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PRESIDENTIAL DEAL

By Les Standiford

HaperCollins; 290 pp.

In a metropolitan area where even the elected politicians seem to do much of their best work in jail, John Deal has never had to look for trouble. For five wonderful books now, it has eagerly come his way.

Even out for a nighttime pleasure cruise on his late father's boat, Deal's relaxed eye spots "some kind of floating debris" bobbing in Biscayne Bay. That's what the 19 Cuban refugees were to the smugglers who tossed them there. Saving them makes building contractor/sleuth Deal an accidental hero.

The accidents multiply. When President and First Lady Frank and Linda Sheldon arrive in Miami to present Deal and several other heroes with the Medal of Valor, things get chaotic, even for Miami. Frank takes the opportunity to meet with the head of Miami's Cuban expatriates, letting Linda do the ceremonial presentation., the most catastrophic presidential decision since J.F.K. said, "Jackie, let's tour Dallas."

In a scheme almost as baroque as actual Latin American/U.S. politics, someone a whisker away from the president has just paid \$5 million to have a former U.S. operative arrange a "controlled riot" to influence federal policy. As law officers disguised as law officers spray the room with automatic gunfire, killing many of the heroes, Deal and the First Lady escape the bullets only to be kidnapped.

Standiford fans will regret one glaring omission from *Presidential Deal*. Deal's estranged wife, Janice, disfigured in Deal book #2, physically healed by #3, his sleuthing partner in #4, but not psychically healed even yet, remains largely absent, here only long enough to show she still loves Deal and remains as fragile as bone china. Among the several reasons this series lands well beyond genre territory into the realm of accomplished art has always been the Deals' absorbing domestic drama.

But gutsy, benevolent Linda Sheldon proves delightful compensation. Right down to Frank's weakness for Big Macs, Standiford gilds the Sheldons with amusing Clintonesque touches, and opponents who call "for an attack on Libya, on general principle alone" to show America hasn't gone soft.

As Deal and Linda get dragged through the Caribbean, shoved in an island prison and battle sadistic bad guys and an Andrew-magnitude hurricane, Deal finds this first lady whom some reporter had called "The Barrenness" a brave, compassionate partner, fighting off rapists and helping him with the most earthy of tasks. All the while, Deal's longtime regular partner, retired homicide detective Vernon Driscoll, chases after Deal through the islands, punching honest cops in the gut and dragging along lowlife sleazeballs for assistance.

While no crime novelist packs more wallop, Standiford offers far more than chaos and intrigue. He presents a superbly textured novel enriched by supple-grained digressions, engaging minor characterizations and masterful prose.

There's Linda's moment of envy for a young assistant who has never had to try so hard to prove herself. There are kids pushing a stalled VW bug, as Driscoll watches, only to have it careen out of control into a supermarket parking lot. And there's a wonderful burlesque of news talk show "expert consultants," the kind who milk alleged indiscretions for months on MSNBC, opining things like, "You have to understand that the sanctity of the individual life is a fairly recent historical development."

Standiford provides a diverse sampling of underbelly scum, from lowest to highest rent, including one gangster so ironically successful that "he'd finally achieved the dream,...made so much money, had come to exert so much influence in the Miami underworld, that he risked annihilation any moment of the day," and so never leaves his fortified Everglades compound.

Like his Miami colleague James Hall, Standiford's descriptions verge on poetry, like this moment when an airplane is lost to friendly fire: "The Cessna had ceased to exist. It transformed first into a brilliant blossom of fire, and then a hail of molten fragments that disappeared hissing into the dark water, and finally it was only a plume of dark smoke that rose lazily into the purpling sky until even that was gone."

By far the best in this compelling series, *Presidential Deal* suggests that it now all comes easily to Standiford. Or perhaps, like a champion athlete, he just makes it look easy.