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RAW DEAL

By Les Standiford

HarperCollins. 288 pp.

If they live in South Florida, it doesn't take many writers long before their fancies lightly turn to thoughts of crime. And in this briskly-paced sequel to his first novel, *Done Deal*, Les Staniford leaves little doubt that he belongs on the same creditable Miami crime shelf as James W. Hall, Edna Buchanan and Paul Levine, if not quite the hilarious separate shelf on which the wonderful Carl Hiassen sits alone.

All the felonious elements that solder life to art around Miami abound in *Raw Deal*: greed, exiled populations, jaded ex-cops, lush living, fraud, guns, crooked pillars of the community, big money and bigger money. And Standiford stitches them along a plotline that unfurls at a breathless pace.

Life should be sweet for John and Janice Deal. He's doing well as a building contractor, they have a beautiful infant daughter and they are crazy in love with each other, even if she does insist on calling him by his last name. Deal's building a home for the "genius who'd brought major league baseball to South Florida," and he's getting enormous satisfaction from helping rebuild the lives blown apart by Hurricane Andrew. However, Deal's got the kind of tenants that bring trouble his way, especially when mysterious disasters begin erupting.

First, a deadly explosion destroys *La Galeria y Ediciones Catalan*, once a beautiful home made from solid coral rock, now the center for the preservation of Hispanic American art in the United States. Then, a suspicious fire races through Deal's fourplex apartment, burning Janice so gravely that she faces the prospect of a lifetime's pain and disfigurement.

Deal's tenant, Vernon Driscoll, a brusque and streetwise retired ex-cop, doesn't think for a moment that the fire was an accident. It fits too well with other things happening around the fourplex, like the knife-wielding stranger who took a swipe at Tommy, a homeless seemingly retarded man Deal was housing in return for odd jobs. When Driscoll and Deal follow the spoor of the fire and bombing, they appear to lead to Cuban exile Vincente Luis Torreno.

Although he has lived 30 years in Miami, Torreno still presents himself as a Cuban patriot. Hugely wealthy, perhaps because he skims funds accumulated by Cuban-Americans for the defeat of Castro, Torreno states, "I have committed every penny of my own wealth to ensure ... the success of *la revolución*" Actually, as the novel opens, Torreno is using many pennies of somebody's wealth to become America's largest sugar producer, with the help of ex-wrestler Coco Morales who likes to toss bombs and swing machetes at people.

Torreno may, in fact, have become what the owner of *La Galeria* describes as the very worst of her Cuban countrymen, "so embittered by personal loss that they had become the very thing they hated most." Much to his credit, Standiford goes well beyond the trappings of purely commercial crime fiction to explore grave and passionate social issues: how for many Cuban exiles the liberation of their homeland remains a fervent and increasingly credible dream while, for some, that initial patriotic fervor may have mutated in exiled incubation over the decades into a megalomania.

And then there are others, of whom Torreno may be one, for whom patriotism can be simply the first refuge of the avaricious. Why, Deal and Driscoll wonder, would someone try to become king of American sugar, whose profitability rests on government price supports, when the collapse of Castro could mean the end of those price supports. Might not the U.S. government want to stabilize Cuba quickly by assuring the successful trade of its primary crop, sugar? What's in all this for Torreno?

Obviously, enough is in it for Torreno that museums explode, fourplexes burn and human obstacles wind up at his lakeside preserve which serves as unnatural habitat to a variety of lethal jungle animals.

Standiford clears up the confusion with expert pacing and the kind of chases, bruising and mayhem that seem made for the large screen. But they are made, too, for the printed page, as readers will discover by how eagerly they keep turning them. This welcome entry into what will clearly become a popular series is sure to whet the appetite for *New Deal*, *Square Deal*, *Misdeal*, *Let's Make a Deal* or whatever Standiford next shuffles our way.