

**CARL
HIAASEN**

***NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR**



A NOVEL

**FEVER
BEACH**

ALSO BY CARL HIAASEN

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FEVER BEACH

CARL
HIAASEN



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A BORZOI BOOK
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This is a work of fiction. All names and characters are either invented or used fictitiously. Most events described are imaginary, except for the assembly line stealing of adult novelty items, and the random throwing of bagged pro-Nazi leaflets from moving vehicles in Florida. Also accurately represented is the Proud Boys' peculiar membership rule regarding self-gratification.

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In memory of Jimmy Buffett

CHAPTER

1

On the afternoon of September 20th, dishwater-gray and rainy, a man named Dale Figgo picked up a hitchhiker on Gus Grissom Boulevard in Tangelo Shores, Florida. The hitchhiker, who reminded Figgo of Danny DeVito, asked for a lift to the interstate. Figgo agreed to take him there after finishing an errand.

The distance to the highway wasn't far, and the hitchhiker would have walked if not for the pounding thunder and wild lightning. As a boy he had witnessed a neighbor's gelded llama struck to the ground by a bolt that lit up the small Wisconsin pasture like Lambeau Field. The llama had survived the shock, but from then on yipped day and night like an addled collie. The hitchhiker shared this anecdote with Dale Figgo, who agreed that lightning was a thing to be avoided.

Soon they entered a manicured subdivision called Sanctuary Falls, where Figgo eased his Dodge Ram 1500 quad cab to the curb and told the hitchhiker what was about to happen. The hitchhiker placed his backpack on the floorboard and pivoted warily toward the back seat, where he saw an assault rifle, a can of bear spray, a sex doll made to look like the lower torso of a woman, and a pile of clear Ziploc bags. Each bag contained a handful of what appeared to be beach sand and a garishly printed flyer. Reading

upside down, the hitchhiker saw that one of the words was “JEWISH.” Figgo began sorting and stacking the bags on the console.

“I’ll drive,” he said. “You throw.”

“Do what?”

“The sand is for weight. Also, so the baggies won’t blow away.”

The hitchhiker said, “I’m pretty sure ‘Holocaust’ isn’t spelled with a *k*.”

“And I’m pretty sure I didn’t tell you to proof-teach my business.”

Slowly Figgo began driving up and down the tidy streets, the hitchhiker reluctantly lobbing the slur-filled Ziplocs onto driveways of multimillion-dollar properties lush with bougainvilleas, black olive trees, and hybrid palms.

When the hitchhiker noticed a shamrock painted on one of the mailboxes, he asked Figgo if they were in the right neighborhood.

“Never question the mission,” Figgo said.

“What mission exactly?”

“Community outreach, dumbass. To enlight the motherfuckin’ citizenry!”

“ ‘Enlight’?” the hitchhiker said. “For real?”

Figgo reached across and popped him in the jaw.

“What the hell?” cried the hitchhiker, rubbing his chin. It was the first time he’d been slugged by a driver. Propositioned? Sure. Robbed? Too many times to count.

But never once punched—and he’d thumbed his way from coast to coast.

Figgo said, “You want a ride to 95 or not?”

The rain was falling harder, the thunder more ominous.

“Why’d you hit me? For Christ’s sake, I’m old enough to be your dad.”

“Just keepin’ it real,” said Figgo, grinning. “That’s what I do. My top forte, you might say.”

What’s wrong with this fuckwhistle? wondered the hitchhiker.

After all the bagged tracts were distributed, Figgo made a phone call to somebody named Jonas and reported that the run had been completed without incident.

But then, as Figgo was navigating an exit from Sanctuary Falls, a gangly, middle-aged blond man stepped into the road. He wore orange Crocs and a terrycloth robe, and he was clutching one of Figgo's baggies. Heatedly he waved both arms, signaling for the pickup truck to halt. The hitchhiker perceived that this particular citizen was rejecting Figgo's version of enlightenment.

As soon as Figgo hit the brakes, the man in the robe lurched closer. Figgo grabbed the can of bear spray from the back seat.

"Aw, don't," the hitchhiker said.

"Self-defense. You're my fuckin' witness."

"Seriously, the dude's wearin' a damn robe."

"So did Mike Tyson!"

Figgo rolled down his window. The man in the street was cursing in a wheezy, irate voice. He called Figgo a lowlife racist and scumbag Nazi. Then he reared back and hurled the plastic bag, which, because of the sand, made a *thwap* when it bounced off Figgo's forehead.

"Game on!" Figgo crowed, aiming the nozzle of the bear spray at the maniac.

But when he pulled the trigger, nothing happened, not even a squirt. The hitchhiker reached over and snatched away the can.

"It's empty, bro," he said.

"Viva," Figgo muttered. "That stupid bitch."

The angry homeowner was now endeavoring to spit, through a slanting sheet of rain, at Figgo's prized Ram. When Figgo stomped on the accelerator, the man tried to jump out of the way but ended up splayed across the hood of the quad cab—robe unhitched, Crocs airborne, the back of his skull spidering the windshield.

"Stop the truck!" the hitchhiker shouted.

"No way." Figgo sped up and began to weave erratically.

"You killed him, man!"

"He ain't dead. He's hangin' on like a damn gecko."

Figgo made a screeching swerve and the pedestrian slid off the hood, landing in a heap on a bike path. Figgo sped away, nervously checking the

rearview.

“How come that asshole got so pissed?” he muttered when they were back on A1A. “He sure didn’t look Jewish. Do they even make blond Jews?”

“Let me out,” the hitchhiker pleaded.

“See what he did to my truck?”

It wouldn’t have been necessary for Figgo to hit-and-run the man if only the bear spray had worked. The container was empty because Figgo’s tenant, a woman named Viva Morales, had in a moment of panic mistaken it for Raid and blasted the blinding contents at a cockroach, rendering the townhouse apartment she and Figgo shared uninhabitable for thirty-six hours. Thrifty by nature, Figgo had saved the bear spray can, trusting it was good for another shot or two.

“That shit ain’t cheap,” he groused to the hitchhiker.

“Seriously, I’ll get out now.”

“Chill, brah. That old geezer’s fine,” Figgo said.

“You need to call 911.”

“No way. He flipped me the finger when we took off.”

The hitchhiker, who had observed no such gesture from the man crumpled on the bike path, fell silent. Soon the fleeing pickup truck got stuck in traffic, inching through the downpour.

“So, where you headed for?” Figgo asked.

“Austin, Texas.” The hitchhiker gathered his backpack onto his lap, prepping for departure.

“What’s the woke situation down in Austin? I heard it was bad.”

“Austin’s cool,” the hitchhiker answered. “Great music.”

“But mostly country, right?”

“All kinds of music.”

“That rap shit, too?”

“Hip-hop, sure.”

“See, that’s what I’m gettin’ at. The rotten libtards, that’s the whole crust of the problem.”

“Ah.” The hitchhiker stole another worried glance at the big gun on the back seat.

“Sorry about the punch in the face,” Figgo said.

“Yeah, I’m not sure why you did that.”

“Wanna make some money?”

“Thanks, but I’m set,” the hitchhiker said.

Traffic had come to a stop. The hitchhiker figured there was an accident somewhere up ahead.

Figgo said, “It’s easy work. I’ll pay ya fifty bucks cash.”

“To do what?”

“Stuff more baggies. I got the carpy tuna bad, so I could use some help.” Figgo extended one hand for inspection. It appeared totally functional.

“Plus there’s some people you should meet,” Figgo went on. “Good dudes. Colleagues of mine.”

He pronounced it “collig-yoos.”

“We’re workin’ up somethin’ so freaking big it’ll blow your mind. You can crash at my place, downstairs on the sleeper sofa.”

“Sweet,” said the hitchhiker, a millisecond before he flung open the door, rolled out of the truck, and ran.



The flight to Orlando was packed. Twilly Spree felt lucky to score an aisle seat. The man and woman sharing the row told him they were going to Disney World for their honeymoon. At first Twilly thought they were joking, the Magic Kingdom being as romantic as a food court. But it turned out the young couple wasn’t kidding. Twilly felt bound to warn them that they were doomed to return to Disney every time their family expanded, the woman seeming to absorb this forecast with less cheer than her husband. They were a gregarious duo, however, with numerous questions about Florida in general. Was it safe? What about the alligators? When’s the next space launch? Where’s the best place to swim with a manatee?

His patience soon sapped, Twilly faked an asthmatic episode and turned away to drag on a realistic-looking inhaler. It was a prop he carried at all times in public. Across the aisle sat an attractive woman in her early forties, auburn hair pinned up. She was wearing tortoiseshell glasses and reading a *New Yorker* magazine, which made Twilly self-conscious about the *USA Today* on his lap. Seeing no wedding band on the woman's ring finger, he uncharacteristically made a stab at conversation.

"Do you live in Orlando?" he asked, pocketing the mock inhaler.

"Hush," she said firmly but gently, as if speaking to a child in church. She didn't look up from the article she was reading.

Twilly wondered if she'd purchased the magazine on the trip or brought it from home. In any case, her surgical concentration on the contents was alluring.

He folded his newspaper into the seat pocket and opened a book on his iPad. It was a biography of a poet he'd never heard of, a supposedly volcanic talent who remained obscure and unappreciated until his tragic death at age thirty-two. Twilly assumed that the misunderstood soul had taken his own life, but it turned out that he'd perished in an electric skateboard accident after partying all night with Lululemon models. Death by suicide would have been a cliché, his biographer wrote solemnly in the foreword, and the rebellious young poet was a sworn enemy of clichés. Evidently, skating into the path of a Coors truck on the Pacific Coast Highway had certified the stature of his untamed genius. Twilly deleted the remainder of the book, having no idea how it had gotten downloaded in the first place. Perhaps the prankster had been Janine, back in happier times.

The flight got bumpy, and the honeymooners clutched each other's hands. Twilly waited for the auburn-haired woman across the aisle to put down the magazine, which the plane's bouncing would have made impossible to read. After a time she gave up trying, took off her glasses, and closed her eyes.

"You okay?" Twilly asked.

"What?"

"I've got a Valium if you need it."

“Behave,” the woman said, still with her eyes shut.

The pilots were weaving around one of those towering mid-Florida thunderstorms. Twilly could see deep purple clouds through the aircraft’s windows on one side, bright and deceiving sunshine through the other.

“I think we’re in a holding pattern,” he said to the woman.

“The plane, you mean.”

“Yes. Of course.”

A few minutes later, the woman said, “So, I actually have your book.”

“Wow, which one?”

“*How to Let Happiness Find You.*”

“And?”

“Did nothing for me,” the woman said. “Completely useless.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Are you working on a new one?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Good,” the woman said, putting her glasses back on.

Twilly had never written a book, and had never heard of the one she was complaining about. Still, he was intrigued that she thought she recognized him from a photograph on a jacket flap—and without seeming to even glance in his direction.

“I’m not qualified to do a self-help guide,” he said.

“No kidding.”

“Do you want your money back?”

The woman sighed and said no. He liked her attitude. She wasn’t going to smile, no matter what.

“Was that albuterol?” she asked.

“Sorry, what?”

“Your inhaler.”

“Oh. Right,” Twilly said, patting his pocket. “For my asthma.”

“I had a husband who used that stuff. Kept him up all night.”

“That’s when I do my best writing.”

“Maybe switch to cocaine,” the woman said.

The plane found smooth air again, on final approach, and the young newlyweds sitting beside Twilly began reciting one of the lesser-known Psalms. He was impressed by the couple's courage to pray out loud in front of Florida-bound strangers. After the landing, he allowed the devout duo to file out ahead of him and—not wishing to further annoy the cool, pretty woman across the aisle—remained in his seat until all the passengers had debarked.

Right away Twilly noticed that the woman had left her *New Yorker* behind, so he put it in his backpack before leaving the plane. On the Uber ride from the airport he took out the magazine and smiled when he saw an address label on a bottom corner of the cover; she wasn't just a casual reader, she was a *subscriber*.

The name printed on the mail sticker: V. Morales.

And her address was an apartment in Tangelo Shores, another pleasant surprise.

Twilly had assumed that she was visiting the state on business or a vacation, but she was actually coming home.

It was encouraging. Twilly felt that way whenever he crossed paths with a potentially intelligent person. Perhaps she was even registered to vote.



Viva walked in and found Dale Figgo seated at the kitchen table filling sandwich baggies with flyers and what appeared to be novelty key chains. They looked like ping-pong balls stamped with crooked swastikas and a website address. Figgo wore a Velcro-strapped brace on his right wrist and hand. A bucket half filled with beach sand was positioned on the linoleum floor between his bare hairy feet.

“Yo, how do you spell ‘Fauci’?” he asked, wagging a red Sharpie.

“Nope,” Viva said.

“Aw, come on.”

She was renting a room in Figgo's townhouse. The kitchen had been designated a neutral zone. In return, Viva had agreed to remain out of sight during the meetings that Figgo occasionally held. Recently he'd formed his

own white nationalist group, the Stokers for Liberty, and Viva's scalding derision had already run off several prospective members.

"The deal," she said to Figgo, "was that you keep your crazy bullshit out of the common area."

He bristled and scowled. "We're at war against the enemy within! What's crazy about that? This comes down from the president himself."

"Sure. The enemy within. They're everywhere."

"Open your eyes, missy."

"All I see is a messy kitchen," Viva said. "Kindly clean off the damn counter."

At first she'd regarded her landlord as repugnant but harmless—an empty pointed hood, as it were. He had no leadership skills and a pliant philosophy. When she'd asked him why a white supremacist would rent space to her, a progressive Hispanic woman, he looked puzzled.

"Why the hell wouldn't I? You pay on time," he'd said. "Also, two of my best bros in the Proud Boys were Cuban dudes from Miami."

"So basically you draw the line at Blacks and Jews."

"And illegals, by God."

"Thanks for clarifying, Dale."

It was nothing Viva hadn't heard before. One of her ex-husband's uncles was a slobbering white zealot who had ruined every family gathering until a coral snake bit his ankle while he was on migrant patrol with his homegrown militia in an Arizona desert. The man didn't die, but he claimed to experience apocalyptic visions. Soon after being discharged from the hospital, he joined a doomsday cult and disappeared off the grid. Dale Figgo seemed destined for a similar obscurity, though his growing collection of semiautomatic weapons had caused Viva to reassess the threat level that he posed.

As Figgo transferred his flyer-stuffing operation to the living room couch, Viva asked what topic he had chosen for this week's screed.

"The rise of the international Zionist cowbell," he said.

"You mean 'cabal.' "

Figgo sneered. "I ain't fallin' for that."

“Are you bozos still throwing Ziplocs in people’s yards?”

“Hey, it works.”

“You know, there’s this thing called the internet.”

“People can block your emails,” Figgo said. “They can’t block a bag full of truth from landing on their driveway.”

He handed her one of the leaflets, which was titled “EVERY SINGLE ASPECT OF THE EVIL COVID AGENDA IS JEWISH.”

Viva yawned and said, “Again with the Jews?”

“Them and the Chinese got a new germ in the hopper. Just wait.”

“Dale, you told me you got vaccinated last time.”

“Only to spare someone innocent that might not be as tough as me.”

“But then you had your boosters, too.”

“Shut up,” Figgo snapped. “I got one a them high-risk conditions.”

“Which is...?”

“I’m a type 2 diabolic.”

“Oh dear,” Viva said.

Figgo grabbed the flyer away and glowered as Viva made a show of scrubbing her hands at the kitchen sink. She asked why there was a blue hurricane tarp over his truck.

“To keep the crows from shittin’ on it,” he lied.

“That won’t fool ’em.”

“Who? The damn birds?”

“The repo guys, Dale.”

“No, no, I got all that nonsense straightened out.”

“Liar,” Viva said, and started up the stairs with her carry-on.

“By the way, you owe me forty-nine bucks,” Figgo snarled after her. She stopped on the landing and turned around. “Do tell, Dale.”

“For the can of grizzly mace you wasted on that puny little roach.”

“I wouldn’t call it a waste,” Viva said.

“Add it to your next rent check.”

“Fine, Dale. When are you going to fix the drain in my tub?”

“I’m still waitin’ on a part.”

“You truly suck,” Viva said.

This was her eighty-ninth day in rental purgatory, with nine months left on an ironclad lease. She'd found the room on Craigslist; it was the only place she could afford, having been not only dumped but also cleaned out by her husband of four years. *Four fucking years!* An embarrassingly long time to have overlooked so many red flags—the day drinking, the aversion to salaried employment, the multiple cellphones, the mysterious “hot springs meditation retreats” to which she was never invited. Her humiliation was compounded because her professional background was human resources, and still he'd snowed her completely.

His name was Malcolm, and he was younger than Viva. How he'd hacked into her private money market account she had no clue; he'd already moved out by the time the bank notified her. The thieving jerk also racked up eleven thousand dollars on one of her credit cards before he got busted, driving a newly leased G-Wagen due west across South Dakota. He was returned to the Twin Cities in handcuffs.

Viva had flown back to sign the divorce papers and reclaim her laptop, a charm bracelet that had belonged to her grandmother, a red sports bra, and other items that Malcolm had taken when he moved out. The bra had been hanging from the rearview mirror of the G-Wagen when he was pulled over by the cops. Viva stuffed it into a trash basket at the police station in Minneapolis. Detectives placed the odds of recovering her life savings at approximately nil, Malcolm having wired the modest balance overseas.

For a fresh start, Viva had chosen Florida because her sister had once lived there and raved about it. So far, the enchanting aspects of the state had eluded her. Dead broke and deep in debt, she'd found a job that paid just well enough to begin reviving her credit rating. Her title was “wealth director” for a nonprofit called the Mink Foundation, which gave away millions of dollars with the goal of getting as many buildings as possible named after Claude and Electra Mink. The couple, not yet deceased, made a souring appearance in the office almost every day.

And every evening Viva would go home and deal with Dale Figgo—bigot, slob, conspiracy nut, and hatemonger. She had known none of this when she'd rented the room at his townhouse. On the plus side, she had the

washer-dryer all to herself, Figgo believing the machine was equipped with software that could read and report the seditious slogans on his tank tops.

Viva got in the shower and stayed there until the backed-up water rose to her ankles. Afterward she put on granny pants and a pullover, and went downstairs for a sandwich. So far, only one of Figgo's fellow white supremacists had arrived for the meeting, a rat-eyed brute named Jonas Onus. He was tall but bottom-heavy, with chipped brown teeth and a long wild beard dyed red, white, and blue. Although Viva had met him twice before, he reintroduced himself before joining Figgo at the baggie prep station. The men were seated shoulder to shoulder, whispering in serious tones, when Viva headed back to her room with a flat Sprite and a tuna salad on rye.

Later she picked through an unpacked box of books and found *How to Let Happiness Find You*, another unforgivable gift from her sister. Viva had made it only midway through the third chapter ("How to Let Yourself Let Yourself Go") before tossing the book aside. Now she studied the author's photo on the jacket flap and saw that he wasn't the man on the airplane, who'd had a dent on the bridge of his nose and a leaner, more weathered face. She felt foolish, and hoped the stranger on the flight had played along because he was polite, not predatory.

Downstairs, the meeting had started and the music was cranked up loud—heavy metal, as always. The bass lines pounded through the floor; Figgo believed that blasting Iron Maiden or Korn at painful decibels would thwart any eavesdropping devices the government might have installed. However, he kept the volume level so high that the Stokers for Liberty were unable to converse normally; they communicated mostly using Sharpie-scrawled notes, which Figgo would later rip into pieces and flush down the toilet. It was a practice that exacerbated the myriad plumbing problems in the townhouse. Viva had suggested that the men take their team building to an outdoor venue—a firing range, for example—but Figgo feared drone surveillance.

The notion that federal agents were spying on the Stokers struck Viva as far-fetched; from what she'd seen of the members, they were too

disorganized to be taken seriously. That they all carried firearms prompted Viva to be watchful, but she wasn't afraid, having grown up in Texas where everyone's packing. Occasionally she used Figgo's paranoia to her own benefit, on one occasion scoring high-end Levolor shades for her bedroom after convincing him that trench-coated prowlers were aiming laser pointers at her window late at night.

As Figgo's playlist blared from the first floor, Viva lowered the shades, put on her noise-canceling headphones, and fell asleep. Some time later she was awakened by a talking-coyote dream, not her first. It wasn't a humorous cartoon coyote, unfortunately, but a smaller and more cynical one.

The townhouse was quiet, so she took off the headphones and slipped down to the kitchen for a glass of ice water. She saw that the living room lights were still on and the front door was ajar. A tow truck was backed up to the driveway, where Figgo and Onus stood supervising the treatment of Figgo's prized Ram 1500, still tarped. The two seemed unusually calm and cooperative, leaving Viva to conclude that both men were familiar with the icy protocol of vehicle repossession.

She was still in the kitchen, eating seedless grapes out of a bowl in the refrigerator, when Figgo reentered the apartment alone.

"What're you doin' up?" he said irritably. "Don't be creepin' round my personal shit."

"Did Avatar Sasquatch go home?"

"Shut up," Figgo said. "Dude's got a master's from Valdosta State."

Viva closed the refrigerator door. "So, which of you is the boss?"

Figgo looked peeved. "Just wait. We're gonna make some big moves, and then you won't be laughin'."

"Good night, Dale."

"Hang on. I wanted to ask could I use your car for a little while tomorrow after work."

"That would be a hard no," Viva said.

"My truck's gonna be in the shop. Torque converter locked up."

"You definitely cannot borrow my car."

“I’ll top off the tank when I’m done.”

“Under no circumstances, Dale.”

“Why you gotta be such a c-word?”

Viva thumped him between the legs and said, “I’m telling your mother.”

Figgo stumbled back, clutching himself. “Leave Mom out of it!” he said. “Don’t get her all jacked up again.”

“Then let’s hear an apology.”

“I’m sorry, ’kay? Jesus Christ.”

“And fix the drain in my bathtub.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I’m not kidding. I’ll call her first thing in the morning,” Viva said. “Swear to God.”

Figgo retreated to his room, thinking he could hardly wait for the day when Viva and especially his mother saw him differently, the day when the Stokers for Liberty stormed into history.