

NO CORNER TO HIDE

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He paddled at full pull, using the foot-controlled rudder to maintain maximum speed around the turn. As the bow of the nineteen-foot surf ski rounded the narrow bend of the river, he passed into full view of the Mama Gator sunning on the sandy right bank. The squeaks of her newly-hatched babies greeted his senses from the opposite shore. No sane person would intentionally come between an alligator mother and her babies, but his intrusion was unintended.

Max immediately realized his predicament.

He was about to get chomped.

The eleven foot long alligator slashed her body once, and lunged into the water. He paddled at full- tilt now, not bothering to turn his head to respond to the source of the splash.

He knew.

At the narrow bend, the river was no more than fifteen feet wide, with narrow sandy banks on each side. Beyond that gash of light, a thick cypress forest extended in either direction. If he wanted to live, he had to paddle.

Max could feel the bumpy skenes of the huge gator as she swam beneath the fiberglass hull of the surf ski. It was nineteen feet long, but only extended three inches on either side of his hips. At twenty-nine pounds, it would be no obstacle to the five- thousand pounds per square- inch jaws of the ancient reptile. If he brought the man-powered speedboat to a full stop, it would tip him into the water, and at this point, stopping was definitely not an option. He saw the eyes

and snout of the gator pop to the surface to his left ahead of him, and looked for the gaping mouth to open.

She was looking at him.

Max kept paddling. When he came abreast of the gator, he placed the blade of the paddle directly between her eyes, and hoped that the depth of the water would keep her from planting her powerful legs in the sandy bottom. If she was floating, he could sink her long enough to propel his watercraft beyond her jaws.

If she was planted on the bottom, she could have him for lunch.

Without breaking form, he propelled the surf ski as fast as his aching shoulders could go. A wake extended behind him, creating small waves that hit the sandy banks on either side. He imagined the eyes of the gator glowing yellow as she watched his retreat. Fifty more strokes, and he came to a tree that extended its full length across the slave canal. A lush bush of poison oak covered the center section of the narrow passage. On the right, he saw light beyond the obstacle, and steered the rudder toward the hole in the foliage. Once beyond it, he turned and looked behind him. There was no sign of the gator, but he was not in a trusting mood.

He paddled for as long as his tired muscles would propel him, and then allowed the sleek craft to tip him into the water. It was cool and clear, and the invigorating wetness brought him back from exhaustion. Its spring-fed waters maintained a temperature of seventy-two degrees year-round, and he floated until his body temperature and breathing returned to normal.

“I wonder how frantic my Secret Service agents would be if they knew that the President of the United States was almost devoured by a huge reptile on their watch,” he wondered. “I can only imagine the predators lurking in the Oval Office. And there are no corners to hide.”

Chapter

He could hear it before he could see it; the sound of a helicopter’s rotor pushing the humid air aside as it approached the secluded spring. Then the massive rotors appeared above the cypress trees with a loud thrumping, followed by the dark blue body of the craft, the presidential seal prominently displayed on the fuselage in gold. The turbulence tore the Spanish moss from the branches and it floated slowly toward the water in elongated tufts of grayish green. The helicopter maneuvered above the circular opening in the trees, not much wider than the reach of the powerful blades, and hovered thirty feet above him.

From doors on either side of the helicopter, two dark figures emerged and dropped from the sky on either side of him, twenty feet away. Max treaded water as two Navy Seals in full wetsuits and scuba gear swam furiously in his direction. The Seals approached with strong strokes, their faces covered with masks. Max was amazed at the speed at which they converged on him, and he wondered whether they would crush him in the middle. When they were at arm’s length, they pulled off their masks and pulled the regulators out of their mouths in unison.

“Just relax, Mr. President, we’re here to save you,” exclaimed one, while the other attempted to roll Max onto his back with arms that resembled tree trunks.

“But I don’t want to be saved,” sputtered Max as he slipped beneath the hold and pointed his finger in the face of the Seal in front of him. “I was enjoying a restful dip in my favorite spring until you guys came along.”

“Sir, it is my duty to protect you from danger, and I would give my life to defend you from harm...”

“Did it ever occur to you, Navy Seal,...what is your name?”

“Shields, Sir.”

“No, your first name! There will be no formality, as long as you maintain respect.”

“Benjamin, sir, er...Ben,”

“And you!”

The other Navy Seal treaded water silently, witnessing the exasperation of Max, and wondering whether he and his companion were about to get re-assigned to somewhere cold and lonely on the first day of their privileged duty assignment.

“Mr. President, Sir, my name is Jonathan Schlitz, but my friends call me Schlitz. I prefer it, and I’m duty bound to protect...” he said over the roar of the helicopter.

Max contemplated his next move, knowing that if he attempted to exercise independence that violated their stringent training, he would likely be trussed up, stuffed in a metal basket and hauled by cable into the helicopter, which continued to hover overhead.

“Boys, I have been coming to the spot since I was a young kid, and one of my favorite things to do is see how long I can hold my breath at the bottom of this spring. What I’m gonna

do is take three deep breaths and free dive down to the bottom, 35 feet down below, and I'm going to hang upside down from that piece of limestone down there until I can't do it anymore. Then I'm going to float to the top all by myself, and after I'm done having my fun, you can take me home." Max could see black SUVs pulling into the small clearing on shore, and one of them was already stuck in the white sugar sand, wheels spinning and throwing dust into the air.

"Yes, Sir, Mr. President!" They replied in a unified baritone. Max took three deep breaths and flipped under the surface, pulling his way toward the bottom of the spring.

From shore and from the above, the scene of the President of the United States disappearing beneath the surface, followed by two dark figures in scuba gear, was enough to cause unrestrained panic. "The president is down, I repeat, the president is down," they yelled into their communicators. They watched helplessly as the water whipped in circular waves from the hovering blades. The effect was to obscure what was happening beneath the surface of the clear water, and the anguish of those on land became horror as each second ticked away.

After two minutes and fourteen seconds, Max popped to the surface with Ben and Jack within arm's length, regulators still in their mouth. Max was ecstatic. "A new record," he managed to say between deep breaths of fresh air.

Immediately, the Navy Seals communicated with the hovering helicopter.

"Drop a basket and get Wizard out of here. The other Helo can pick us up."

The abrupt intrusion into his placid respite was startling, but he was coming to expect that his ability to be alone had gone away on election day. He had become the property of the United States of America. With that position came the sacrifice of his privacy, or any deluded

expectation that the president had a reasonable expectation of privacy, and the inaugural was still over a month away.