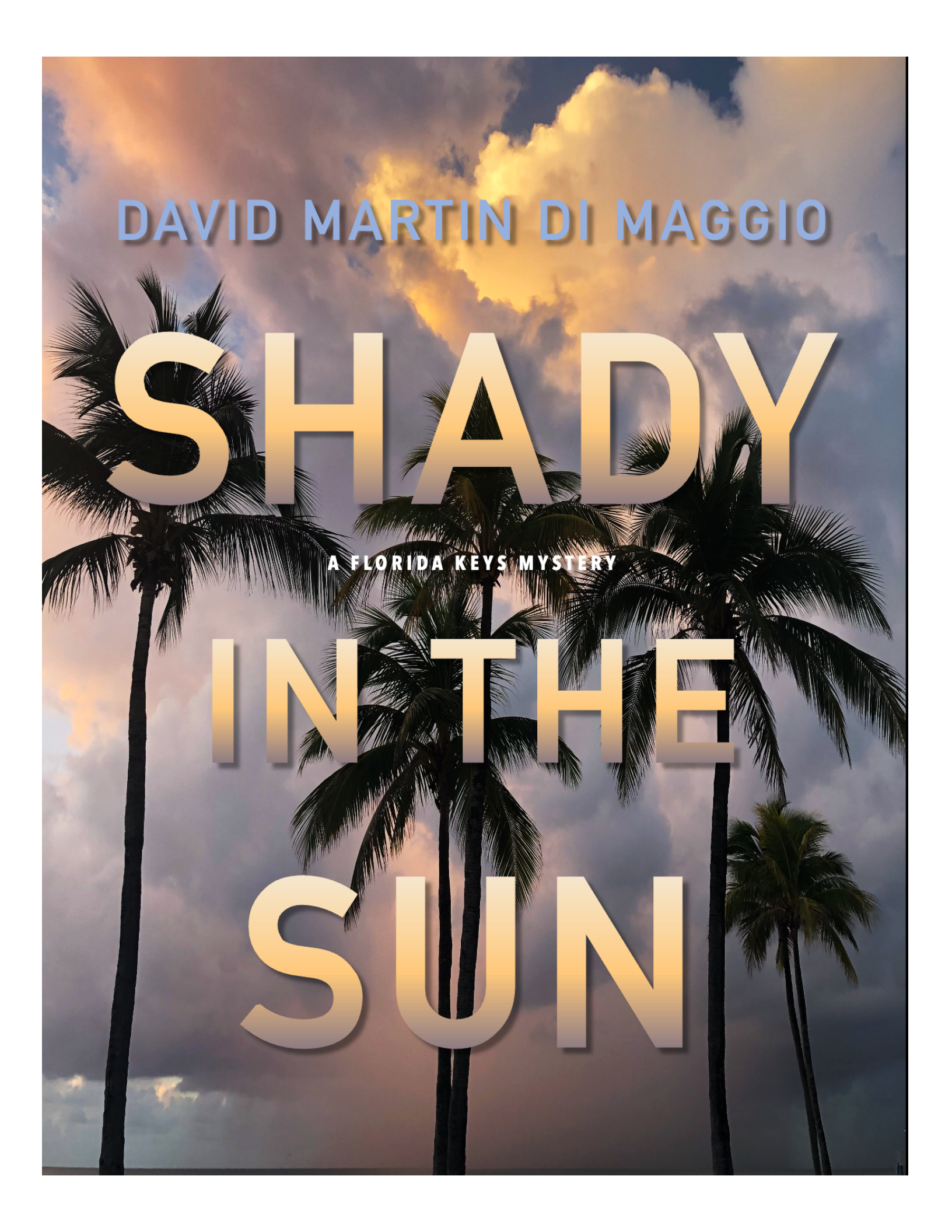




DAVID MARTIN DI MAGGIO

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. The black men all spoke in a distinct Bahamian lilt, the others in Spanish. 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.

A large Bahamian dressed in crème linin 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.