

Prologue

PALM BEACH COUNTY

The sun was going down behind the Big Burger when the alligator came flying in the drive-through window.

It scampered past a milkshake machine and scattered teenagers working the french-fry baskets. The manager hung his head. “Not again.”

The driver of a fourteen-year-old Honda Civic sped away from the restaurant and traveled south on U.S. Highway 1. He wasn’t mad at Big Burger. In fact he had never even eaten there, although now he wanted to someday. It was just another aimless afternoon that started when he spotted the three-foot gator sunning itself next to a golf course and threw a surf-casting net over it without understanding his motivation. The driver had previously used the net for fishing, but he recently began carrying it around in his car at other times for the broader possibilities. After the golf course, the driver stopped at a convenience store and stared at Slim Jims for a while before buying gum. He got back in the car with the

captive reptile on the passenger seat and saw the Big Burger across the highway. And he thought to himself, *Sure, why not?*

Thus continued the Florida epoch of fuck-it lifestyle decisions.

The story of the alligator would make news across the country and overseas, but in Florida it wouldn't even top the wildlife report because a body had just turned up in a nearby motel room with two live spider monkeys dancing on it. The chattering alerted police.

The Honda continued south, past a man on a riding lawn mower twirling Philippine fighting sticks, then a strip club called the Church of the New Burning Bush that would soon lose its tax-exempt status.

Back at Big Burger, customers finished clearing out of the dining area with free food and apologies. Employees loitered in the parking lot. A small gator with its mouth taped shut emerged under the arm of a state game official. Police got the Honda's license off the surveillance tape, and two officers headed south with discussions of sports and alimony.

A sea-green Chevy Nova drove by the fast-food joint, stereo on the Delfonics.

"... Ready or not, here I come..."

"Serge." Coleman pointed out the passenger window. "What's all the craziness at Big Burger?"

Serge glanced over. "Gator. Next question?"

Coleman cracked open a sweaty Schlitz, forgetting the already open one between his legs. "Where are we going again?"

"The next stop on our literary pilgrimage of Florida."

"Oh right," said Coleman. "Books. Reading. *Ewww*."

Flick.

"Ouch, you flicked my ear again!"

"Cultural reinforcement," said Serge. "Everyone comes to Florida touring beaches and bars, but few realize the rich literary heritage all around that people just drive right by every day. Their

awareness begins and ends with Hemingway.”

“Sloppy Joe’s Bar!” said Coleman.

Flick.

“Stop!”

“It drives me batty that our most famous author won the Nobel Prize, yet we’ve reduced him to a logo on a line of tank tops, shot glasses and refrigerator magnets. What profound quote would Papa utter if he suddenly came back to life and saw what was going on?”

“Uh . . .” Coleman strained in thought. “These new phones are the shit!”

Flick.

The Nova rolled up to a red light between a police car and a lawn mower. Coleman lowered his joint below window level. “So what’s our next stop on this reading trip of yours?”

Serge checked his watch. “We’ll have to hurry if we’re going to make it to the library on time . . .”

Cars streamed into the parking lot from all directions. The lighted information sign in front of the Palm Beach Gardens Library: BOOK SIGNING 7 P.M.

A green Nova found a spot near the back of the lot, and Serge and Coleman joined the rest of the patrons heading for the doors.

Inside the community room, a grid of chairs filled fast. A long table stood along the back wall with a punch bowl and bags of Keebler cookies that produced low-range joy.

When the time came, the library’s director made the introduction, and the audience broke into the kind of applause you’d hear at a ribbon cutting for a minor historical marker.

The author took up a position behind the podium, greeted the crowd with a smile and cleared his throat. He opened a hardcover book and began reading:

CHAPTER ONE

My day had been exceedingly normal—which extended the streak to 9,632 normal days in a row—when the shotgun blast sent my life in an entirely new direction.

That's what shotgun blasts do quite well.

Don't ask me who I am right now, or if I'm dead. Even I don't have the answer to that last one yet.

It was 1989, just after midnight, down by the docks at the port. There was no moon, only the red and green running lights of vessels big and small navigating the narrow channels around Peanut Island.

I remember riding my bike down there as a kid and watching the boats. Some came in from the ocean through the jetties of the Lake Worth Inlet, others up the Intracoastal, still more from the canals behind homes on Singer Island. It had always been a busy waterway, even at night.

These were the days long before Homeland Security or DEA radar aircraft, and the Port of Palm Beach was still more than a bit lawless. Later some officials would go to jail for taking bribes.

I heard a small Evinrude outboard approaching the docks, but saw no beacons. The growl of the motor grew louder. There was a yellow light—one of those lamps over the fuel pumps at the end of the soggy wooden pier—and it glinted off the barrel of a twelve-gauge.

A shout: "Too late! Run!"

Blam!

The audience at the library formed a signing line that wrapped around the room. Books cradled in arms, anticipation. One by one they got their autographs.
"You're the greatest."
"Love the writing style."

"I'm you're number one fan."

"Remember the time you tied a guy to the bridge in the Keys?"

The author looked up. "That was actually Hiaasen."

"I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't worry about it." The author handed the book back, and the reader ran away.

The event wound down. The lights went off, doors were locked, and the last of the library staff drove out of the deserted parking lot.

Hours later, a lone vehicle rolled quietly up to the curb by the front door. Guilty fingers reached from the driver's window. They grabbed the handle of the library's night deposit box, seeking to return a shopping bag of overdue titles under cloak of night.

The driver fed volumes through the slot two and three at a time, until his shopping bag was half-empty. Then the door on the box wouldn't budge. He rattled the handle again and again.

"Damn, it's full. Why don't they empty these things?" He drove off like a thief.

The library was dark and lifeless again, a syrupy red pool of blood spreading out from under the dripping book-deposit box.