

randy wayne white

*dead of night*

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g. p. putnam's sons  
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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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This book is printed on acid-free paper. ♻

*Book design by Stephanie Huntwork*

*This book is for my daughter, Kate,  
a dear and gifted young lady.*

## author's note

On Friday the thirteenth, August, in the year this book was written, the eye of a category 4 hurricane made landfall on Pine Island, west coast of Florida, and the storm's northeasterly tornado wall savaged the village of Pineland, where I've lived for many years.

It was as if a five-hundred-pound bomb exploded overhead. My 1920s Cracker house, built on an Indian mound overlooking the bay, had to be gutted because of water damage. My guesthouse was crushed, the houses of neighbors leveled, and acres of old tropical growth were flattened, including avocados, poinciana, key limes, and also three gumbo-limbo trees that were several hundred years old.

The irony that, five years earlier, I'd written about Marion Ford climbing an Indian mound to escape a category 4 hurricane with the same name (Charles) did not mitigate the difficulties that followed.

It was a month before I got water, six weeks before my power was restored, and, as far as I know, my phone at Pineland still doesn't work. I don't know because, three months later, I am still homeless, as are several neighbors.

Here is what I've learned: A hurricane is just bad weather, unless

you are touched by the eye. But if you are in the path of that tornado phalanx, your life is forever changed.

I am happy to report that a disaster of Charley's magnitude mobilizes a lot more good people than the few who became profiteers. Many dozens offered me help, even their homes. I will forever be in their debt.

I am especially grateful to Jill Beckstead and Dean Beckstead, and the staff at Palm Island Resort, Cape Haze, Florida, a barrier island hideaway south of Sarasota and north of Fort Myers. Palm Island is a Florida classic: miles of beach, classy Gulf Coast architecture, few automobiles, swimming pools long enough for laps, and a fine restaurant, Rum Bay, where much of this book was written. During many busy lunches, the staff kindly tiptoed around me as I typed away. Chef Khoum, Jennifer Graham, Phyllis Muller, Walt Mintel, Dave Comello, Campi Campese, Capt. Blackie, Jay Hodges, Liam Crowley, and others were very supportive.

Other places where people went out of their way to provide me a place to write include Doc Ford's Sanibel Rum Bar and Grille, Sanibel Island, Matt Asen's Sanibel Grill, the staff of Pine Island Library, the staff of Holmes Beach Library, Sharkey's Steak on Bradenton Beach, the staff of Sanibel Library, and people associated with the *Queen Mary 2*, especially Ms. Mary Thomas, Sara Andersson, Jennifer Schaper, Laura Penfold, and Capt. Ronald Warwick's brilliant staff.

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These people all provided valuable guidance and/or information. All errors, exaggerations, omissions, or fictionalizations are entirely the fault, and the responsibility, of the author.

Finally, the islands of Sanibel and Captiva sustained damage from the storm, but they not only survived, they are thriving, and open for business. As always, they are real places, faithfully described, but used fictitiously in this novel. The same is true of certain businesses, marinas, bars, and other places frequented by Doc Ford, Tomlinson, and pals.

Finally, I would like to thank my sons, Lee and Rogan White, for, once again, helping me finish a book.

Reptiles are abhorrent because of their cold body, pale color, cartilaginous skeleton, filthy skin, fierce aspect, calculating eye, offensive smell, harsh voice, squalid habitation, and terrible venom; wherefore their creator has not exerted his powers to make many of them.

—*Carolus Linnaeus, 1758*

Thou shalt not fear the terror of night;  
nor the arrow that flieth by day;  
nor the pestilence that walketh in darkness;  
nor the destruction that wasteth at noonday.  
A thousand may fall at thy side,  
and ten thousand at thy right hand;  
but it shall not come nigh thee.

—*Psalm 91:5-7*



# 1

## *serpiente*

Solaris thought of her as “Snake Woman” because the first time she asked to see him, he thought she’d pointed at a crate just arrived from South Africa that contained leathery eggs and baby snakes.

He’d said, “Of course. You are the buyer, I am the seller. It is your right.”

He wasn’t the seller. Solaris was nineteen years old, lived with his family in Vinales, west of Cuba, eight people crowded into a shack near the village baseball diamond and communal fields where he’d plowed behind oxen until the Chinaman hired him as labor for his smuggling operation.

The Russian, whose name was Dasha, was blond, tall. Good teeth and skinny hips like women he’d seen in American magazines. Still aiming her finger at him, she’d smiled. “No. It’s you I want to see. We’re alone, aren’t we?”

She’d come into the barn where the Chinaman had organized the unloading of seventeen crates of African reptiles, parasites, spiders, and South American fish recently delivered in an old Soviet freight helicopter, a Kamov. It was a barn for drying tobacco. It smelled peppery and sour. Good, like the inside of a whiskey keg. Dusty light leaked

through the wooden siding and roofing shingles. The interior seemed brighter when she pulled the door closed and slid the wooden bolt.

Yes. They were alone.

"My . . . *private* thing?" Was she joking?

"When you take your shirt off, your skin looks like it's stretched tight over cables. Every muscle vertical or horizontal. So I'm curious about the whole package. Don't be shy." Looking up into his eyes, she reached and cupped him in her fingers. Still holding him, she backed Solaris into shadows against the wooden wall, the pepper smell stronger now, staring into his face, her expression different: He was a toy, his reactions amusing.

"Is there a zipper?"

"No. Just my belt. I didn't expect—"

"Untie your belt. Or I could use my knife. It's only rope. Would you like that?"

Solaris fumbled with the knot, his fingers shaking as the woman pulled his pants down over his hips, then to the floor, pausing to slowly retrace the curvature of his buttocks with the tips of her fingers.

"Step out of them."

She moved away as he kicked off his pants. Stood there like an artist, her pale eyes inspecting, vacuuming in color, angles, texture.

"Nice. So smooth."

Solaris was aroused, but he also felt ridiculous. Could this really be happening?

Now the woman was unbuttoning her blouse as she returned to him. He'd never seen skin so white.

He held his hands out to embrace her.

"*Stop*. Just stand there. Don't do anything."

He let his arms drop to his sides. "But if we are to make love, then you must let me—" Solaris stopped, not sure how to continue. The only woman he'd ever been with was a prostitute on the beach at Verdadero, and that had lasted only a few minutes. How did a man go about

making love, particularly with an older woman who was so certain of herself and aggressive?

The Russian saved him, barking, “This has nothing to do with love. I want to have fun after a shitty day. For *my* pleasure. Just stand there and keep your mouth closed.”

Like all Russians, she spoke Spanish as if she had a bad cold and was coughing.

“Don’t try to touch me again. Unless I give you permission.”

He nodded. Stood upright, shaking, not wanting to ruin it.

Her voice was dense and sleepy once again. “He has eyes. The way he follows my body. What does he remind you of?”

A picture came into Solaris’s mind of a man wearing a turban, sitting before a woven basket, playing a flute. A cobra followed the movement of the flute, head swaying.

*Culebra.*

Another reason he thought of her as the Snake Woman.

*Serpiente.*

The way she was holding him, fingers gripped, steering him into the shadows as if he had wheels, Solaris realized something that he would later find unsettling. He’d been born with this weakness. Maybe all men were.

A man with his built-in leash.

They’d been coming to Vinales, western Cuba, for the past sixteen months, arriving in a Volvo limo, or by small helicopter, dropping over rock towers into the valley beneath mountains where coffee grew green in summer, white when bushes bloomed.

There were two, Dasha, the blond Russian, with an older American man who had money, no mistaking it. It was an attitude, the way the man’s eyes blurred, empty as a camera lens, indifferent to breathing things that were tiny, peasants who would die in silence.

Dr. Desmond Stokes.

Rich Americans, they never had to open their mouths. As a boy, Solaris had pushed an ice cart around the docks of Marina Hemingway west of Havana. He knew.

They came every other month, sometimes more, the two of them alone, or with an associate. Usually a gigantic Russian with black hair that grew out of his ears like a wolf. Aleski was the wolf's name.

Once, they'd brought a nervous little man with glasses who carried a microscope in a case. A biologist of some type. He'd jumped at unexpected sounds. Began to cry when they told him he had to fly in the helicopter again.

Solaris had never seen an adult man cry. Disgusting. Even so, the woman treated the little man like he was important. Spent time off alone, whispering.

Usually, though, Dasha was with Dr. Stokes. He allowed her to leave his side only when he talked privately with the Chinaman. Business. Money. Powerful chiefs cutting a deal.

— Actually, the Chinaman was Vietnamese, Bat-tuy Nguyen. A fat man who wore bright scarves, gold jewelry, who'd learned the exotic animal trade from someone named Keng Wong. This was before Wong got extradited from Mexico to the U.S., and was sentenced to twenty-five years.

"The best known rare animal dealer in the world," Nguyen told Solaris. It was part of the sales pitch when the Chinaman recruited Solaris and his uncle, who was in charge of the village landing strip.

Same with the article about Wong in *El Mundo*, part of which read: "... reptiles rate third as the world's most lucrative commodity to smuggle, after firearms and drugs. According to U.N. officials, the trade is worth about \$10 billion internationally. It is further evidence that capitalism must destroy natural resources to fuel its own growth. . . ."

The article was written months before the Bearded One died. Be-

fore world crime syndicates rushed into the political vacuum to stake out territory.

Cubans no longer cared about politics, only dollars. And survival.

"If you work hard, learn how the business works, maybe you'll one day be as rich as the great Keng Wong!" the Chinaman told him and his uncle.

His cynical uncle had replied, "If the *Chino* is so great, why is he in a Yankee prison?" but they accepted jobs anyway.

Nguyen did a surprising business, using the village as his rendezvous place and warehouse. He imported strange creatures, illegal products from all over the world. Not drugs, though. Too risky. Better wealthy collectors than desperate addicts.

The clients were from the U.S., sometimes Europe or Colombia.

Once, Solaris said to the Chinaman, "What kind of people buy this shit?"

Nguyen told him, "We sell to a few scientists who can't get permits, men looking for cures for cancer, high blood pressure, whatever. Discover a drug that works, you're rich forever. Like Dr. Stokes, when he lost his license and got run out of the U.S. That's how I started with him. Just snakes at first, now everything."

Otherwise, the Chinaman said, most of their clients were people so protected by their wealth that they enjoyed toying with danger.

"It's why I know we'll make money. Something that's illegal and dangerous—it's a way of showing off. One of the scorpions in that cage?" He'd pointed at scorpions with robotic tails as thick as the fat man's thumb. "They cost us twenty cents, U.S. A penny if we hatch them from eggs, which we've been doing. Calcutta funeral scorpions—poisonous, but not as dangerous as people think. Because of the name, we can charge two or three hundred dollars a pair. Where else can collectors buy them?"

Speaking of "us" and "we" as if Solaris and his uncle were getting

part of the profit instead of the wrinkled dollar bills the fat man stuffed into their hands at the end of the day.

“Komodo dragons? They kill a man by biting his stomach open, eating his guts. The rarest of rare. In Indonesia, we buy a dozen Komodo eggs for twenty dollars, ship them like gold for a thousand. If only three hatch? There’s a group of ranchers in Texas who buy all the Komodos I can deliver at fifty thousand cash, no questions as long as their veterinarian okays the animal.

“Man-children. They wear loincloths, carry torches at night, hunt the lizards with spears. Probably paint their faces and scream at the moon. Play caveman, then go home and enter their wives from behind. Who knows? They tell me dragon tail tastes like eagle squab.”

African mambas, the Chinaman said, were the most dangerous snakes on earth. They moved over the ground faster than a racehorse; grew more than five meters long. Australian death vipers were a better example, because of the name. For an adult female death viper, he could get five, ten thousand. If the female was gravid—“they’re live-bearers,” he explained—twice that.

“Both are listed among the ten most venomous snakes in the world,” he said. “It’s like a sports title. Deadly, so valuable. Understand what I’m telling you?”

Solaris was in charge of maintaining storage barns, procuring feed, keeping track of inventory. Also, he was big enough to scare anyone thinking about robbing the place.

The morning Snake Woman lured him into the barn for the first time, he’d copied the Chinaman’s writing onto a clipboard.

Sold to Dr. Desmond Stokes:

25 dozen African mamba eggs & hatchlings

10 death adders, 6 gravid females

25 pint containers of thick-tailed scorpion eggs & hatchlings

50-liter drum/parasites, West Africa

50-liter drum/mosquito larvae, Brazil

50-liter drum/sewage, East Africa

14 laboratory rats test-positive, cholera, Johannesburg

Cholera? *Madre de Jesus*. The things they ordered were always like that. Weird. Dangerous. Dirty.

What sort of research was that strange man doing? This was not like the pet store toys other clients wanted.

But God, the blond Russian, what a body. Solaris would think of her at night, his four younger brothers asleep in the same room, and try not to tremble.

The Chinaman wasn't dumb. He caught on quick about what the two of them were doing alone in the tobacco barn.

"She'll be the death of you," the fat man said one afternoon, not laughing.

Solaris took it as a joke. "But that woman loves me so much, what a way to go!"

— But the fat man was right.

## 2

Aside from a strange, shy message on an answering machine, the first words I heard Jobe Applebee speak were: “Please, don’t hit me again. My brain . . . you don’t understand. I *can’t*.”

The way he said it, “I can’t,” sounded touchingly childlike. This thirty-some-year-old man wasn’t begging. He was apologizing. Telling the blond woman who was beating him that he wanted to cooperate. He simply didn’t know how.

Only a minute or two before, I’d been standing on the porch of Applebee’s secluded island home on Lake Toho, Central Florida, in citrus, cattle, bass boat, and Disney country. I’d stood there feeling out of place, a little silly, looking up at all the dark gables and darker windows of the man’s solitary three-story. I would have guessed the place was empty but for a golf cart umbilicaled to a charger next to the porch.

Golf carts are standard transportation in Florida’s island communities. Drive them to the boat dock when leaving, drive them home upon return. The cart meant that Applebee probably was inside.

I didn’t know the man. Had never met him. I was there because I’d made a reluctant promise to his sister, a friend.

It was a promise I already regretted.



As I stood there trying to decide what to do, I grunted and I sighed, made the silly, adolescent sounds that a person utters when he's about to continue some damn, silly task he doesn't want to continue. I certainly did *not* want to do this, but, as Applebee's sister pointed out, I am an ever-dependable pushover. I am Marion D. Ford, the amiable marine biologist, bookworm nerd, collector of sea creatures, and "wouldn't hurt a flea, cheery sunset cohort who can't say no to a pal."

My friend's words.

Finally, I stepped onto Applebee's porch, went to the door.

There wasn't a bell, so I leaned to knock . . . then stopped, knuckles poised, head tilted, listening to an unexpected sound. Stood for long seconds straining to identify an indistinct moaning. It was a noise that someone in pain might make. Or someone frightened. Or someone trying to pull a very bad joke.

This was no joke. The moaning was coming from the rear of the house.

Quietly, I tested the doorknob. Locked.

I waited, ears focused . . . heard it again: Someone in pain.

Hurrying now, I swung over the porch railing, and jogged to the rear of the house. That's when I heard Applebee's frightened, apologetic voice; heard him in person for the first time: "Please, don't hit me again. My brain . . . you don't understand. I *can't*."

Heard the words during a lull in the music that was being played loud, probably to cover the man's pleading, and then his scream: "Stop, *please*. I can't stand this!"

In bizarre contrast was the music, a Disney tune that even I recognized. Something about it being a small world afterall.

The sound of a grown man begging detonates all the primitive cave-man alarms. Terror has a distinctive pitch. We hear it through the base of the skull, not the auditory canal, and it's interpreted as an electric prickle down the spine.

I waited until the music resumed, then began to move toward a set