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DEAL TO DIE FOR

By Les Standiford

HarperCollins. 352 pp.

Real artists--and Frank O'Connor Award winner Les Standiford has by now removed all doubt he is one--know how to grow older without growing old. For, as actor/director John Cassavetes aptly noted, "No matter how old you get, if you can keep the desire to be creative, you're keeping the man-child alive."

Like Raymond Chandler and Miami's James W. Hall, Standiford is a poet masquerading in a trench coat so he can slalom around palm-treed urban underbellies. Too tall for Cops 'n' Robbers, Standiford shows us every bit as good a time with the South Florida literary version of the game: Sleuths 'n' Sleazeballs.

And in this, the third and best of the John Deal thrillers, there's enough sleaze to reach China, which is where the troubles begin.

It seems the mainland Chinese want a whole lot more "quality" porn flicks than they've been able to produce at home, so Chinese mobsters offer Hollywood agent/filmmaker Stuart Mahler billions to meet the Far East's lusty demands.

That kind of money, of course, can attract competition. And with these players, competition instantly reaches the level of murder. As bullets and bodies start flying around Southern California, beautiful film star Paige Nobleman, a client of Mahler's, receives a cross-country call from her estranged sister saying their mother is dying in Miami. That brings the mayhem to John Deal's neighborhood.

Paige reaches Miami just in time to see her mother die and hear her sister say, "She's not your mother.... She adopted you." Before the stunned Paige can get her mysterious substitute limo driver--who looks like Oddjob and moves like Bruce Lee--to take her to her sister's home to learn more, the sister turns up dead from an apparent suicide. The Miami stranger sharing Paige's twin griefs is John Deal, for Paige's sister was Deal's best friend.

It's not as if Deal didn't already have trouble enough. With his construction business thriving, his toddler daughter beaming, and his wife Janice almost completely healed outwardly from the disfiguring burns she'd suffered from arson in the 1994 *Raw Deal*, Deal's life had been looking up. But while outwardly healing, Janice has been inwardly withering. She's grown convinced she is, if only in her mind's eye, hideous to look at and impossible to love. As the first step toward lightening this psychic burden, she wants to leave Deal.

Entering through the door Janice is exiting, Paige hires Deal and his tenant Vernon Driscoll, the hard-boiled retired cop with a Runyonesque voice, to discover the

truth about her birth. As way leads on to way, Deal is soon tracking his client's origins and his friend's death along a trail with California and Chinese by-paths.

Quick and taut as a frontier hanging, the plot alone would make this a rapid page-turner. It has all the requisites of the suspense genre: sex, smack, shotguns, snow, and that's just the S's. But Standiford, director of the creative writing program at Florida International University, works on a plane far above genre writing.

Like veteran spy novelist Len Deighton, Standiford knows that the richer the domestic fabric he weaves into the lives of his characters, the more deeply the reader knows and cares about them, and the more intense the suspense will become. So he offers much beside titillation and gunfire. Himself married to a psychotherapist, Standiford astutely probes the subtle dynamics of a marriage and how easily love bruises when either spouse feels less than whole.

Even his most minor characters spring to vibrant life: a flamboyant medical examiner, a uniquely courteous Miami driver, even an old lady who strolls the edges of a golf course in a flesh-colored bikini.

It helps, too, that Standiford has lavish descriptive gifts, as when Deal runs after a fleeing figure and "redoubled his speed, ignoring the fiery protest in his lungs, the lashing of the banyan tendrils at his face, the sudden jolt of pain when his foot twisted on an outcrop of coral rock and doubled under him."

Getting into this series now is one sweet deal, like picking up Xerox when it was still a penny stock.