had skidded up sideways behind the crashed Nissan. Overloaded with passengers, an armed clown car, leathery men in cowboy hats and plaid shirts. Jumping out and firing as they advanced, as if it were completely normal behavior in South Florida. They had a point.

They were along a stretch of U.S. 1, also called Federal Highway, between Fort Lauderdale and Miami. No-man's-land. A gritty corridor of strip malls, service stations, old mom-and-pop motels and new bank branches.

Calls flooded 911 operators. Stray rounds shattered glass at a pizza place and nail salon. Another vehicle arrived. A silver Ford Explorer with Kentucky plates cut the corner through a Citgo station and

stopped half over the curb at a Walgreens. More men with guns. Blue jeans, T-shirts, boots. The newcomers began firing on the gunmen from the Jeep Cherokee. Two immediately got hit, MAC-10 twirling and shooting the sky as they went down. The rest ran back behind their car and returned fire on the Ford. Both groups occasionally turned to squeeze off shots at the Impala and the tourists.

A police helicopter swooped over the scene, looking down at the geometry of a Wild West corral: the Jeep on the east side of the street, the Ford on the west, and to the south, the Impala, forming a tight triangulation of fire. The tourists were on the far side of their car, desperately crawling low down the centerline. They would have headed for the side of the road, but the positions of the other vehicles was placing fire along both edges of the street. The helicopter saw them and got on the radio.

The first patrol car screamed north up the middle of the highway. He saw the tourists and swerved around the couple, placing his cruiser between them and the bullets. The officer jumped out and opened the back door. "Get in!"

The tourists began standing up.

A concentrated salvo from the Jeep blew out two of the patrol car's tires and most of the windows.

"Get down!"

The officer joined them on the pavement.

"What do we do?" asked the woman.

"See that copy shop?" said the officer. "We need to get around the corner."

"I feel safer here," said her husband.

The cop shook his head. "Some of those rounds are armor piercing."

The woman couldn't command her shaking legs to move. Tears. "I can't do it."

A bullet came through the door of the police car and chipped the pavement near her head. She took off like a track star, shots pocking the street around her feet. The men were right behind.

They made it around the side of the building and flattened against a wall, plaster from the storefront spraying behind them. The officer grabbed his shoulder mike to radio their position.

"What on earth's going on?" asked the man.

"Probably find out on the news tonight," said the officer. "Do you know any of those people?"

Two heads shook. "Never seen them before."

"What about the dead driver in your car? . . ."

A thin, wiry man in a tropical shirt stood on the second-floor balcony of one of the mom-and-pops.

A shorter, plumper man hid behind him and peeked around his side. "They're shooting down there!"

Serge smiled and continued filming with his camcorder. "I love the beach season."

"Where is the beach?"

Serge aimed an arm east. "About a mile and another world away, magnificent sand and surf, with the postcard-ready Highway A1A running along the shore. Most tourists take root out there and never get dick-deep into the underbelly. That's why I love U.S. 1!" Serge shouted the last part loud enough for one of the shooters to look up. Serge waved back. "Humid yet dusty at the same time, harsh egg yolk tints, devoid of vegetation except for the most determined wild palms fighting their way up between the pavement and concrete blocks. And the foot traffic, a rudderless rhythm of the same basic choices and narrow appetites, trudging the streets at all hours like the undead . . . But every now and then, a fortunate tourist will confuse U.S. 1 with A1A, and accidentally book a room out here and get to dig it like a native!"

A bullet clanged off the balcony railing near the stairs.

Coleman tugged Serge's shirt. "Maybe we should go back inside."

"And miss this great footage? We're going to be famous!"

“But you’re already famous, sort of,” said Coleman. “All those murders. The cops call you serial—”

“Shut up.” Serge winced. “I hate that term. Serial killers are losers.”

“How are you different?”

“A victim of circumstance.” Serge zoomed in on the Jeep. “What are the odds all those assholes would cross my path?”

“So you’re filming another documentary like the one you shot at spring break?”

“No, I’ve got a new hook.” He panned to the Explorer. “I misjudged the market for that last project. I went for the non-market because nobody tries to reach them.”

“Non-market?” asked Coleman.

“The people who never watch TV or movies, so I figured it was wide-open territory. But not takers, not even a nibble.”

Another bullet hit their building two rooms down. Coleman took a swig from a pint of Jim Beam. “But I liked your spring-break documentary. It had topless chicks, frat boys funneling beers and me burying my vomit in the sand.”

Serge shrugged. “Documentaries are too intellectual for the general public.”

“Then what’s your new hook?”

“I already explained it to you, and we’ve been filming for over a week. Were you high?”

“Yes, tell me again.”

“A reality show,” said Serge. “I was surfing the channels, and you wouldn’t believe the dreck that cable people are putting out these days. Not even good reality. We come home at the end of the day and turn on the tube and watch the bullshit parts of what we just came in from: people cooking, working on motorcycles, trying to lose weight, getting fired, getting tattoos, getting their cars repossessed, going broke and pawning World War One gas masks, suing ex-boyfriends in small claims court, over the power bill, couples stressed out because they had ten kids, speeders making excuses to cops, truckers driving on bad roads, guys rummaging through abandoned storage units, a dude who does a bunch of jobs that cover him with filth, a game show in a taxi, interventions for people who hoard trash, families getting their kitchens remodeled against their will.”

Coleman took another slug of whiskey. “What about *Cupcake Wars*?”

“That one sounded promising,” said Serge. “So I tuned in one night, and no fighting at all. Just a lot of frosting. What the fuck?”

“Who do you think will buy your show?”

“Probably MTV.” Serge swung his camera toward more arriving police cars. “Our reality show will beat those *Jersey Shore* mooks like a gong. They even had the gall to set their second season on South Beach, but that was an antiseptically controlled environment. They’d never survive the real Florida. Inside a week, Snooki would be blowing winos for cigarette butts.”

“I’d watch that,” said Coleman.

“And that’s why everyone will definitely watch *our* show.”

“I’ve got the title,” said Coleman. “*Scumbag Shore*.”

Serge nodded. “I’ll run it by the suits.”

“The only thing I don’t understand is you’re just filming other people at a distance.” Coleman killed the pint and fired up a jay. “If it’s our reality show, aren’t we supposed to be in it?”

Serge pulled a nine-millimeter pistol from under his tropical shirt and headed for the stairs. “That’s what we’re going to do now.”

“But they’re still shooting.”

“Good, I was afraid we’d get left out.” Serge waved his gun vaguely at the street. “Let’s go down there and interact with our peeps.”

Coleman tossed the nub of his joint off the balcony and jogged to catch up. “Who are we going to interact with?”

“Thought we’d start with those two tourists who were crawling on their hands and knees through gunfire up the middle of U.S. 1.” Serge racked the chamber of his pistol. “Most visitors could stand here for days without experiencing that kind of genuine Welcome-to-Florida zeitgeist. Since they’re probably thrilled with their beginner’s luck, we’ll hook up and I’ll take them on a behind-the-scenes tour of the Sunshine State that will trip their minds. I have a hunch they won’t forget this vacation.”



Chapter One

ONE MONTH EARLIER

A fisherman found the body in the mangroves just before dawn. Actually, tiny crabs found it first. The tide had ebbed from an inlet near the top of the Florida Keys, and the muck began to give off the funk. The homicide was what authorities like to call a classic case of overkill. But they were stumped about the specific cause of death because of the way . . . well, it's complicated. And all that didn't happen until tomorrow. Right now the victim was still very much alive, and the residents of Key Largo had their attention on something else . . .

* * *

At the very bottom of the state—below Miami and the zoo and the Coral Castle and everything else—sits the tiny outpost of Florida City. Last stop. Nothing below on the mainland but mangroves and swamp.

There was some agriculture and migrants on the outskirts, but mainly it was just a short tourist strip where the end of the state turnpike dumps motorists into a cluster of economy motels and convenience stores: a final gas-up, food-up and beer-up before the long, desolate run to the Florida Keys.

Sportsmen bashed bags of ice on the curb in front of a Shell station, college students toted cases of beer, and a '72 Corvette Stingray flew south doing eighty. It ran a red light and was pushing a hundred by the time it passed the last building—the Last Chance Saloon—and dove down into the mangroves.

The driver looked in the rearview. Faint sirens and countless flashing blue lights a mile behind. He floored it.

Coleman leaned back and shotgunned a Schlitz. "Serge, do you think we'll ever be caught?"

"'Caught' is a funny word," said Serge. "Most criminals catch themselves, like getting stuck at three A.M. in an air duct over a car-stereo store, and the people opening up in the morning hear crying and screaming from the ceiling, and the fire department has to get him out with spatulas and butter. Your arrest involves a lot of butter, or, even more embarrassing, I Can't Believe It's Not Butter, the

you actually need to go to jail, if for nothing else just some hang time to inner-reflect.”

“Those cops are still chasing,” said Coleman, firing up a hash pipe.

“Where did they all come from?” Serge leaned attentively. “There was nobody following, and then, *bam!* The road hits Florida City and suddenly it’s like a *Blues Brothers* chase back there.”

“Florida City?” Coleman dropped a Vicodin. “So that’s what that string of motels is called?”

Serge nodded. “Actually a funny story. Used to be called Detroit.”

Coleman swigged a pint of Rebel Yell. “Now you’re making fun of me because I’m wrecked.”

“Swear to God. You can look it up,” said Serge. “I wouldn’t shit you.”

“I know,” said Coleman. “I’m your favorite turd.”

“And naming it Detroit wasn’t even an accident, like the other times when two pioneer families set up shop in the sticks and there’s no one else around to stop them, and they’re chugging moonshine by the campfire, ‘What should we call this place?’ ‘Fuck it, I already spent enough effort today running from wild pigs,’ and then you end up with a place called Toad Suck, Arkansas—you can look that up, too. Except modern-day Florida City started as an ambitious land development with hard-sell advertising and giant marketing geniuses behind the project. Then they had the big meeting to concoct a name: ‘I got it! What do people moving to Florida really want? To be in Michigan!’ ”

“Bullshit on Michigan,” said Coleman.

“That was pretty much the universal consumer response back in 1910,” said Serge. “But I still can’t wrap my head around that management decision to name it Detroit. The brain wasn’t engineered to deal with that rarefied level of dumbness.”

“Sounds like they were all on acid,” said Coleman.

“Exactly,” said Serge. “So here’s what I think really happened: The top guy mentioned the name and everyone else obsequiously nodded and went along with the idea like they do around Trump, and then months later they take the train south, and the main cat sees the signs at the city limits: ‘You idiots! That was sarcasm!’ ”

“The cops are still back there,” said Coleman.

“Chasing is in police DNA memory, like Labradors running after sticks,” said Serge. “They probably don’t even know why they do it. They just put the lights on and go, and a while later the partner who isn’t behind the wheel says, ‘Why are we stopping?’ ‘Something inside just told me because there’s a really cool crash up ahead. It’s weird; I can’t explain it.’ ”

“I hope we never get caught,” said Coleman.

“That would be my choice,” said Serge. “Unfortunately, a lot of people are looking for us, and heading down to the Keys is never a good call when you’re on the run.”

Another Schlitz popped. “Why?”

“Geography. There’s just one road in and no way out, so it’s a fool’s move,” said Serge. “Except in our case, because I can line up some boats. I know these guys.”

“The cops are getting closer.”

Serge gestured with the book he was reading. “Turn up the volume on the TV.”

Coleman twisted a knob. “That Corvette is really flying.”

“I love watching live police chases on TV,” said Serge. “You usually have to live in California.”

“They have more helicopters out there,” said Coleman.

“But our Channel Seven whirlybird is staying right with him,” said Serge. “Down the Eighteen Mile.”

“What’s that?”

“The name for the empty stretch of road through the limbo of mangroves from the bottom of Florida City until the bridge to Key Largo.”

Coleman pointed. “He’s crossing the bridge . . . The cops are right behind.”

“It’s the big new bridge,” said Serge. “Takes you right across Lake What-the-Fuck.”

“Is that another real name?”

“No,” said Serge. “That’s what I call it. It’s really named Lake Surprise. But surprise is usually something good that provides delight, like winning the lottery or reaching in the back of the fridge and finding an unexpected jar of olives. But this lake got its name because it pissed people off.”

“How’d it do that?”

“Another funny story. When Henry Flagler started the Overseas Railroad down the Keys, he looked for the route with the most land, because bridges over water cost more. So he sent out surveyors, and they began laying tracks south from the mainland of Florida, across some little islands and an isthmus to Key Largo. And I can’t believe they built that far before realizing that right in the middle of a big chunk of land was this giant lake, and now they have to build an *extra* bridge that wasn’t in the budget.”

“I guess the guys at the lake didn’t yell, ‘Surprise.’ ”

“That’s why history gives me a woody.” Serge nodded toward the television. “Even recent history. Like this bozo heading our way.”

“The TV people said the Corvette was stolen in Coconut Grove.”

“He’s coming off the bridge,” said Serge. “The rocks will start soon.”

“Rocks?”

“It’s local tradition, and another reason I love the Keys.” Serge stood and put on his sneakers. “It’s our version of when those people went out to the overpasses and waved at O. J. Simpson during the slow-motion chase. Except in the Keys, when there’s a high-speed pursuit on TV heading south, the locals line the road and wait for the car to come off the bridge to Key Largo. Last time was around Christmas.”

“You’re right.” Coleman pointed at the TV again. “They’re lining the side of the road. They’re throwing rocks.”

“And we’re at Mile Marker 105, so that gives us about three minutes.” Serge tightened the Velcro straps on his shoes. “Let’s go throw rocks.”

“Cool.”

They went outside.

“Is this a good rock?” asked Coleman.

“I think that’s a hardened piece of poo.”

“Righteous,” said Coleman, tossing the brown oval up and down in his palm to gauge heft. “I bet nobody else is throwing this at the car.”

“My wild guess is you’re probably right,” said Serge. “Man, look at all the freakin’ people out here. There’s barely room for us.”

“It’s like a parade, only better.”

A drumroll of pinging sounds came up the road toward them. Pieces of gravel and bricks ricocheted off the Chevrolet frame.

“There he is now,” said Serge.

“He’s swerving all over the place,” said Coleman. “And the car’s completely beaten to shit.”

“That’s why it’s always better to be at the front of the rock line.” Serge fingered a smooth stone in his pitching hand. “Here’s the secret to enjoying this moment in history: In World War Two, ten percent of the pilots got ninety percent of the kills, and most were from southern states where they did a lot of hunting.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“They learned to lead their targets,” said Serge. “But you’re inexperienced. So stand ten yards on the far side of me, and when you see me throw, you let her rip. Your marijuana reflexes will build it

the necessary time lag.”

~~The pinging sounds grew louder.~~

Serge stretched his right shoulder in a circular motion. “People in the Keys don’t hunt, so even you’re not at the front of the rock line, they usually still leave you the prize.”

“Which is what?”

“The driver’s window.”

“Here he comes!”

“*Readddddyyy . . .*” Serge wound up. “Now!”

Serge let fly.

Coleman did, too.

Smash.

“You got the window,” said Coleman.

“And I think your shot went through the opening I created. Good teamwork.”

“He’s fishtailing,” said Coleman. “He’s losing control.”

“And now the other rock people are scattering to make room for him sliding sideways into the mailbox.”

“The police are slowing down,” said Coleman. “But they don’t seem to know why.”

“Here’s where they pull him out through the window by his hair. Let’s listen . . .”

“*Ow! Ow! I’m not resisting . . . Someone hit me with poo. Who throws poo?*”

“Welcome to the Keys,” said Serge.

“It’s hot,” said Coleman. “Let’s go back inside.”

MEANWHILE . . .

A blistering afternoon on U.S. 1.

People fanned themselves under the shade of a bus-stop shelter. Several had inexplicably massive amounts of worthless possessions in a variety of unsteady containers that symbolized the earth’s history of evolutionary dead ends. The bus finally came, and the driver wouldn’t let someone on because he had a George Foreman Grill, even though it wasn’t lit. Alongside the bus, someone else in a safari hat drove a riding lawn mower through a thin strip of grass in front of an outreach ministry. The bus pulled away. A man stayed behind on the bench and considered the downside of being able to suddenly barbecue with little warning.

But it was best not to think too hard about this strip of hot tar below Deerfield and Pompano. Which put it in Broward County, between Palm Beach and Miami-Dade. Shop after shop in endless miles of scrambled economy: ceiling fans, patio furniture, Oriental rugs, barbers, psychics, Pilates, massage parlor on the up-and-up, herbs for the pretentious, used car lots for customers with radioactive credit, carpet remnants for people who didn’t give a shit anymore, a karate studio run by a prick, and one business that simply said L_ASER.

The traffic was typically heavy and frequently slowed by countless school zones. People in orange vests escorted children across the street. A school bus drove by. A man in a gorilla suit stood on the corner, twirling a sign advertising divorce representation.

More school buses. Regular ones, short ones, public, parochial. And one that looked like the others, except upon closer inspection. All males, all adults. The license plate read: T_HE B_LUEGRASS S_TA_TE. The bus cleared a school zone and accelerated a few more blocks before pulling into a shopping center the

was busier than the others. A lot busier, cars everywhere, no parking at all on the south end. A psychi came out of her shop and wondered what was going on. The bus pulled around back.

Inside, a waiting room spilled into another waiting room, every chair taken, overflowing outside onto the front patio, where people fiddled with cheap radios and cell phones. Except the wait was surprisingly short, and people moved chair to chair like they were turnstiles. A platoon of nurses called names from manila folders and continuously funneled the clientele into a series of individual examination rooms that ran the length of a hall. A single doctor emerged from the last door, came down the hallway and started again at the first. The loop took twenty minutes, even if someone was chatty. Because most of the patients spoke Spanish, and the doc had no idea what they were saying.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“¿Qué?”

“Sounds like gout. Take this and see the nurse out front.”

Patients stacked up again at the checkout window. But not to settle accounts. This was exclusively prepay. And one size fits all. Each person picked up an identical single small square of paper that the doctor had filled out ahead of time and stacked in a tall pile. The only chore left was for the nurses to fill in the names. Back pain, knee pain, migraine, toothache, general blahs, didn't matter. The nurse handed over a script for ninety tablets, eighty-milligram oxycodone, the greenish-blue one.

“And here's the address of the pharmacy. Make sure you go to that one . . . Next, please! . . .”

Palm Shore Pain Associates, Inc.

The back door opened and the men from the school bus filed in. They had an express-line arrangement; nurses took them directly to the doctor's personal office in groups of fifteen. And they didn't look too good. Missing front teeth and that sallow, ruddy complexion that says *no permanente address*. As the men filed past the reception desk, the driver forked over four hundred dollars a head, which was a hundred more than everyone else waiting behind them.

An hour later, the sixth and last group of fifteen left the office and climbed back on the bus. The driver collected a prescription from each, just as he had done on all of their last eight vacations in Florida. Of course, they would get them back at the pharmacy, but then they'd have to turn over the pill bottle upon rejoining the bus, or it would be a long walk back to Kentucky, and no three hundred bucks for their trouble.

The driver started up the bus and pulled out of the alley behind the pain clinic.

Suddenly: “What the hell?”

A single whoop of a siren. Before anyone knew it, the SWAT team was everywhere, black helmets and Kevlar vests, M16 rifles pointed at the windshield, storming aboard.

Patients waiting on the patio in front scattered across the shopping-center parking lot and were tackled under running sprinklers.

The shrill yelling outside brought nurses running into the waiting room, just in time for more officers to crash through the doors. Someone in the bathroom stopped up the toilet trying to flush prescriptions.

More M16s. “On the ground! Now!”

Every chair emptied in the waiting areas. Officers pulled others from examination rooms. Another member of the tactical unit came in the back door, pushing the doctor ahead of him. “Tried to climb out his window.”

Another pulled a nurse with wet arms out of the bathroom. The crackdown required several bags of those plastic wrist cuffs. Finally, everyone was lying stomach down and heard their Miranda rights in two languages.

“Secure,” said the officer in charge. “Let 'em in.”

Lights! Cameras! . . . The TV gang from all the local affiliates poured through the door.

“Can you hold up the money and those prescription pads again? . . .”

~~One of the stations went live from the parking lot as officers paraded suspects toward correction vans.~~

“In a highly coordinated and dangerous operation, authorities have just raided one of the large South Florida pill mills illegally dispensing oxycodone, which has contributed to record numbers of overdoses not only in Broward County, but as far away as West Virginia. Officials report they even seized a bus that out-of-state traffickers were using to transport homeless people from Kentucky, and today’s arrests should seriously disrupt the Interstate 95 pipeline of so-called Hillbilly Heroin . . .”

Behind the TV correspondent on U.S. 1, dozens of weary street people stared out the windows of an unnoticed school bus that had just left a different medical clinic three blocks away and was headed back north on Interstate 95.



Chapter Two

KEY LARGO

Throwing rocks at cars is cool!” said Coleman.

“Another quote for the ages,” said Serge.

And another typical afternoon in paradise in the Florida Keys. Empty, bright, baby-blanket sky. Shimmering emerald water all around the Long Key Viaduct with its century-old arches. Heavy, happy traffic heading both ways, including a clown-fish-orange 1976 Ford Gran Torino SportsRoof, with the Magnum 500 wheels, laser stripe and 429 cubic inches of V-8 madness.

A foot hit the clutch, and a hand slammed the shift into top gear. The Torino swerved across the centerline and passed six cars, swinging back at the last second as a van full of sheet-white people passed in the other direction.

“Hot damn!” Serge reached over from the driver’s seat and punched Coleman in the shoulder.

“Ow.”

“I’m so jazzed!” Serge bobbed in his seat. “I love the beach season!”

“What’s the beach season?”

“Comes right after *the* season, otherwise known as tourist season or snowbird season, starting after Christmas, when people migrate to Florida to escape the cold. Then they walk along the beach at sunset with sweaters tied around their waists. I respect the lifestyle choice, but I can’t hang with it. What’s the point of Florida if you don’t get in the fucking water?”

“I remember on New Year’s Day, you were the only one splashing around out there.”

“That was my annual polar-bear plunge,” said Serge. “But how can it count if you’re living in Florida? Except in Jacksonville, where the Parrot Head Club makes it interesting by drinking tequila before sunrise. And I mean way into the bottle, before jumping in the surf at a sunrise that is blocked by a frigid gray sea mist, and they leap back out with half of their wacky foam hats left drifting out to sea, then finish the tequila, sleep twelve hours and dance that night at the local moose lodge. They’re very focused.”

Coleman lifted a cheek to sneak one. “The time I’m thinking of, you were yelling at the people on the shore.”

“What was I yelling?”

“~~‘Get in the fucking water!’~~” Coleman dropped a tab of ecstasy. “~~But they ran the other way~~ instead. Oh, you were also waving a gun. Then the beach was empty and covered with sweaters.”

“It was probably getting late for them anyway.”

“Then you came charging out of the water,” said Coleman. “At first I thought you were running after them like the other times, but you jumped in the car and turned on the heater.”

“Because the water was way too goddamn freezing to get in.” Serge shivered at the thought. “What was I thinking? That’s why I love the beach season! Instead of fleeing the cold, people get in the water to escape the heat. That’s my crowd, keeping it Coppertone real. And it all builds to the huge climax on the extended Memorial Day weekend. I can’t wait! I love the beach season! That’s why I bought a ton of toys at that Home Depot on Vaca Key.”

“Home Depot has beach toys?”

“Better.” Serge reached for a bag in the backseat and pulled it onto his lap. “Hurricane toys. Hurricane season starts the first of June, which means hurricane *preparation* begins the same time as beach season . . .” Serge glanced back and forth from the road to the bag, steering with his knees and pawing inside. “Here’s the crank-powered emergency weather radio and compass, the floating diode flashlight that needs no batteries and runs on the Faraday Principle, a laser-guided compass with GPS, the solar survival blanket developed by NASA, a big-honkin’ all-purpose tungsten hunting knife with a compass *and* flashlight . . .”

“All this stuff will help us survive a storm?” Coleman asked nervously.

“Heck no.” Serge flicked the laser on and off at approaching traffic. Someone in a Mazda skidded down the shoulder into sea grapes. “There ain’t going to be any hurricanes this year. I just like to play with this crap during beach season. Did I mention I love it?”

“Where have I seen those other boxes before?” asked Coleman.

“Military MREs, or Meals Ready to Eat, distributed by the National Guard to storm victims. Got them at a surplus sale this morning. The cool part is the heating element: This clear plastic pouch with what looks like a tea bag in the bottom, and you add just a *little* water to start a chemical reaction that generates a ferocious amount of heat. I’m going to have some fun with those.”

“Now I remember,” said Coleman. “You used the heating pouches on that price gouger we captured a few years ago after that hurricane. But you never like to use the same thing twice. You said it shows lack of imagination and disrespect for your contestants.”

“That’s right!” Serge opened one of the boxes on his lap. “But true imagination is squeezing a second, totally unrelated use from the same item. This time, an ignition source.”

“Ignition?”

“Read about it on the Internet.” Serge pulled a plastic bag from a meal, containing plastic utensils and condiments. “Here’s the key . . .” He pointed at a tiny, one-serving foil packet of Tabasco sauce.

“Why do soldiers have Tabasco sauce?”

“Because war requires spicy food.” Serge stowed the bag. “Anyway, back to the plot: Some cadets from West Point were on survival training, and one of their tasks was to start a fire.”

“How hard can that be?”

“They took away their lighters and matches.”

“Oh.”

“So this one cadet gets the idea to substitute hot sauce instead of water in a heating pouch and—*shazam!*—fire. Who would have thought? . . . But I still haven’t figured out how to use it as an instructional aid.”

“Can I have some of the freeze-dried ice cream?”

“Knock yourself out.” Serge tossed a foil packet sideways across the front seat. “But the mo

excellent purchase of the day is in the trunk, courtesy of the construction wholesaler I hit after Home Depot.”

Coleman sucked foil. “When I was in the bar next door?”

Serge nodded and spread his hands. “Been looking all over for these ever since I first saw them on the Internet when Hurricane Wilma slammed Fort Lauderdale: instant sandbags. Just add water.”

Coleman stopped sucking. “I thought sandbags were supposed to *stop* water.”

“These are special. Each bag weighs only two pounds dry because they’re filled with the lightweight, scientifically developed crystals. But soak them in water, and a half hour later each feathery sack has inflated into a thirty-five-pound rock-hard bulwark of flood protection. Perfect for the hurricane survivor with a hectic schedule.” Serge jerked a thumb back over his shoulder toward the trunk. “Picked up thirty of ’em for hours of entertainment and education.”

They came off the bridge into Islamorada.

“Serge.” Coleman aimed his joint out the window. “You’re passing the Hurricane Monument. You never pass the monument; I always have to stop and wait for your photos.”

“No time.” Serge hit the gas. “I need to find a shopping center on Key Largo with a Target and Kmart.”

“What for?”

“It’s the beach season! I need to buy a ton of surfing music and every beach-movie DVD they’ve got.” Serge reached under his seat and pulled out a camcorder. “I’ve totally rededicated my life to complete immersion in the beach culture. We’ll get jobs raking sand before dawn behind the resort, rubbing lotion on aristocrats and selling tropical snow cones behind the boardwalk.”

“What boardwalk?”

“We’ll build one. That’s how dedicated I am.” Serge turned the camcorder toward Coleman. “And through it all, we’ll record every last second for my new smash-hit reality show. We’ll be famous! . . . Let’s rehearse.”

Serge began filming his pal as they drove.

“Okay,” said Coleman. “What am I supposed to—”

“Shut the fuck up!” said Serge. “You do this every time! You ruin every single vacation with your bullshit!”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“Oh, right!” Serge turned the camera around to film his own face. “Act all innocent, like I don’t know what you’ve been up to behind my back! Pitting one side against the other so one day you can rule the whole beach. You’re a scheming little bastard, and I’m here to stop you! Your glory days in the sand are over!”

“Serge, you’ve never talked this way to me before.” Coleman was on the verge of tears. “I thought we were best buddies.”

Serge put the camcorder on pause. “We are. But we have to pretend there’s all kind of brooding tension on the beach about to boil over any second.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a reality show. You have to fake a lot of stuff.”

Serge resumed filming out the driver’s window at a giant roadside mermaid, a giant lobster, a giant conch shell.

Coleman settled his nerves with a flask of Early Times. “You mean reality shows aren’t real?”

“Of course not,” said Serge. “Reality’s boring. Especially the realities they pick for these shows. People repairing stuff or the daily life in a tattoo parlor. You know what daily life in a tattoo parlor is? Sitting around and smoking with no customers. Then, after five hours, bells jingle at the front door and someone finally comes in. ‘Yeah, give me something on my face with a flaming skull, an inverted

pentagram and lots of swastikas. I want to impress my boss.' ”

Coleman emptied the pint. “That is boring.”

“But easily fixed, and always with a feud. Reality shows are required to have them,” said Serge. “Take the most painfully mundane situation, add some nasty spats, and everything is forgiven. In the middle of a five-hour dry spell with no customers, the hotshot new tattoo artist walks over to the minifridge. ‘Okay, who the fuck took my pudding cups?’ ”

“Now I’m into it,” said Coleman.

“Me, too,” said Serge. “Feuds have a way of cheering up the viewing public. Or humiliation.”

“Humiliation?”

“The new tattoo guy can go next door in the strip mall to the health spa where they’re filming the reality-show contest on people trying to lose a hundred pounds. ‘Oh, so you like pudding, eh? Then take this!’—mashing tapioca up the nose of a fat chick.”

“Who could not watch that?” asked Coleman.

“We are a proud people.”

“The sign said ‘Key Largo.’ ” Coleman pointed with a cocaine tooter. “And there’s a shopping center up ahead.”

Serge cast a glare sideways. “You still into that stupid crap?”

Coleman flicked open the access hole on the small plastic tube for a quick snort. “Just on Tuesdays.”

“It’s Wednesday.”

“Then I’m late.” Another snort.

Serge rolled his eyes. The shopping center came into view, and a turn signal blinked.

Coleman hung his head out the window. “I don’t see a Target or Kmart.”

“But there’s another big place near Winn-Dixie that’s sure to have everything we need.”

They parked, and Serge fleetly went inside to canvass the media section, filling his arms with a harvest of Beach Boys and Annette Funicello.

“There’s a *Gidget* movie,” said Coleman. “*Gidget, Gidget, Gidget . . .*” Uncontrolled giggling. “That’s messed up. *Gidget, Gidget, Gidget . . .*”

“Coleman, you’re acting really weird.” Serge grabbed a *Baywatch* boxed set. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.” He turned and bent over. Snort.

“Jesus!” Serge’s eyes shot around for any onlookers. “We’re in a big store. You can’t be doing coke!”

Another giggle. “Coke, blow, flake, fluff, snow, marching dust, weasel powder, white death, white lady, wings, yeho, nose-candy, donut glaze, gutter glitter, Charlie, Chippy, Belushi, Foo-foo, Merck, mojo, movie star, Mayan mist, Bolivian blizzard, Inca telegram, California cornflakes, la lines, cut rails, hitch the reindeer, chase the dragon . . .”

Serge slapped himself on the forehead.

Then a lightbulb went on. Serge reached in his shoulder pouch for the camcorder. “From the top.”

“Coke, blow, flake . . .”

A few minutes later, Serge finished checking out at the registers and paid with fresh twenties.

“ . . . Roxanne, pimp, sugar, thing, cotton, girlfriend, Big C . . .”

Serge gathered up his bag. “Come on, Coleman, follow me.”

“Where are we going?”

Serge led him over to the back of a long line stacked up at the customer-service desk.

“I don’t understand,” said Coleman. “You just bought those and now you’re going to return them?”

“No,” said Serge. “I just need some customer service. Except for some reason, I always have trouble at customer service. Even though it says ‘Customer Service’ on the sign, it usually feels like I’m getting the opposite. I’ll give it one more try, because I’m into hope . . .”

On the Other Side of the State

Arnold Lip was an ordinary doctor in Tampa who ran a modest private practice that had fallen on hard times because he wasn’t a very good doctor. He was forced to move his office several times down descending strata of square footage and facility maintenance. Until he ended up in a professional building that was a two-story converted crack motel. He specialized in diseases that medical journals described as the most likely to go away on their own.

One day just before lunch, he walked through his empty waiting room. The only receptionist had been let go. He stepped outside and looked over the balcony railing, wondering what he was going to do. He looked around the office complex. No cars in the parking lot. None of the other professionals doing any business either, not the forensic accountant, maritime insurance agent, empty office-space broker, Ventures Limited, or something called the Lone Wolf Group. The outsourcing firm next door had been replaced by an office in a converted motel in India.

He strolled toward the end of the balcony with the stairwell, thinking of the sandwich shop across the street. He stopped. What were all those cars doing on the other side of the parking lot? He watched throngs of people flowing toward one particular office on the first floor. He jogged halfway down the stairs and read the sign by the door. What was a personal injury attorney doing in such a run-down business complex? Those guys can afford full-page ads on the backs of phone books.

At the end of the day, Arnold made a point of taking the same stairs. And waiting. All the cars were gone except a Porsche 955. A young man with German features and a Lance Armstrong haircut was the last to leave the building. He folded his jacket neatly in the backseat of the coupe and sped off, punching the car through its gears.

A week later, Arnold Lip sat in his empty office. He was behind the reception desk, eating a tuna salad sandwich that he had made at home with extra chopped celery because he liked the crunch. The sliding translucent window to the waiting room was closed.

The office’s front door opened. Arnold observed a silhouette approach and stop on the other side of the pebbled glass, like a priest hearing confession.

A hand knocked.

Arnold slid the window open, still chewing. “Yes?”

“Is Dr. Lip in?” asked a young professional with a short haircut. He leaned slightly through the window, looking around for other signs of life in the office.

Arnold wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I’m Dr. Lip.”

“Oh.” A gaze that had been straining down the hall dropped down to the man behind the desk. “My name is Hagman Reed . . .” He pointed generally toward one of the walls. “I’m an attorney from the other side of this building.”

Arnold took another bite. “I recognize you from the parking lot. Porsche 955.”

Hagman looked around the office again at stacks of old *US* magazines. “But you are a doctor, right?”

Lip nodded. “How can I help you?”

“I have a business proposition . . .”

THE NEXT DAY

Arnold opened the door to the waiting room. He looked down a clipboard with a grid full of names and times. “Mr. Euclid?”

He had to raise his voice because the waiting room vibrated from a loud din of conversation mostly on cell phones. The rest of the overflow clientele flipped through magazines and photo spreads of Angelina dragging Brad Pitt around the third world. The new patients sported a variety of new braces and casts.

A man with crutches got up and did a three-legged stroll behind Arnold and into an examination room. He was out in two minutes.

Lip stood in the door again. “Mrs. Lambright? . . .”

And so it went the rest of the day. And the week. And the month. You could almost see the waiting line picking up speed.

The attorney’s business proposition had kicked in.

The reason lay on the unattended reception desk, the morning edition of the *Tampa Tribune*. A small article below the fold on page fifteen. Physician arrested for insurance fraud.

It wasn’t unexpected. Florida had long been plagued by a burgeoning scam industry, making the state the national leader in staged auto accidents. The faux-fender-bender capital was Miami. Until law enforcement cracked down in a big way. And like any other species of scheme in Florida, it was simply a game of Whac-A-Mole. Those who escaped the dragnet just pulled the tent stakes and drove three hundred miles up to the west coast.

Tampa officially became the new U.S. capital of insurance rip-offs. We’re Number One!

Authorities rolled up their sleeves and clamped down again. The arrest that was announced in the morning’s paper was the sixth in less than a month. But this one was different. He was the physician in league with Hagman Reed.

The doctor faced an eighty-six-count indictment, but Hagman was in the clear because he was a lawyer.

Except it still left him without a conspiring doctor. And twenty more cars had already been smashed up. What about those people? It wouldn’t be fair to them. So Hagman had paid a visit to Arnold Lip, because Lip wasn’t a good doctor. He could have gone to a good doctor, but that would mean no kickbacks and, most lucrative of all, no documentation for imaginary pain and suffering.

Which brought us to today. Mrs. Lambright sat on the edge of an examination table.

Lip stood over her with a manila patient file. “Where does it hurt?”

“It doesn’t.”

He hit her in the leg with a triangular rubber hammer.

“Ow.”

Lip talked to himself as he wrote: “Hyperextended knee.”

Then he set down his folder and got her in a headlock. He twisted.

“Ow.” She pushed him away. “Stop that.”

He picked up the folder. “Delayed neck pain . . .”



Chapter Three

KEY LARGO

In the back of a crowd at a customer-service desk:

“Look at this line,” said Coleman. “Why isn’t it moving?”

“Because the customer at the counter is telling her life story from the delivery room,” said Serge.

Five minutes later: “. . . Now, this other person doesn’t have ID or a receipt, but wants cash . . .”

Another five minutes: “. . . He’s explaining that he only wore the underwear a single time on a camping trip . . .”

Five more: “. . . She’s holding up a finger for the service rep to wait while she takes a cell-phone call . . .”

“Serge,” said Coleman. “I’m impressed.”

“By this parade of rudeness?”

“No, by your reaction. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you can be a little impatient.”

“A little? I’m *superimpatient*,” said Serge. “But trying to improve. That’s the whole problem with society: We detect countless faults in others, but never work on ourselves. And behavior in long lines brings out the worst. Take the nicest people you’d ever meet, stick them in an ultralong line that’s moving like molasses, and it’s as if they were bitten by a werewolf. Some sweet old lady who volunteers to read to the blind: ‘Look at this dickhead with *eleven* items in the express lane.’ Supermarkets bring out the worst.”

“Supermarkets?”

“I’ve spent hours with calibrated instruments charting the phenomenon. When the national fabric finally tears itself apart, they’ll trace the first rips to grocery checkouts, where all registers are jammed, and suddenly two shoppers with overflowing carts spot the one register with a slightly shorter line. And the rival customers are exactly the same distance away from the register in opposite directions. They both want to get there first, but need to maintain the social facade of not rushing. So they cut the other one off, so they do the supermarket dance. Happens a million times a day.”

“What do you mean, ‘dance’?”

“They both speed up, but in a special, highly trained way that creates the illusion they’re actually

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