

Prologue

ANOTHER TYPICAL DAY IN PARADISE

A large, clear plastic ball rolled across the Atlantic Ocean off Miami Beach.

It approached a yacht. A hatch on the side of the ball opened. A head popped out. “Which way to Bermuda?” Three deep-sea sports fishermen pointed. “Thank you.” The hatch closed. The ball resumed rolling.

Back ashore, a whiskered man dove onto the sidewalk next to U.S. Highway 1, capturing another iguana under his T-shirt. The reptile was hog-tied with rubber bands and hung from the handlebars of a Schwinn bicycle, joining five other similarly dangling reptiles all wondering how life had come to this.

High above the road, workers on a scaffold updated the jackpot on a billboard for the Florida lottery. Motorists stopped texting to slam their brakes as a Marilyn Monroe drag queen ran into the street, chased through traffic by a JFK impersonator. There were fistfights, fender benders, free clinics, firecrackers that

people thought were gunfire, and gunfire that people thought was firecrackers.

A man with no known address was thrown out of a Chinese restaurant after trying to sell iguanas to the kitchen staff during the lunch buffet special. He was soon arrested in the parking lot but escaped during an increasingly bitter jurisdictional feud between Animal Control and the health department. A bullet-riddled body lay unnoticed behind a Dumpster as a nearby SWAT team surrounded a group of small boys lighting fireworks.

The sun climbed toward noon. Heat waves rose from the pavement. People slowed down. A bicycle rolled quietly past Caribbean trawlers docked along the banks of the Miami River. Six swaying iguanas looked up from the handlebars at a dilapidated office building and an unimpressed man in a fedora staring back at them from a second-story window.

The man in the window removed the hat and wiped his brow as the cyclist pedaled out of sight. Then he returned to his chair and the conversation with himself: “The name’s Mahoney, and if I had a dime for every shanghaied lizard on this river, I could buy the B&O Railroad and not have to pass Go. But they don’t pay for that kind of information in these parts, and until they do, I use up oxygen with my feet propped on a desk that has coffee stains older than all the cops in this town, and most of the hookers. The chipped gold letters on the window of my office door say I’m a ‘Private Investigator,’ but from this side of the glass, I’m a ‘Rotagitsevni Etavirp.’ Been called worse. As long as the money’s green, except that’s not a popular shade in this economy. Is business slow? My bartender stopped letting me hock cuff links for Cutty Sark, the bookies treat me like an IRS agent at a dice game, and the client chair on the other side of my desk has been empty so long it’s starting to have that new-car smell. Guess it’s just that time of year again in Miami. Summer, that is, when the road tar outside is hotter than a stolen pinkie ring at a mob wedding. Most people can’t take this heat . . .”

2 TIM DORSEY

Rapid footsteps came pounding up the hallway. The door flew open. A Marilyn Monroe drag queen burst in and locked the door behind her. “I can’t live like this anymore! You have to help me!”

Mahoney replaced the fedora on his head. “Then again, some like it hot.”

It remained quiet and still outside a private detective’s office on the Miami River. Suddenly, from high in the sky, the thunderous whapping of a Coast Guard helicopter that had just rescued someone drifting out to sea in a human-sized hamster ball. It continued north toward its air station in Opa-locka, flying over the horse track and a desolate, industrial stretch of Hialeah.

Down below sat a small, squat concrete pillbox of a building. Used to be the office of a high-mileage used-car lot. Now a lawyer’s shingle hung over the door. Inside, two people sat on opposite sides of a desk. One wore a tailored French suit. The other, shorts, flip-flops, T-shirt. They stared at the ceiling, waited for the helicopter racket to fade. Then:

“Okay, I got you off on a technicality this time, but you need to be more careful.”

The client didn’t speak.

“I can’t *legally* tell you to break the law,” continued the attorney, kicking off his flip-flops. “But hypothetically, if someone absolutely had to transport weed for personal use, they should get a rental car and pull the most tightly packed buds from their stash. Now this is the most important part: no baggie. That’s where they get fingerprints. And since you can’t get prints off individual buds, just stick them here and there in various spots in the trunk. Even if the cops find your stuff, what can they do? Arrest you because the rental company didn’t thoroughly vacuum after the previous customer?”

The man in the French suit slowly began to nod with understanding. “Cool.” He stood up, revealing the extent of an athletic

frame that made him one of the most popular players for the Miami ——. He pulled a platinum money clip from his pocket and peeled off C-notes.

“But you already paid me.”

“This is a tip.” He formed a wad just north of two G’s and passed the currency across the desk, then gave the lawyer an interlocking-thumb, freak-power handshake.

The player left. His lawyer remained behind the desk, counting the cash and sticking it in a bottom drawer before lighting an incense stick. Ziggy. Ziggy Blade, attorney to the . . . well, it was different every day, about to become even more so. The entire office was one room, divided in half by a curtain of hanging beads. The walls were covered with taped-up posters: the Constitution, Vietnam napalm plumes, Frank Zappa in concert.

Ziggy had just fired up a joint when the front door opened. He quickly stubbed it out, swatting the incriminating smoke away from his face as the beads parted and someone walked in. Then someone else. And another. And another. So on, until there was no breathing room. Serious mouths, briefcases, guns, dreadlocks.

Ziggy sat with wide, stoned eyes. His T-shirt said: EVERYONE REMAIN CALM. LET THE P.E. TEACHER HANDLE IT. The leader of the group gave a slight nod, which was all the communication needed for the others to set their briefcases on the desk and open them in succession.

Ziggy had never seen so much cash, even on TV. He looked up with even bigger eyes. “You sure you have the right lawyer?”

The leader nodded. “You come highly recommended.”

Outside the concrete-block law office in Hialeah, a bicycle rolled by with dangling iguanas. It continued on and approached one of Florida’s most popular supermarkets, like Publix, except not Publix.

A dozen cars circled the parking lot for elusive spots. Crammed

shopping carts crossed the crosswalks. Inside the automatic doors, all the checkout lines were full, even the registers at the customer-service counter, which were usually shortest of all and the last refuge of the one-item shopper. Except now they were the longest lines in sight because . . .

Bright lights flooded the front of the store. A TV correspondent cheerfully raised a microphone. *“This is Bianca Blanco reporting live for Action Eye Live Eyewitness Five at Five from one of Florida’s most popular supermarkets, where the short lines at the customer-service counter are now preposterously long due to an outbreak of lottery fever, and since we’ve gone three weeks without a winner, the jackpot has rolled over to a whopping record that is being updated by the hour . . . Excuse me, sir, why are you willing to wait so long to buy lottery tickets?”*

“It gives my life meaning . . .”

Behind the counter, employees worked frantically to dispense tickets and process the occasional grocery purchase. The staff all had little green plastic name tags. Two of them: SERGE and COLEMAN.

Another customer stepped up to the counter. “Six quick-picks, please.”

“Jesus, don’t buy lottery tickets,” said Serge. “The store won’t tell you this because they’re in on it, but the whole thing is a fool’s bet. It’s a tax on people who are bad at arithmetic.”

“What the hell’s going on here? Just give me the tickets!”

“Buy food instead,” said Serge. “That’s a sure thing.”

“I *am* buying food.” The man set an item on the counter.

Serge gasped. “Not that!”

“I’m buying chips.”

“But you’re buying the twelve-pack of small individual bags! It’s the worst possible cost-per-ounce scenario! Work the numbers, man!”

“I can afford it.”

“That’s not the point!” said Serge. “Think of all the extra

Fritos!”

“Do I need to get the manager?”

Serge sighed and hit buttons. “It’s your road to ruin.”

The customer snatched tickets and chips. “Wacko . . .”

At the next register, an employee popped a can of soda.

“Six quick-picks, please.”

“Sure thing.” The worker lowered the can and furtively manipulated something in his other hand. Then he chugged while pressing buttons on the lottery console.

“Are you drinking?” asked the customer.

“What?”

“I just saw you pour a miniature bottle of vodka into that can of Sprite.”

Coleman stared a moment. “No, I didn’t.”

“Whatever. Just give me my tickets.”

“Here you go.”

“Hold on.” The customer looked at his stubs. “These are Fantasy Five. I wanted Lotto. Where’s your supervisor?”

“Wait! It’s cool! It’s cool!” Coleman quickly pressed more buttons, canceling the previous sale and spitting out correct tickets. “There you go. Have a nice day.”

The customer gave him a cold stare before leaving.

Coleman took a deep breath, followed by an extra-long chug. “The pressure . . .”

Back at the other register, the line was really starting to stack up.

“No, listen to me!” said Serge, raising his voice. “All of you, listen to me! There are more than fourteen million permutations! Do the math! The government is taking all of you for a ride—”

Serge felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around. “Yeah?”

An assistant manager stood dumbstruck. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What’s it look like? Teaching home economics.”

The supervisor opened his mouth to say something, but

stopped and sniffed the air. “Do I smell alcohol?”

“I don’t drink,” said Serge.

The lines of irate customers pointed in unison at the other register.

Coleman punched buttons in frustration. “Darn, wrong tickets again . . .”

Two men wandered away from the grocery store with holes in their shirts where their name tags had been torn off.

“I can’t believe they fired us,” said Coleman. “I was starting to get pretty good at that.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Serge. “We were going to quit tomorrow anyway.”

“But we just started working there Monday.”

“That’s right. We reached our time limit.” Serge pulled a lottery ticket from his pocket and gently caressed the image of a loggerhead turtle. “It’s the key to our new lifestyle choice, moving on to a new town every week and getting another job, just like all the classic American TV road shows: *Route 66*, *The Fugitive*, *Branded*, *Kung Fu*, and the all-but-overlooked *Sea Hunt*, starring Lloyd Bridges. None of them ever stayed more than a week.”

“Why not?”

“The next episode had to air. Even rebels must answer to the prime-time network schedule.”

“Serge, why do you have a lottery ticket?”

“Not just any ticket.” He raised it over his head in triumph. “This is a special-edition Guy Harvey marine-life scratch-off.”

“But you told all those people back there that the lottery was stupid.”

“Only if you play,” said Serge. “This is going right in my collection. That way I’ve already won.”

Coleman reached. “Can I scratch it off?”

Serge clutched it to his chest. “And ruin a mint-condition

Florida souvenir?”

Coleman shrugged and pulled another miniature bottle from his pocket. “Serge, there’s a dude riding by with a bunch of iguanas hanging from rubber bands on his handlebars.”

“Florida happens.”

The pair strolled down the sidewalk as a commercial truck pulled up to the curb. A work crew got out to update the jackpot total on another lottery billboard. The first began climbing the ladder. “Hey, Stan, check this out.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure.”

Passing motorists had been staring curiously at the unusual sign all morning, but they just assumed it one of those 3-D gimmick billboards, this one sending a message like *You’ll really regret not buying lottery tickets*.

The first worker slowly climbed a few more rungs. “What the— . . . Oh my God!”

He practically jumped off the ladder. The whole crew sprinted back to their truck and got on the radio.

High above the road stood the familiar flamingo logo with a tropical splash of colors that promoted wealth without work. In front of the sign was a man wearing a short-sleeve clerk shirt with a clip-on tie. Clashed to his breast pocket: a photo ID badge from the state department of lottery. He gently swung in the breeze from the noose around his neck.