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VIRGIN HEAT

By Laurence Shames

Hyperion; 320 pp.

Even Hamlet learns that desire, though to a radiant angel linked, can "prey on garbage."

That's clearly what's happened to seraphic Angelina Amaro, the eponymous virgin in Laurence Shames' latest Key West mafioso farce. Guileless daughter of New York capo Paul Amaro, Angelina, 27, has spent nearly a decade of cloistered youth living "mainly in the precinct of her thoughts." Unknown to her father, newly released from nine years in jail, Angelina pined the whole time for Sal Martucci, the lieutenant who'd turned state's evidence against Paul and put him away.

But when Paul's youngest brother, Louie, comes to Paul's welcome-home-from-the-pen party with the videotape of his vacation in Key West, everyone's life will change.

Only the polite Angelina pays attention to the tape. After all, Louie, "the only brother who didn't hurt people for a living" is the charcoal grey sheep of the family whom the others pay little respect. When the camera focuses on the hands of a bartender, Angelina moves beyond polite to transfixed. A woman in love does not forget such hands.

Immediately, stealthily, Angelina hops a plane and speeds to Key West and the reluctant hands of Ziggy Maxx, f.k.a. Sal Martucci, late of the Witness Protection Program. This is the man for whom she has forsaken all others, the man her father wants dead.

With the help of a friend made in transit, Michael, a gay man also in pursuit of romance, Angelina finds Ziggy/Sal and throws herself against the wall of his callous indifference. Michael, meanwhile, finds romance too quickly, in the form of an undercover federal agent whose idea of disguise is a t-shirt reading FREE MOUSTACHE RIDES.

Bartending doesn't let Ziggy live in the style he was once accustomed to, so he does odd jobs for small-time local hood Carmen Salazar, which the moustached agent keeps an eye on. Now Salazar wants to go big-time, connecting a New York Mafia arsenal to a counter-revolutionary Cuban.

We Floridians often believe New Yorkers descend upon us in pestilent profusion, but few show the process as close up as Shames. First came Ziggy. Then Angelina. Then Louie, remembering Angelina's face as she watched the tape, follows his hunch about her disappearance and drives down to rescue her, the first spontaneous act of his

life. Then Paul arrives, lured into the Cuban guns deal. Finally, Louie's wife Rose, now that Louie's gone, realizes she loves this man she's ignored for 30 years.

Factor in some Miami hoods, eccentric FBI agents, a gay hotel that becomes a hideout, several double-crosses, and things get hilariously baroque.

You'll have to step over a pile of improbabilities to meet Shames halfway, but he makes it well worth the trip. He fills a frenetic plot with zestfully outlandish characters and writes with more artistry than most in the swarming South Florida crime genre.

For much of this comic feast Shames serves hardboiled prose on wry: "In the next instant the muzzle of a gun was pressed against the hollow just behind his ear. He didn't go limp, exactly; he went extremely cooperative." But when he chooses, he can render this jaded paradise with poetic grace: "Tourists were at the beach; locals were at home, naked under ceiling fans. Ease spilled over into vague sorrow, sensuous languor phased toward quiet loss, as the heat of the tropics gave its gift of lassitude and claimed its price of wasted time."

While Shames inevitably goes for the joke instead of the jugular, deeper implications surface within his view. Some seem merely barside philosophy: "You try for sex without remorse, sometimes you get remorse without the sex." Others go deeper: "'What [Sal] did to me, Angelina. My world, that's the absolute worst thing a person can do.' Angelina said, 'There's other worlds, Pop. I guess there's a worst thing you can do in each of them.'"

Laurence Shames' *Key West* extends from purgatory to paradise. It's Dante-lite, with laughs.