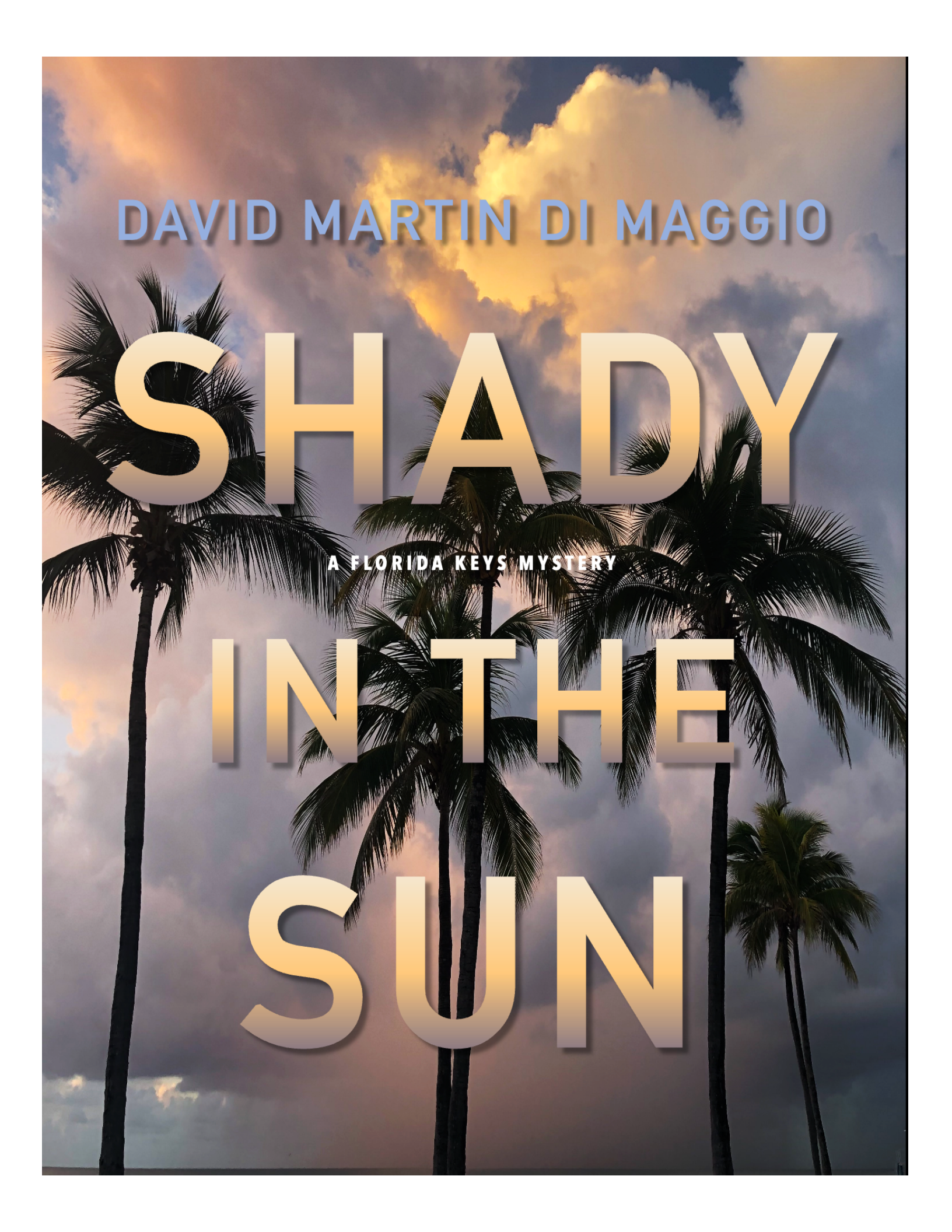




DAVID MARTIN DI MAGGIO

SHADY

A FLORIDA KEYS MYSTERY

IN THE

SUN

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

And the Heavens Looked Down.

The central courtyard of the container village, partially covered in tarps and sunshades, was lit by lights strung in random patterns across the open area, its floor a snow-like drift of deep, pearlescent sand. At the center of the enclosure, a loud group of about 30 men were gathered around a makeshift card table. Some stood. Some sat on crates. All were quaffing directly from bottles.

In the boisterous scene of activity, men moved in and out of the shadows that caressed the edges of the brightly lit enclave. Most appeared to be black. Some Hispanic. Generators grumbled in the background as clouds of white cigar smoke ascended into the still, night air. A scattered row of AR-15's leaned against one of the container's exterior walls. The scent of ammonia and vinegar wobbled in and out of the area. Metal barrels were scattered at the edges of the facility, wrapped in transparent plastic.

Two men sat at the card table, tethered in a tandem dance with Lady Luck. Each seemed transfixed, motionless, as they stared intently at the cards in their hands, minds racing, considering their options. The younger of the two appeared Hispanic, unshaven, and dressed in a simple tan t-shirt, blue basketball shorts and flip flops. The older of the two sat taller, darkly tanned and weathered, yet charismatic, as if a former business executive that had said goodbye to the good life as well as the sunscreen. His long, grey cargo shorts and bare feet were topped off by a white tank top revealing both upper arms and shoulders covered in elaborate, black tattoos, a modern interpretation of tribal artwork.

The younger man placed his cards on the table, facing up, showing the 5 of spades, the 4 of clubs, the 3 of hearts, the 2 of diamonds, and the Ace of clubs.

The second man paused, then grinned, as he revealed the 5 of diamonds, the 4 of spades, the 3 of clubs, the 2 of spades, and the Ace of hearts.

The crowd seem to respond in unison, first still, then whispering, then in arguments. Some in English, others in Spanish.

A large Bahamian dressed in crème linen coat and slacks and wearing a Panama hat, stood up from his seat on a crate and approached the table.

“You know da rules gentlemen,” he said, revealing a revolver in his right hand and pointing it skyward. He reached up with his left hand and spun the cylinder, then placed the gun on the table between the two men.

The group became silent.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a coin and pointed to the younger man to make the call, then flipped the currency into the air.

“Cara,” the younger man said softly as the coin arced skyward, then descended. The Bahamian caught the coin between his right hand and left forearm. He removed his hand and extended his forearm to the men, revealing the outcome.

“It is tails gentlemen. You shall go first,” he instructed.

The young man’s eyes fixed onto the pistol sitting on the card table. He sat still, as if contemplating a course of escape. Or the course of his life.

The older man also stared intensely at the pistol, eyes sparkling, with a slight grin, seemingly invigorated by the moment.

The loser of the coin toss picked up the gun and brought his eyes up to look at his opponent. He slowly placed its barrel to his right temple. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, followed by an equally deep swallow.

After what seemed an eternity, he pulled the trigger.

With a deep sigh, his body relaxed into a slump. His head rolled back, facing the night sky, eyes remaining shut. Onlookers erupted in cheers, patting his back, shaking him by the shoulders. He slowly looked down from his heavenly gaze, beads of sweat cascading from his brow and across his face. He opened his eyes and fixed them onto the other man, then placed the gun back onto the table.

The other man quickly grabbed the gun, as if eager to embrace his eternal destiny. The gathering once again grew silent. He placed the gun to his temple without hesitation; his deep, piercing blue eyes fixed intently on his young opponent, sparkling.

Keeping his finger on the trigger, he picked up the Cohiba from the table and drew a long, deep smoke. He exhaled a massive billow into his competitor’s face, grinned, then spoke.

“So do me a favor: When you get to hell, be sure to look me up.” Never breaking eye contact, he grinned, laughed, and pulled the trigger.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

It all just clicks.

The second inconsequential squeeze of the revolver's trigger seemed to stun the group more than the potential outcomes of any gun shot. Silence engulfed the scene. The air stood still, leaving only the deep, rhythmic rumble of generators. A swell of murmuring began to fill the space. Every man seemed unsure of the next event.

The referee once again rose and walked toward the table. Picking up the gun, he pointed it toward the night sky, then addressed the two men and the group. His bearing, his voice, his firearm, clearly proclaiming authority over the night's proceedings.

All fell to quiet attention.

"So, de cards did not declare a winna'. Bud fate has chosen dem both. Looks like dey live ta play a nudda day. Gentlemen, it is a draw. Gudnight."

The crowd erupted into a mélange of cheers and moans; both men receiving pats, punches, and high fives. The older man extended his hand to his young adversary, who took it sheepishly and nodded. The crowd, in various stages of conversation, slowly began to disperse into the shadows in multiple directions toward the containers, seemingly calling it a night.

The older contender held a brief conversation with the referee as the younger slipped off into the shadows. Five or six others began picking up around the encampment, breaking down the night's gathering, and putting things back into whatever order there may have been before the armed wagering.

"Well damn," Billy bellowed from the edge of the shadows. "I thought I was about to own a marina."

The cleanup crew, yelling in Spanish, raced to grab their AR's with the speed of a tactical response team, quickly drawing their barrels onto Billy and Lomas.

"Sure glad I didn't have to wear your brains home," Billy continued, ignoring the improvised firing squad.

From the center of the bright enclosure, Jack Pierson stood squinting toward the edge of darkness, searching for the source of the voice in the night. After a moment, he grinned, relaxed, and addressed the unanticipated visitors.

“Well, good evening Mr. Blaze,” he said, in a voice far calmer than would be expected of a man who had just missed a chance to meet his maker. “This is quite a surprise,” he added, in a voice coated with insincerity.

He spoke in a warm, sonorous baritone, rich and deep with crisp highs, as if well-trained by years of alcohol and nicotine. His eyes appeared tired, adorned with an extensive display of crow’s feet. His thick hair was cut short, appearing dyed dark with blond highlights, as if attempting to retain a waning virility. His overgrown goatee appeared late for its next touchup appointment with a box of Just For Men. He looked to the men on his left, then to his right, then motioned.

“You can put the guns down guys. Probably just a couple of love-sick tourists out for an evening stroll,” he said, grinning in sarcasm.

The men slowly lowered their weapons, still appearing unsure.

“So this how you spend your time when you aren’t spendin’ my money?” Billy continued, stepping from the shadows and over a bottle labeled, “Santiago de Cuba.”

“Well Billy, if you’ve come to collect, you’re a little early,” Pierson replied, maintaining a sly grin.

Pierson drew a long puff on his Cohiba while giving Lomas a once-over, then turned his attention back to Billy.

“So, who’s your sidekick?”

“Oh, he’s... ah...he’s just...” Billy began, stammering.

“Lomas. Dan Lomas. I’m one of Billy’s friends from Miami.”

“Ahh yes,” Pierson said, drawing another long smoke. “I used to love Miami,” he said wistfully, looking off into the night. “Café Versailles...” as if challenging Lomas’s claim.

Lomas grinned. “I recommend the ropa vieja.”

“Thanks,” said Pierson, returning his glance toward Lomas, still sizing him up. “If I ever get back there, I’ll look it up.”

“And the plátanos are astounding,” he said, continuing to counter Pierson’s inquiry.

Seeming satisfied with Lomas’ story, Pierson dismissed his gunmen and returned his attention to Billy and Lomas.

“So gentlemen, to what do I owe the honor?”