

Skin Tight Study Guide

Skin Tight by Carl Hiaasen

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Plot Summary

The tranquil life led by Mick Stranahan on his stilt house in the tidal flats of Biscayne Bay is rudely shattered when a man, pretending to be his friend Tim Gavigan, drives up with a speedboat and attempts to shoot him. Mick Stranahan defends himself with a trophy Marlin's spike from the wall of his house and fatally stabs his assailant in the chest. Then, Stranahan, who is retired from being an investigator for the State Attorney Office, goes in search of the person or persons who are trying to get him killed.

Stranahan starts his inquiries with the case of a young woman who, four years ago, disappeared after having cosmetic surgery at a Miami clinic. The owner operator of that clinic was a Doctor Rudy Graveline, who has reopened an even bigger clinic called the Whispering Palms Clinic. Stranahan soon learns that it is Rudy Graveline who is trying to have him killed. Apparently Graveline is being blackmailed by a nurse who was working for him when the young woman disappeared but the Doctor thinks Stranahan is the blackmailer. Dr. Graveline is also being investigated by a TV reporter and his crew who intend to expose him on the show "In Your Face." Stranahan and the TV show's producer, Christina Marks, join forces to find the nurse, Maggie Gonzalez. Meanwhile Dr Graveline has hired a man called Chemo to kill Stranahan but who fails in two attempts. The first time is when he torches the wrong stilt house and at the same time murders Stranahan's ex wife by drowning her, and the second time when he only wounds Stranahan in the shoulder but loses his own hand to a large barracuda when he falls into the water.

On learning that Chemo has not carried out his instructions to kill the blackmailing nurse, Graveline bribes two homicide detectives to arrest Stranahan for murdering his ex wife and to shoot him under pretext of resisting arrest. Warned of this, Mick Stranahan and Christina Marks hide out in a remote key in Biscayne Bay and when the two homicide detectives turn up they perish in a boating accident engineered by Stranahan, without the knowledge of Christina. By now Mick and Christina have consummated their love affair but, almost immediately, split up because Christina thinks Mick is excluding her from his life.

Back on the mainland, Dr. Graveline performs surgery on the TV reporter who is trying to expose him, but in doing so kills him with a botched liposuction procedure. At the same time, Chemo kidnaps Christina Marks in an effort to get Stranahan to come to meet him, but Stranahan reciprocates by taking the film star, with whom Rudy Graveline is besotted, back to the stilt house and invites all the characters to meet up there.

In a climactic final scene, all the women are set free in a rental boat into the bay and on the stilt house, Dr. Rudy Graveline is killed by Chemo during the reenactment of a rhinoplastic procedure, which Stranahan arranges in an effort to get the Doctor to confess. Chemo cannot escape from the stilt house because he is convinced that, if he swims away, the giant barracuda will get him, and Mick Stranahan disappears and is nowhere to be seen when the police arrive to arrest Chemo for the murders of Stranahan's ex wife and Dr. Graveline.



Chapters 1 to 3

Chapters 1 to 3 Summary

Mike Stranahan enjoys the peace and solitude of his life on an old stilt house in the tidal flats of Biscayne Bay. No other stilt houses in the area are permanently inhabited and Stranahan bought his house for forty thousand dollars at a government auction. One day in January, one of the local fishing guides drops by and tells Mike that a man, calling himself Tim Gavigan, is out in a 20 ft white Seacraft looking for the house lived in by Mike Stranahan. Later in the day this individual turns up at Stranahan's stilt house and claims he is out of gas and could he borrow some. When Stranahan eventually shows himself, the stranger draws a .38 pistol but Stranahan seizes a mounted blue marlin off the wall and manages to pin the dorsal spike through the gunman's chest, killing him instantly. Stranahan takes the body out into the Biscayne Channel, tosses the corpse and the pistol into the water, cleans up the Seacraft, and leaves it in the channel before swimming back to the stilt house. That night he wonders who is trying to kill him. Tim Gavigan, his friend, is in a hospital ward dying of cancer.

Stranahan reminisces over the incident which led to his discharge from the State Attorney's Office prosecutor's staff. A corrupt judge he was in the process of arresting fired a .22 at him at close quarters and Mick Stranahan took the pistol from him and killed him with a shot to the face. All the other people who might have a grudge against him have long left the local scene. The next day, the local marine patrol officer, Luis Cordova, calls at the stilt house and asks Stranahan if he knows anything about a corpse found in the channel and an abandoned Seacraft boat. He tells Stranahan that the corpse was that of a man named Tony Traviola, a known crook from New Jersey. Curiously Traviola had had extensive plastic surgery to his face. Later when Stranahan visits his sick friend Gavigan, they come to the conclusion that the only time Stranahan and Gavigan had been photographed together for the media was in the case of the disappearance of Victoria Barletta four years previously.

Four days after the attempt on his life, Mick Stranahan takes his skiff to the main land and visits his sister, who is married to a wealthy and successful personal injury lawyer called Kipper Garth. He recovers a Remington pump action shot gun that he has left there, telling his sister he has a problem with seagulls. Back at the stilt house he finds three naked women sunning themselves on his deck. When their boyfriends return later in the day they start roughing up the girls and Mick Stranahan goes out to their boat, overcomes the leader, and drags him behind the boat with the ski rope until he begs for mercy. Mick warns them to never come back to the stilt house. In the evening, after most of the boats have left the area of Stiltsville, Stranahan notices a cabin cruiser nearby with a minicam on board. Someone is videotaping him and his house.



Chapters 1 to 3 Analysis

The opening scene of the story accurately depicts the milieu of the action, the Biscayne Bay area of Florida, but the reader may wonder at the inclusion of details of a young tourist couple from Covington, Tennessee who discover a body in the surf and take photographs of it, when they and this incident are never referred to again. As it is, the description of Stranahan's existence on a stilt house is very eloquent in its details about the environment and the important part played by the weather and marine elements. When a complete stranger attacks Stranahan in his home, his choice of weapon in defending himself is as unlikely as it is successful. The incident presages the suite of grotesque fatalities, which are the norm for this story.

The story then cuts to the clinic run by Dr. Rudy Graveline and the details of his plastic surgery practice are graphically described, though these are subservient to the account of the phone call he receives from New Jersey. The reader is left in ignorance as to the event which has gone awry though he or she may speculate as to whether or not it is connected with the unknown assailant or even the tourist couple on the beach. Even when the marine patrolman provides more details as to the mystery assassin, the only connections between Dr. Graveline and the attempt on Stranahan's life are New Jersey and the dead man's cosmetic surgery.

As other players are introduced to the reader in the first three chapters—Stranahan's friend Tim Gavigan, his sister Kate Garth, and the three naked trespassers on his stilt house—further facts about his life are sparingly advanced. Stranahan saw action in Viet Nam, he has killed five men in cold blood, but always the homicide is justified. He is completely unfazed by feminine pulchritude but as his peremptory treatment of the uncouth boyfriends of the sunbathers shows, he is quite capable of dealing with odds of three to one and is almost chivalrous when it comes to enforcing respect for the fairer sex.



Chapters 4 to 6

Chapters 4 to 6 Summary

Mike Stranahan goes to the State Attorney's office and uses his old badge to get the file on the disappearance of Victoria Barletta. He reviews the file and remembers the details; he and Gavigan had interviewed everyone but had never come up with any leads. The young assistant attorney tells him that the file is so immediately available because it will be used in a segment of the Reynaldo Flemm T.V. show "In Your Face."

Later in the day, Mike Stranahan again notices the cabin cruiser moored near his stilt house. Again they are video taping. He goes out to the cabin cruiser, armed with his favorite weapon, a stainless-steel tarpon gaff. On board he finds Reynaldo Flemm, Christina Marks, the producer, and the cameraman. Christine tells Stranahan that they have been looking for a Maggie Gonzalez, who was at the Durkos clinic when the Barletta girl disappeared and who has told them she had important information on the case. He leaves them with Christina Marks telling him that she is at the Sonesta if Maggie Gonzalez turns up.

Mick Stranahan finds out that the Durkos Clinic moved suddenly, right after Victoria Barletta disappeared. The principal of the clinic had been Rudy Graveline, the surgeon who performed a procedure (nose job) on the girl who disappeared. The woman, Maggie Gonzalez, since she was bought off by Dr. Graveline, has run into hard times, with the death of her husband who, she found out, spent all her savings on a cocaine addiction. She has flown to New York and struck a deal with Christina Marks to testify on camera about the Barletta case but later she realizes that the investigator who interviewed her, Mike Stranahan, could destroy her credibility. So she borrows another five thousand dollars and returns to Miami to tell Rudy Graveline that Stranahan is the informant in the Reynaldo Flemm investigation.

Dr. Rudy Graveline, now running his practice at the Whispering Palms clinic, has tried to have Stranahan eliminated by hiring a hit man through a contact in Atlantic City, New Jersey. This was the man who died when he was stabbed with by Stranahan. He now recruits a local man, Chemo, a bouncer at a local club, and promises to repay Chemo for the hit by giving him treatment to rectify the disastrous results of a botched plastic surgery.

Mike Stranahan finds Maggie Gonzalez's apartment and breaks in but finds nothing significant. He calls on Christina Marks at her hotel and suggests a cooperative arrangement between them. At the same time Chemo has tracked down one of Stranahan's ex wives, Chloe Simpkins Stranahan. Together they plot revenge on her ex husband.



Chapters 4 to 6 Analysis

In using his old State Attorney connections Stranahan learns more details about the Barletta case and the role that the T.V. Shock journalist Reynaldo Flemm is playing in the affair and this meshes well with the confrontation between Mick Stranahan and the video crew on the cabin cruiser moored near his stilt house. This sets the scene for the introduction of three more principal players: Reynaldo Flemm, Christina Marks and their cameraman Willie. It also serves to depict Stranahan's method of interrogation of hostile witnesses and his favorite weapon, the stainless steel tarpon gaffe.

Simultaneously, Dr. Rudy Graveline's proclivity for cunnilingus is the basis for the revelation that it is the Doctor who is attempting to eliminate Mick Stranahan and his engagement of Chemo as a hit man. Again the specific reason for Graveline's desire to get Mick Stranahan out of the way is not revealed to Chemo or to the reader, who by now must speculate that it has to do with the disappearance of Victoria Barletta.

An important and detailed flashback by Maggie Orestes Gonzalez precedes Mick Stranahan's enquiries about the Barletta case and his search for Maggie Gonzalez, who was the nurse at the clinic when Victoria Barletta disappeared. This, combined with Christina Marks' investigation, leads to an almost overload in facts. The lack of continuity, and the constant, cutting back and forth between different scenes and the inclusion of the Gonzalez flashback, requires a considerable mental agility on the part of the reader.

When Christina Marks and Chemo each launch their own enquiries to locate Mick Stranahan, the comparison between their methods leads to exposition of linguistic evasion and an almost farcical preview of Chemo's impulsive and drastic demonstration of his skills to the impertinent black kids in the ghetto.



Chapters 7 to 9

Chapters 7 to 9 Summary

Mick Stranahan finds the only doctor who worked with Dr. Graveline at the Durkos Center who is left in Miami. George Ginger tells Stranahan that the closure of the Durkos was very sudden but he and the other three doctors on the staff had received very generous separation payments. One of them, Dr. Greer, died as a result of a hunting accident six months after the Durkos center closed. Reynaldo Flemm, under the guise of a male stripper, Mr. LeTigre, visits the new clinic run by Rudy Graveline and arranges for an operation on a mole on his left buttock. He reconnoiters the clinic in preparation for his T.V. expose. Shortly after, Maggie Gonzalez calls him from New York and tells him that Stranahan is leaving her warning telephone messages. He tells her to stay in New York; he will send her more money. Privately he considers telling Chemo to hurry up the elimination of Stranahan.

When Stranahan returns to his stilt house he finds the model Tina has been dumped there by her boyfriend Richie. They have a candle light dinner and Mick shows her how he feeds a giant barracuda below the house—the barracuda has become almost a pet. Tina makes a play for Stranahan but it is not successful.

Chemo, has persuades Chloe Simpkins Stranahan to join him on a rented Aquasport and to show him her ex-husband's stilt house. When she finds out that Chemo intends to kill Stranahan and burn down his house, she starts to argue with him and calls him "Velcro face." Chemo dumps the boat's anchor into her lap and pitches her overboard. He watches as the bubbles indicate she has gone to the bottom of the bay.

Tina and Mike Stranahan watch a neighboring stilt house go up in flames. Stranahan believes it is arson as he heard a boat. Later in the day a marine patrol boat brings Luis Cordova and a detective from the homicide office. They are investigating the murder by drowning of Chloe Simpkins Stranahan. They tell Mick Stranahan that he is the prime suspect but then Tina joins them and Mick tells them she is his alibi.

Christina Marks, the producer of the Reynaldo Flemm T. V. show, is worried that he will blow Chloe's death out of all proportion, especially as they have paid her five hundred dollars as tipster money. Maggie Gonzalez calls Christina from New York. She has arranged for Reynaldo to pay her fifteen thousand dollars and a trip to Hawaii because of the threatening calls she is getting from Stranahan, the ex investigator in the Barletta case.

Chapters 7 to 9 Analysis

When Reynaldo Flemm visits the Whispering Pines clinic in his role as Johnny LeTigre, a male stripper with a mole on his buttocks, the normal modus operandi of the plastic surgery is described in detail, including the salesmanship part for promoting additional



operations and business. Mammary prosthetics are also the background to a call to Dr. Graveline from Maggie Gonzalez, who has received an ominous phone message on her answering machine in New York.

Back at the stilt house Stranahan's unplanned sojourn with Tina, the model whose boyfriend Mick had taught a lesson about respect for females, leads to a reinforcement of the description of Stranahan's almost indifferent and cavalier attitude towards beautiful and inviting woman. Stranahan also exhibits gourmet expertise in preparing a dinner of freshly cooked fish and white wine. Little by little the outline of Mick Stranahan's personality is being revealed. The narrative introduces the almost domesticated great barracuda that lives under the stilt house and is regularly fed by Stranahan. This unlikely denizen of the deep is not just a colorful detail but has an important role to play in the final chapters.

Unlike the sparse history of Stranahan, the reader is now given a fairly detailed account of the life of Chemo in a three-page flash back. This in turn explains the partnership between the hired hit man and Stranahan's third ex-wife, which inevitably leads to her demise when she triggers Chemo's lethal reaction by calling him "Velcro face." Tina the model, is not only a witness to Chemo's mistaken torching of the stilt house of one of Stranahan's neighbors but her presence also serves as Stranahan's alibi when the police come visiting to tell him about the death of his ex-wife and that he is the prime suspect.



Chapters 10 to 12

Chapters 10 to 12 Summary

Dr. Rudy Graveline is dining with Dade County Commissioner Roberto Pepsical. He is offering a bribe to get a permit for a low-density public use zone ordinance to be changed so that he can move forward on his real estate project, the Old Cypress Towers. He also primes the commissioner to watch out for a disgruntled employee who is threatening him with police action on an old medical case. When Rudy Graveline gets back to his clinic, Chemo is there with the news that he has eliminated Stranahan. Graveline starts the treatment for Chemo's facial skin problem.

Mick Stranahan visits his brother-in-law, a Personal Injury lawyer, and coerces him to get the state papers on medical discipline records for a Dr. Rudy Graveline. Later Mick Stranahan goes with Tina to visit her plastic surgeon, Dr. Dicer, who tells Stranahan that Dr. Graveline is a well-known butcher. He also demonstrates how it is possible to kill a patient accidentally during a nose job.

Chemo is at work as a bouncer at the Gay Bidet nightclub when he gets a call from Rudy Graveline. Stranahan is still alive and has just torched Graveline's Jaguar.

Christina Marks visits Tim Gavigan in hospital and he takes a great shine to her. The only thing he can think of for her to tell Stranahan is that Dr. Graveline's brother had been at the Durkos clinic when Victoria Barletta disappeared, and that he has a tree trimming business. In the parking lot of the clinic, Graveline tells the police that a man had rammed his Jaguar sedan with an old Chrysler Imperial after placing containers of gasoline in the Jaguar sedan's trunk. The policeman investigating the incident, Al Garcia, deduces that they are looking for a malnourished Haitian midget, probably a member of The Shining Light or in the pay of the IRA. Graveline does not tell the police that the man was Mick Stranahan who emphatically disapproves of him trying to murder him.

Reynaldo Flemm has been in a hysterical crisis since his visit to Graveline's clinic where the surgeon told him he should consider liposuction because of his weight problem. He tells Christina Marks he wants to wait a little before calling Maggie Gonzalez's bluff and they will not attend Chloe Simpkin Stranahan's funeral in case the police know about the five hundred dollars tipster deal.

At Tim Gavigan's funeral, Al Garcia begs Stranahan to stop his car bombing tactics. He also tells Stranahan that two homicide detectives named Murdock and Salazar have been assigned the case of Chloe's death. They are known enemies of Stranahan but they have uncovered the description of the man seen with Chloe before she drowned. He is seven foot, balding, early thirties and with some kind of Halloween make up on his face.



Christina Marks hires a shrimp fisherman to take her out to Mick Stranahan's stilt house. On the way there she and the shrimper see a half naked, pale man on a jet ski, wearing black sunglasses and with an Ingram .45 machine gun strapped to his bare shoulder.

Chapters 10 to 12 Analysis

The sub plot of how Dr. Graveline suborns the county commissioner for one of his real estate swindles merely seems to confirm the endemic corruption in Miami. In the same manner the details of the unethical practices of Personal Injury lawyers are part of Stranahan's ploy in initiating legal proceedings against Dr. Graveline. The fact that Kipper Garth and Dr. Graveline are members of the same yacht club emphasizes the underlying uniformity of the ethics of the professional classes in Florida.

Christina Mark's visit to the dying Tim Gavigan leads to the unabashed approval of Stranahan's friend. It cements the feeling of the inevitable getting together of Christina and Mick Stranahan. Coincidentally, the ominous fact that Graveline has a brother who is a tree trimmer is revealed, but its significance is not explained and this adds to the tension. This tension is offset by the farcical interview between Graveline and officer Garcia who is investigating the burning of the doctor's Jaguar, which leads him, logically, to deduce that the perpetrator was an undernourished Haitian midget.

Rudy Graveline's self examination and catalog of his surgical disasters is transformed by his discovery of a fresh and wondrous affair with the film star Heather Chappell. This infatuation is rather incompletely explained; after all he has seen thousands of female bodies. Her desire to have unnecessary cosmetic surgery on her perfect body and face is also scarcely accounted for.

Chapter 12 ends with the indelible image of a nearly naked Chemo roaring towards the stilt houses on a yellow jet ski, with an Ingram submachine strapped to his naked torso. The character of the impetuous Chemo following his diabolical inclinations with no thought of the inevitable practical consequences is a minor masterpiece.



Chapters 13 to 15

Chapters 13 to 15 Summary

Tina arrives at the stilt house in a borrowed Capri Bayliner with two girlfriends and tells Mick Stranahan that she is going back to her boyfriend Richie. She begs him to make love to her but as she cannot remember the names of all four Beatles, Stranahan declines her offer and she leaves in a huff.

When Christina Marks arrives at the stilt house, she tells Mick about the armed freak on the water jet ski and also what Travigan told her about the tree-trimming brother of the surgeon Graveline. Mick Stranahan hears the water jet ski engine and shuts up the house and waits for his assailant inside in the dark. Chemo realizes that Stranahan is waiting inside and comes on board the stilt house. He fires shots into the house from all four sides and enters through the front door. Stranahan, who has been hit in the shoulder misses with his first shot gun blast but lets off another four shots through the walls as Chemo runs around the deck. Chemo falls in the water but is mostly unharmed and is making for the pilings below the house when the great barracuda, attracted by the commotion, mistakes the Heuer dive watch Chemo is wearing for its usual bait and strikes swiftly. It spits out the amputated hand and the watch when it realizes its mistake.

It has been three weeks since Chemo appeared in the canal at the Whispering Pines clinic on a blood soaked jet ski brandishing a tourniqueted bloody stump of a left arm. He has been staying at the clinic and Graveline has been looking for a prosthetic for the missing hand.

Mick Stranahan is in bed at the Mercy hospital where Christina Marks managed to get him to in his skiff after the shooting. She recounts the incident to detectives Murdock and Salazar who are threatening Stranahan with a murder charge. Then she uses the reputation of her boss Reynaldo Flemm to get rid of them while Stranahan pretends to be unconscious.

Chemo goes back to his old job at the nightclub Gay Bidet much to the delight of Freddie Wong his boss. His left arm is now equipped with a new prosthesis—a small, six volt Weed Whacker.

Mick Stranahan confronts Graveline's brother George at his tree trimming operation. He accuses him of getting rid of the body of Victoria Bartlett for his brother who had been operating on her when she died on the operating theatre table. Later he looks through mug shots with Al Garcia. He and Al conclude that the man who shot Stranahan is the same man seen with Chloe just before she died. Finally he breaks into Maggie Gonzalez's apartment and goes through her mail and finds out she is staying at the Plaza hotel in New York. He also overhears a phone message from a man calling from the Whispering Palms clinic. Then he books a flight with Delta Airlines.



Chapters 13 to 15 Analysis

Stranahan's insistence that he will only make love to Tina if she can name all the Beatles is a recurring ploy when he faces demands by good-looking females. Ostensibly this tactic is to counteract the five wives he has failed to keep in the past and it gives an interesting aspect to the psychological turmoil, which lies below his calm masterful exterior.

When Christina Marks joins Stranahan on the stilt house, she supplies him with the news of Graveline's brother the tree trimmer and Stranahan explains the significance to her, and the reader. Chemo arrives and conducts a frontal assault on the stilt houses, his tactics those of a maniac who knows no fear. In contrast Stranahan displays a certain weakness in not successfully shooting Chemo in self-defense. His lack of instructions to Christina indicate that he expected to get the better of Chemo. As it is, it is only her heroic efforts, which save his life. Chemo, now a victim of the barracuda, has to display equal determination and resourcefulness to get himself and his amputated arm to the safety of Graveline's clinic. The hilarious description of the reaction of the doctor's patient with the facial appearance of an African Ubangi woman with huge lips, at the appearance of the bloodied, naked Chemo is, as Graveline recalls, unforgettable.

Later on, Chemo's choice of a household weed whacker as prosthesis for his arm is in the same vein. It is a notable feature of the story that these unlikely and grotesque images are presented in a logical manner. The description of the bizarrely named bands at the Gay Bidet nightclub and the outrageous disguise that the psychologically unstable Renaldo Flemm chooses to adopt are all consistent with increasingly bizarre details of the unfolding story.

Christina Marks, having saved Stranahan's life in getting him back to the hospital after he is shot on the stilt house, and then in defending the feigning unconscious Stranahan from the threats of the two hostile homicide detectives, is never thanked by Stranahan, nor are her courage and actions acknowledged by him.



Chapters 16 to 18

Chapters 16 to 18 Summary

Mick Stranahan stops by his brother-in-law's office on his way to the airport to verify that Kipper Garth has obtained the Graveline files. Stranahan tells him that he, Kipper, will be using them to sue Dr. Graveline and instructs him to go down to the courthouse and file the papers. Graveline, meanwhile, is indulging in sex with his latest paramour, the actress Heather Chappell. While he is making love in the black marble fireplace with the actress he suddenly comes to the realization that he has to have Maggie Gonzalez eliminated. The next day while his brother George is complaining about Stranahan's confrontation with him on the subject of bodies disappearing in wood chipping machines, Chemo turns up at the clinic. Rudy Graveline gives Chemo two thousand dollars and a photograph of Maggie Gonzalez and tells him to kill her.

On the flight to New York, Mick Stranahan meets Christina Marks who is traveling first class with a disguised Reynaldo Flemm. They exchange life stories and agree to work together to find Maggie Gonzalez. The lady herself, Maggie Gonzalez, has made a videotape of her account of the killing of Victoria Barletta and has placed two extra copies in a safe deposit box. She has followed this with plastic surgery to give her a new face. When Mick Stranahan knocks on her door Maggie does not respond as she is still recovering from the plastic surgery. Mick Stranahan returns to Christina's apartment where he has spent the night. At the same time Chemo arrives on a Pan Am flight from Miami. He has the address and room number of Maggie Gonzalez.

When Chemo knocks on Maggie's door he is confused by the spectacle of a woman whose face is completely obscured by bandages so he cannot be certain whether he has the right woman and he has only got two shells for the rusty Colt .38 he has purchased. Maggie recognizes that Chemo has been having dermabrasion and in the ensuing conversation Chemo learns that he has been badly deceived by Dr. Graveline. They go to Central Park and compare notes. Maggie tells Chemo about the fatal nose job, the disappearance of Victoria Barletta and the Reynaldo Lemm T.V. expose. Chemo has still not decided whether to shoot the bandaged woman but when he and Maggie return to her room they find Mick Stranahan and Christina Marks in her room going through her belongings.

In the ensuing fight between Stranahan and Chemo, Chemo fires a shot at the fleeing Christina and is thwarted from putting a bullet through Stranahan's throat by the fact that the second shell is a dud. Mick and Christina flee the scene via the elevator, and Mick has Maggie's original of the video tape in his coat pocket.



Chapters 16 to 18 Analysis

The opportunity for Mick Stranahan (and the author) to expound on his life's history during the flight to New York when Christina tells him her personal story is missed. Stranahan sums up his life by admitting five wives and five homicides. He seems to relish the impression of being a cold-blooded killer. Again there is no mention of any gratitude on his part for the help she has given him so far. The opportunity for the initiation of an affair with her when she offers to share her New York apartment with him is also missed. The portrait of a completely unemotional hero is vivid, especially in his recital of his previous affairs.

On the other hand the unexpected development of a working partnership between Chemo and Maggie Gonzalez, his assigned victim, is convincingly portrayed. The image of the barefooted Chemo and the bandaged Maggie, having breakfast in Central Park, is another little bizarre cameo, at once logical and at the same time instrumental in the development of the story.

When the two couples dramatically confront each other at Maggie's apartment, Christina, as usual, displays a quick thinking coolness while the supposedly invincible Stranahan is saved from being shot by Chemo by what can only be described as pure chance.



Chapters 19 to 21

Chapters 19 to 21 Summary

Dr. Rudy Graveline finds sex with the Hollywood Star, Heather Chappell, a means to focus his mind on the solution to his many predicaments. Not the least of these is that the actress wants a full cosmetic plastic surgical makeover and, not only that, but she insists the procedures be videotaped. When he gets a phone call from New York, instead of one of his connections to the mafia, it turns out to be the male stripper Johnny LeTigre who has forgotten about his mole and now wants Graveline to fix his nose and his abdomen. Reynaldo has decided to by pass Christina Marks and makes an appointment with Graveline at the clinic to single handedly get the expose on the doctor and simultaneously correct his physical shortcomings, which his paranoiac, masochistic personality tells him he is exhibiting.

Chemo has given up trying to find the person who sold him the dud revolver, and, accompanied by the still bandaged Maggie, makes for the airport to return to Miami. When he hears about Maggie's videotape, he offers to be partners with her. After Maggie has used her guile to get them upgraded to first class, she tells him that Stranahan has the tape and this merely confirms his desire to kill him. At the Metro Dade Police Department the fracas at Maggie's room at the Park Hill Hotel is being documented and the fishing knife has been traced to a recent shipment at a bait shop in South Miami. A partial thumbprint on the same fishing knife has been identified as belonging to a Blondell Wayne Tatum, aka Chemo. Chemo is wanted for the murder of Dr. Gunther MacLeish a dermatologist.

In Miami, Commissioner Roberto Pepsical arranges to bribe detectives Murdock and Salazar to get rid of Stranahan when they arrest him on their murder warrant. Stranahan and Christina do not bother to go to the stilt house; instead they arrange to be taken a sagging dock near Old Rhodes Key, which belongs to an old fisherman friend of Mick's.

Kipper Garth, has arranged to handle the malpractice suit against Graveline himself. He interviews the clients; the nub of the case is that after surgery on Mrs. Nordstrom, her breasts had become rock hard and Mr. Nordstrom suffered a detached retina when he subsequently tried to make love to his wife.

Rudy Graveline goes to the Gay Bidet nightclub to find out from Chemo what happened in New York. He finds him in full fettle, using his weed whacker prosthetic to break up a fight between rival gangs of bikers and skin heads, but nearly collapses when he is told, firstly that Maggie Gonzalez is still alive and secondly that her incriminating video tape is in the hands of Mick Stranahan.



Chapters 19 to 21 Analysis

The net begins to close around Chemo, already wanted for the murder of the dermatologist who originally destroyed his face with a botched treatment. The sub plot involving the bribing of the two homicide detectives is interwoven with the rezoning of Graveline's latest real estate scam and the impending surgical procedures on the clandestine Reynaldo Flemm impersonating Johnny LeTigre.

The description of Maggie and Chemo's fellow passengers in the supposedly typical Miami bound flight leads to the implication that Miami is a major concentration of freaks and misfits. This is the justification for the shoe-less Chemo and the bandaged Maggie fitting right in with the rest of the Miami bound contingent. Chemo's dramatic aversion to being subjected to Maggie's vomiting is a little less convincing. He thinks nothing of using his briefs to form a tourniquet for his amputated arm, wanders around New York and the airport in naked feet, so a little vomit should not cause him all that concern

The bribery scene in the strip joint involves the typical squalid details that offend even the two homicide detectives. This inevitably, and logically, leads to Commissioner Pepsical choosing a Catholic church for his next nefarious meeting place. This contrasts with the battle scene at the Gay Bidet nightclub, where Graveline goes to find out from Chemo what happened in New York. The ingredients of a fight between anorexic Nazi skin heads and flabby bikers in a dispute over who has the worst tattoo, the sounds of a band called Cathy and the Catheters, and Chemo, in his role as security, whipping up these ingredients with his Weed Whacker prosthesis, is a masterpiece of grotesque imagery.



Chapters 22 to 24

Chapters 22 to 24 Summary

Reynaldo Flemm has trouble persuading the cameraman Willie on his new plan especially when he says he, not Christina, will be producing the segment. At the Metro-Dade Police Department, Al Garcia is working on getting an artist's rendition of what Blondell Wayne Tatum, aka Chemo, looks like. He gets three positive I.D.s on the man who was with Chloe Simpkins Stranahan the day before she was drowned. He is disconcerted to find that Murdock and Salazar have a murder warrant out on Stranahan.

At the shrimper's hide-out Mick Stranahan and Christina make love and she is able to name all the Beatles and he tells her he thinks he loves her. However, he will not explain to her what he is doing or what he is waiting for. It certainly is not the huge skinny freak who has tried to kill them twice.

Detectives Murdock and Salazar have been searching the stilt houses for Stranahan. They are using the sheriff's department Aquasport. On the second day of their search they are approached by marine patrolman, Luis Cordova. He tells them he last saw Stranahan on the conch key at Old Rhodes Key. He even lends them a spare chart of the area.

On Old Rhodes Key, Mick Stranahan tells Christina that two rogue cops are coming to shoot him and he insists that she goes for a walk around the key. She is worried and offended, especially as they have just been making love. After running aground and waiting for the tide to refloat them, Murdock and Salazar find Old Rhodes Key. They put on the blue police lights and turning on the siren they drive the boat, at its full speed of forty-two miles an hour, up the narrow channel to where Stranahan is apparently sitting on the dock. They never see the monoplastic filament Stranahan has rigged across the channel from trees on either side. Salazar who is on the bow is instantly garroted and Murdock is caught by the throat and pitched into the howling outboard engine and then into the water.

Stranahan reaches the boat and tries to get Murdock to tell him who had arranged the arrest but he dies before he can get anything out of him. When Luis Cordova picks Christina and Mick up next day Stranahan says he wants to go back to his stilt house but Christina asks to be taken to the Key Biscayne marina. The official police reaction to the missing patrol boat and the two dead homicide detectives is that it was a boating accident.

Rudy Graveline is told by Commissioner Roberto Pepsical that the elimination of Stranahan has gone terribly wrong and, no, he cannot have back the money he paid for the arrest. He also tells Graveline that the balance of the bribe for the members of the commission on the rezoning of Old Cypress Point will have to be paid within forty eight



hours. Rudy Graveline makes reckless love to Heather Chappell and, as he does so, he comes up with an idea of brilliant force.

Chapters 22 to 24 Analysis

Reynaldo sells his idea of the plan for the exposé of Dr. Graveline to Willie the cameraman. As it is outlined, it seems to be a simple variation on Flemm's standard procedure for provoking the interview into an attack on Reynaldo Flemm, with the usual provisions for what might go wrong and at what point Willie has to join the fracas to save his boss's hide. Even Willie can see the faults in the plan but he consoles himself with a stronger planter's punch.

The arrival of Maggie's videotape at the Metro Dade Police Department, addressed to Al Garcia, signals the inevitable end to Dr. Graveline's career, even though Garcia does not think of her as a reliable witness. The intervention of detectives Murdock and Salazar and their impending lethal arrest of Stranahan, however, forces his hand.

When Stranahan and Christina make their way to a deserted beach on Old Rhodes Key they finally consummate their passion and she passes Stranahan's ultimate test by reciting the names of all the Beatles at which point he declares his love for her. Unfortunately things go wrong immediately and instead of an idyllic honeymoon Christina is rebuffed by Stranahan, who not only refuses to tell her what he is up to on Old Rhodes Key, but also insists that she remove herself to the other side of the island while he prepares his reception of the lethally inclined homicide detectives. All her wiles and sarcasm are to no avail and it is significant that she now sees him as a stern father figure rather than a lover.

Stranahan's reluctance to include Christina in his plans, which, if they do not work out will be personally dangerous for her, and if they do succeed, will leave her as a material witness, is understandable. However, given the thought that he must have put into the scheme, it is slightly contradictory of him to even have her with him when he goes to the old shrimper's dock. As it is, the plan works brilliantly but when they are picked up from the key by Luis Cordova, Christina is angry, insulted, and feels excluded by Mick Stranahan and he makes no effort to change her mind when she asks to be taken to the mainland.

Stranahan admits to himself that she is the first woman he has loved who declined to marry him, though the details of his proposal, made that night, are not given to the reader. As far as Christina is concerned Stranahan is just like her boss Reynaldo Flemm—"just another macho head case."



Chapters 25 to 27

Chapters 25 to 27 Summary

Mick Stranahan inspects the lawsuit against Dr. Rudy Graveline and gives Kipper Garth a list of witnesses to be filed with it. He reminds Kipper Garth that the malpractice suit might turn into a charge of murder. He then meets up with his detective friend Al Garcia who has been questioning George Graveline at his wood cutting site. When Stranahan finds out that the woodcutter is being uncooperative, he goes to see him by himself. He roughs up the tree trimmer and gets the work location for Chemo but when he starts to interrogate him about Victoria Barletta, George Graveline hits him on the back of the head with a heavy piece of wood. Mick Stranahan recovers consciousness to find Al Garcia at his side holding his revolver. He had to shoot George Graveline when he attacked Stranahan and the body of the shot man fell backwards into the wood chipper.

Dr. Rudy Graveline, unable to shake off Stranahan, tries to solve the Zoning Commission problem by ordering his mafia friends in New Jersey to kill all nine members of the commission because he does not know which specific individuals Commissioner Pepsical has bribed. They decline the task and tell him to concentrate on the Commissioner himself, so Graveline gets twenty five thousand dollars in a samsonite suitcase and meets up with Pepsical in the confessional at St. Mary's church. While Pepsical is counting the money he plunges a syringe filled with deadly potassium into him, and when the Commissioner breathes his last, he collects the loose cash from the body and leaves the church.

At his home Graveline is confronted by Chemo and Maggie who demand money for the videotape that Maggie made in New York. When he refuses, Chemo goes to work on him with the Weed Whacker but quickly discovers the large amount of cash he is carrying. Maggie and Chemo make off with the money without telling Graveline any further details about their position.

Stranahan makes sure that the workers at the site of George Graveline's demise will be discreet and keep away from the media. Then he goes and interrupts Reynaldo Flemm's sexual activities with a young woman Reynaldo has picked up. Stranahan is looking for Christina who has disappeared from her hotel. Reynaldo knows nothing about Christina so Stranahan goes to the Gay Bidet nightclub but Chemo has quit and Freddie Wong does not know anything about where he has gone, except that he had two women with him.

Chapters 25 to 27 Analysis

The development of the several sub plots continues with a rapidity, which keeps the readers on their toes. Mick Stranahan again shows his vulnerability by only just escaping death in the wood chipper when his friend Garcia shoots George Graveline in



the back in the middle of his homicidal attack. Graveline, fortunately for everyone concerned, abandons his idea of having all nine of the zoning commissioners assassinated, but then, with undeserved luck, manages to administer a lethal injection to Roberto Pepsical in the confessional at St. Mary's. Back at the clinic, Chemo and Maggie confront Dr. Graveline with extortion demands for the videotape Maggie has made. Chemo has just weed whacked Rudy's brand new replacement Jaguar and sets on the Doctor only to discover the large quantity of cash he is carrying from his encounter with the Commissioner. This now allows Chemo to consider flight to Barbados but again Maggie intervenes and persuades him to hold out for the millions she reckons they can get from Graveline.

As the reader might come to expect, Reynaldo Flemm is in the process of his apparently routine sexual activities when Mick Stranahan interrupts the proceedings to ask about the whereabouts of Christina Marks who has not checked back into her hotel. Brandishing his favorite weapon, the stainless steel Tarpon gaffe, he gives the impression of a latter day Knight of the Round Table on a mission to rescue his damsel in distress.

The pieces of the lurid jigsaw puzzle fit neatly together with the demise of George Graveline in his own wood chipper and the undetected murder of the Commissioner in the confessional gives a faint air of improbability.



Chapters 28 to 30

Chapters 28 to 30 Summary

Maggie manages to persuade Chemo not to simply take the money and go off to Barbados. They return to the Holiday Inn in Key Biscayne where they have Christina bound and gagged in their room. Chemo decides he wants Stranahan to come to him with the videotape and will use Christina as bait.

Stranahan has arranged for Dr. Graveline's financial assets to be frozen as he might skip town after he is cited in a lawsuit. Kipper Garth, surprised at the success in the personal injury litigation, goes to see Mr. Nordstrom but he is out being interviewed for a Jai-Halai coaching job. When he returns he finds Kipper Garth has persuaded Mrs. Nordstrom to let him inspect and then palmate her breasts. Without hesitation, he begins hurling Jai-Halai balls at Garth who is trying to escape via the back door. The final ball hits Kipper Garth in the skull and he falls unconscious to the ground.

At the stilt house Mick Stranahan is given a note by his friend the fishing guide. It tells him that Chemo has his girl friend and gives him a phone number. The guide leaves with his clients, telling Stranahan that he will be back in the area tomorrow. Later Luis Cordova, the young marine patrol officer, takes Stranahan to the main land where he catches a cab to his sister who is waiting for word on her almost deceased husband. Al Garcia greets him when he leaves his sister's house and remonstrates with him about tampering and obstructing justice. Al Garcia is on his way to the funeral of Commissioner Pepsical who died of a heart attack in the confessional.

Reynaldo Flemm, in his disguise of Johnny LeTigre, is being prepped for his plastic surgery. His plan is going all wrong. Willie the cameraman does not know in which of the four surgical theaters the Shock Television journalist is being operated on. Flemm is being anesthetized by the nurses before he can confront Dr. Graveline with his accusation that he killed Victoria Barletta in 1986. When Willie and his Beta cam camera burst into the operating theater, Dr. Graveline is in the process of pumping out the extra fat from Flemm's abdomen. Willie, now realizing it is up to him alone, pushes the microphone into Graveline's face and asks him if he killed Victoria Barletta. At this the doctor loses all control and continues the liposuction beyond safe limits. The liposuction machine starts to vacuum the aorta and Willie, watching through the camera viewfinder, sees the doctor's arm go red and then everything goes red as the camera continues to record the disaster.

Chapters 28 to 30 Analysis

Neither Maggie Gonzalez nor the reader have yet to discover what motivates Chemo. It certainly is not money and he fails to take physical advantage of Christina Marks whom the pair have kidnapped and is now spread-eagled in her underwear on a bed in the



Holiday Inn where she is bound and gagged. His only interest is in correcting the disastrous effect of the botched cosmetic surgery to his face and watching old Miami Vice episodes on the television (Is the author giving the reader a hint here?)

Though the seizure of Dr. Graveline's financial assets, as an outcome of the personal injury law suit brought by Kipper Garth, is an important nail in Graveline's coffin, Kipper Garth's being laid low by a Jai-Halai, westa-wielding Swedish husband provides almost comic relief.

Prior to getting Chemo's note that he has got Christina and wants to meet up with him, Mick Stranahan, on his stilt house, indulges in a rare introspective soliloquy in which he remembers how his previous marriages ended and he questions as to why he has got involved with Christina Marks. Significantly, even in his dreams, marriage emerges as thinks he has encountered Victoria Barletta on the Miami Campus.

As the character Al Garcia says when he remonstrates with Stranahan for obstructing and tampering with justice: "ever since I got into this thing with you and the doctor, So many people are dying. Dying weird too!" Dying weird is exactly what befalls Reynaldo Flemm at the Whispering Palms clinic. The disastrous outcome of Willie interrupting the Doctor as he performs liposuction on the character he believes is the male go-go dancer, Johnny LeTigre, is recorded on the beta cam videotape by Willie, who flees to a local news producer's office.



Chapters 31 to 34

Chapters 31 to 34 Summary

Chemo and Maggie have been contacted by Stranahan on Chemo's newly acquired car phone. Stranahan tells Chemo he will get another call in a little while to arrange a meeting. Rudy Graveline has taken Reynaldo Flemm's corpse, ostensibly to Mount Sinai Hospital. He has been told about his brother George's death, so he cannot use the wood chipper solution and makes room for the body in his deep freeze. However, now he finds that Stranahan has kidnapped Heather Chappell and left behind a note. He calls Chemo and tells him to come to his house.

When Maggie and Chemo arrive at Graveline's house, with Christina locked in the trunk of Chemo's Bonneville, they find that Stranahan has left a note inviting them to a party at his stilt house and included a map of how to get there. Graveline and Chemo decide that a permanent solution to the Stranahan problem must be found and Chemo tells Graveline to get hold of a big boat, like a Scarab thirty-eight.

Maggie remembers a certain man in the Miami hospital district who deals with international Bio-Medical Exports and they take Flemm's corpse to his office and sell the cadaver to him for eight hundred and seventy-five dollars cash.

At the stilt house Stranahan shows Heather Chappell that Graveline has not done any surgery on her and has been keeping her doped. He tells her that Rudy Graveline will be coming to the stilt house to save her and to kill him. He turns off all the lights and takes her to the roof. He has a Coleman lamp and the shotgun with him.

By the time Chemo and the others arrive at the stilt house in the old but seaworthy, twenty-foot, hotel rental boat, they are all soaking wet and seasick. Stranahan has put Coleman lanterns all over the stilt house and when Chemo and Graveline get on the house deck, Heather gets in the boat, refusing to have anything to do with Rudy Graveline. Chemo, who is only armed with a .38 revolver, is persuaded to pitch it into the water when Stranahan fires a warning shot gun blast from his hiding place in the pilings below the house. Chemo tries to leave in the rental boat with the women, but Stranahan knocks him unconscious with the butt of the shotgun.

After the women have left for the mainland, Chemo recovers consciousness to find Stranahan getting ready to operate on Graveline's nose in an attempt to get him to confess to what happened to Victoria Barletta. He coerces Chemo, whose weed whacker is no longer functioning, to participate in the re-enactment. Rudy believes that Stranahan is bluffing but Chemo is aghast at the surgical scene and begs Graveline to tell Stranahan what he wants to hear. With the chisel in his nose, Graveline finally breaks down and yells at Chemo to tell Stranahan about the dermabrasion deal between them. Chemo reacting out of fear and embarrassment, swings the mallet with all his strength and the chisel penetrates Graveline's brain, killing him instantly.



Chemo goes to get Stranahan's boat so that he can leave the stilt house but finds that it has been sunk. Stranahan tells him the only way of the stilt house is by swimming. To reinforce his already developed terror of the barracuda which bit off his hand during his last visit to the stilt house, Stranahan gives him back the Swiss dive watch which had been on the his wrist at the time of the previous barracuda attack.

Christina Marks, Maggie Gonzalez, and Heather Chappell eventually get picked up by Tina and her boyfriend Richie after their rental boat breaks down in the bay. Al Garcia and Luis Cordova get to the stilt house shortly after dawn. They discover Chemo still at the house and the mutilated body of Rudy Graveline. They arrest Chemo for the murder of Chloe Simpkins Stranahan and read him his rights but he refuses to say anything to them. Garcia and Cordova cannot find any sign of Stranahan whom they agree was not involved in the death of Graveline. They notice a man in a yellow skiff, fishing in one of the channels between them and the nearest island and, just beyond the fisherman, something in the water, which they think could be a big turtle. Then they return to the stilt house to continue interrogating Chemo.

Chapters 31 to 34 Analysis

With Dr. Graveline driving around with a rapidly dying patient bleeding to death on the seats of his new Jaguar and looking for his defunct brother and his wood chipper, and with Christina Marks, bound and gagged in the trunk of Chemo's Bonneville as he waits for a call from Stranahan, the reader might wonder at the sleight of hand on the part of the author which will be necessary to extricate everyone from their predicaments.

The providential recollection by Maggie of a man who buys cadavers for international export disposes of the corpse of Reynaldo Flemm and the note and map left behind by Stranahan when he abducts Heather Chappell, the irreplaceable provider of athletic copulation for the Doctor, dictates the scenario for the final scene. Stranahan, with Heather Chappell on his stilt house, disabuses her of her real treatment by Rudy Graveline and points out that he had severely doped her. As always, Mick Stranahan shows no interest in her perfect physique except to question her as to why she wants plastic surgery. There is no satisfactory explanation for this and the reader is left with the impression that there is some deep-seated psychological need in the lady.

When the "rescue" party arrives at the stilt house, Stranahan succeeds in separating the women in the party from the men. At that point there is a significant interchange between Christina and Mick. She declares she wants to stay and he interprets this as an acceptance of his marriage proposal but he still believes her main motivation to be her pursuit of a journalistic scoop. That this interchange of deeply felt emotions occurs in the middle of an extremely tricky and dangerous maneuver is an indication that the resolution of the relationship between Mick and Christina has some way to go.

The climax of the party to which Stranahan has invited Graveline and Chemo comes when he has subdued both of them and proceeds to conduct a mock nose operation on the doctor. That Chemo will be the only witness to the extracted confession does not



seem to trouble Stranahan. Chemo, exhibits his uncontrolled rage at the seemingly trivial admission of the dermabrasion, which was to be his payment for killing Stranahan, and, not unexpectedly, Graveline dies in the same manner as Victoria Barletta. However, there is no consideration for the predicament this puts Stranahan in, with respect to being an accomplice, before, during, and after the death of Dr. Graveline. It is only the all too willing acceptance by officers Al Garcia and Luis Cordova that Stranahan is not involved and the frenetic non-cooperation of the demented Chemo that saves him from being the subject of an arrest warrant. Stranahan's use of the rescued Swiss Dive watch, that Chemo lost when his arm was bitten off by the barracuda, and the sabotage of his own boat, are an ingenious explanation as to why Chemo is still on the stilt house when the officers arrive.



Prologue

Prologue Summary

Blondell Wayne Tatum, also known as Chemo, is serving three concurrent seventeen-year sentences for the murders of Dr. Rudy Graveline, Chloe Simpkins Stranahan, and Dr. Gunther Macleish.

Maggie Orestes Gonzalez is working as a volunteer nurse, serving one hundred hours of community service at the Dade County Stockade when she is killed in a food-related riot.

Kipper Garth never recovers from his pelota injuries and sells his practice.

Willie Velasquez gets his own news-documentary program on Fox Television as a result of the dramatic videotaped footage of the cosmetic surgery of the now presumed dead Reynaldo Flemm. He offers the position of producer to Christina Marks but she takes a job with the Miami Herald, purchases a second-hand Boston Whaler and a nautical chart of South Biscayne Bay.

The parents of Victoria Barletta receive a letter and a suitcase with over one hundred thousand dollars. An accompanying letter explains it is a gift from the estate of Dr. Rudy Garland and is signed by a retired investigator named Mick Stranahan, but there is no return address.

Prologue Analysis

The Prologue serves as a means to succinctly tie up a lot of loose ends at the end of the story. Chemo's fairly lenient sentence by the courts contrasts with the death in a jail riot of Maggie Gonzalez who was, in fact, merely serving a modest public service requirement. The reader can guess that Stranahan is laying low in the Biscayne area and that he and Christina, in her Boston Whaler and with her nautical chart, will somehow meet up again and, hopefully, merge their lives and destinies together.



Characters

Mick Stranahan

Mick Stranahan is an ex-investigator for the State Attorney office. He was a decorated Viet Nam veteran when he took the gun from a man robbing a fried chicken joint and killed him. Later, as an investigator for the State Attorney office, he was in the process of arresting a crooked judge in a strip joint near Miami airport when the judge pulled .22 and fired three shots at Stranahan. Stranahan, wounded twice in the thigh managed to wrestle the gun from his assailant and fired it in his face and killed him. The subsequent grand jury exonerated Stranahan but he was forced to resign from the prosecutors staff on full disability compensation.

Since then Mick Stranahan has lived on his stilt house in the tidal flats of Key Biscayne, relishing the solitude and the fact he is the only permanent resident in the collection of similar structures known as Stiltsville. He has been married and divorced five times, each time, as he ruefully acknowledges, because he fell in love with cocktail waitresses all of whom were younger than he. Now he refuses to get serious with any woman who is not old enough, or savvy enough, to be able to name all the Beatles. Opportunities for sexual adventures are plentiful enough as is witnessed by his encounter with the naked model, Tina, who is trespassing on his house when he returns from a visit to the main land. His use of a carpenter's level to persuade her that she does not need cosmetic surgery to her breasts is an example of his sardonic disinterest in members of the opposite sex.

Mick Stranahan is very capable physically as is evidenced when he disarms the fried chicken hold up man and when he gives a lesson in good manners to the three boyfriends of Tina and her friends. On several occasions his calm display of force gets him out of, and sometimes into, trouble. The way he deals with the unknown assailant who comes to shoot him at his home is typical of his methods. Stabbing the man to death with a wall-mounted Marlin trophy is as effective as it is unusual. Likewise his disposal of the threat from two crooked homicide detectives at Old Rhodes Key is a masterpiece of cunning and field craft. It does not always go his way, however, as when he is nearly killed by Chemo, and later by the tree trimmer and his wood chipping machine.

Stranahan's armour of indifference and reserve is finally pierced when he runs into Christina Marks but the promising start to their romance rapidly turns sour when he refuses to let her into his life, refusing to believe her motives are not simply professional ambition. The story ends with Stranahan lying low in the Biscayne area and Christina determined to find him and re-establish their relationship.



Dr. Rudy Graveline

Dr. Rudy Graveline is a very successful plastic surgeon in the Miami area. His practice, at the Whispering Palms Clinic, has four separate operating theaters and a staff of eight plastic surgeons who do most of the work. Graveline himself is notoriously inept as a surgeon, and is often saved from the results of his own incompetence by his more skilled staff.

A determined philanderer, Rudy Graveline often uses his black Jaguar sedan or his marble mansion of a house to consummate his sexual affairs. It is a moot point as to whether money or sex is the main motivation for Dr. Graveline. As it is, he has offshore bank accounts where he accumulates the profits from his inordinately expensive, assembly line, practice and he is also engaged in real estate projects which require bribing certain Dade County Commissioners to make changes to zoning regulations to his advantage.

As the story unfolds, Dr. Rudy Graveline is facing blackmail and threats of exposure, concerning his previous clinic, Durkos clinic, which he had been forced to close down after the scandal of a young woman disappearing after paying a visit to him.

Dr. Graveline abruptly closes the Durkos clinic, pays off the staff, including four surgeons and ceases business until he opens the Whispering Palms clinic. Now the nurse, Maggie Orestes Gonzalez, who was at the clinic that day and for whom he ensured a generous termination, is now telling him that a former State Attorney investigator, Mick Stranahan, is re-opening inquiries into the disappearance of Victoria Barletta. Unbeknownst to the doctor, Maggie Gonzalez is also taking money from a renowned shock exposure TV journalist, Reynaldo Flemm, who is planning on exposing Dr. Graveline on his TV show.

In attempting to eliminate the threat posed by Stranahan by his usual expediency of engaging a hit man from his Mafia connections in New Jersey. Graveline only succeeds in stirring up a hornets nest of trouble which eventually leads to his demise during a botched, re-enactment of a rhinoplasty operation. Throughout the story, Rudy Graveline exhibits no trace of compassion for his victims as he pursues his headlong quest for money and sexual gratification. It is the ultimate poetic justice that he dies at the hand of his own hired assassin and with the instruments of his own profession, before he can be brought to account for himself in a court of law.

Reynaldo Flemm

Reynaldo Flemm is a renowned Shock TV journalist who has a successful show called "In Your Face." He specializes in confronting the subjects of his exposure, face to face, and part of the notoriety of the show is gained from the spectacle of him being attacked by the people in question. Though no serious injuries have ever arisen, there is just enough danger that the cameraman, Willie, is sometimes used to divert attention from



Reynaldo Flemm so that he can escape to a specially prepared van, always placed near the scene of the interview.

The strong element of masochism in his nature which allows him to undergo these threats is completely overwhelmed by his insatiable desire for the limelight. Completely unrestrained in both his wardrobe and his behavior, Reynaldo Flemm almost represents a caricature of himself. When he decides to change his appearance and make it more flattering, after a disparaging remark by his executive producer, he chooses a seven-hundred-dollar blond wig which he hopes will make his nose look thinner and take twenty pounds of his waist on camera.

Reynaldo's preoccupation with his looks and his intention to bypass the skills and craftsmanship of his producer Christina Marks, lead him to the scheme whereby he will combine his expose of Dr. Graveline with a full cosmetic workover at the Whispering Palms clinic, rather than the simple removal of a mole from the buttocks of Johnny LeTigre, the male go-go dancer who is Flemm's disguise. The almost reckless disregard of the carefully arranged checks and balances of his normal show format and the well intentioned, but disastrous attempt by Willie the cameraman to capture the exposé, result in Reynaldo Flemm residing in the deep freeze at Dr. Graveline's house from where his corpse will eventually serve the educational needs of medical students on a foreign campus.

Chemo

Chemo is the name of the man that Rudy Graveline hires, first to get rid of Mick Stranahan and secondly to kill Maggie Gonzalez. Employed as a bouncer at the Gay Bidet Nightclub, Chemo's real name is Blondell Wayne Tatum. Thirty-eight years old, he is six foot nine and only weighs one hundred and eighty one pounds. He is wanted by the state of Pennsylvania for bank robbery and the murder of a Dr. Gunther MacLeish and is described as a white male with possible burn marks on his face.

Chemo was raised by an Aunt and Uncle in an Amish community until his twenty first birthday when he robbed a local bank using the only weapon available to an Amish youth, a pitch fork. Chemo's preferred way of life, burglary, was not too successful because of his abnormal height and he spent four months in a county jail before he discovered the secondary income to be derived from bribery and corruption in the form of a career as an assistant city manager. Then thoughts of entering local politics emerged and Chemo suddenly found himself obsessed with the removal of two ingrown hair follicles at the tip of his otherwise, normal looking nose, a blemish instantly exaggerated by his campaign photographs. When he went to Scranton for electrolysis treatment, the elderly Dr. Macleish bungled the job disastrously and Chemo impulsively broke the doctor's neck, thus ending the doctor's medical career and his own political one.

Since this point in his life, Chemo has remained a fugitive, on an unending quest to get his face fixed and back to normal. When he is approached by Rudy Graveline to



eliminate Stranahan, the deal is that the Doctor will fix up his face using a treatment called dermabrasion. This is all the motivation that Chemo needs and he proceeds on his murderous errands with simple minded concentration.

There is, within Chemo, the instantaneous reaction to events or people that he feels offend him. It is like a coiled spring which results in unthinking and violent action. Thus his murder of Chloe Simpkins Stranahan, when she calls him "Velcro Face," the almost naked ride on the Kawasaki jet ski to shoot Stranahan with the Ingram sub machine gun, his casting off his shoes when Maggie vomits on his feet, the shooting up of the basketball when the kids in the black ghetto mock his appearance and his unemotional treatment of the participants in fights at the night club.

This is countered by his reprieve of Maggie Gonzalez and their subsequent partnership and the almost inspired selection of a household weed whacker as a prosthetic for his amputated hand. Chemo's undoubted physical courage seems to emanate from a certain lack of imagination as to the consequences of his actions—the exception being his instinctual fear of the barracuda under Stranahan's stilt house and the latter's clever exploitation of this with the return to Chemo of the watch which he lost with his hand.

In the Prologue, Chemo is described as serving three concurrent seventeen year sentences and being a trusty in charge of the winter vegetable garden at the Raiford Correctional Institution. The impression given is that he might gain some peace of mind while the public is protected from his outlandish behavior.

Christina Marks

Christina Marks is the producer for Reynaldo Flemm on his TV show "In Your Face." It is her attention to detail and assiduous background investigations which are the foundation of the success of the show. Christina Marks was born in Richmond, Virginia, graduated from the school of journalism at the University of Missouri having lettered in the swimming team. After completing three years at WBBM in Chicago, she met Reynaldo Flemm at a trial and accepted his offer of a job as an assistant producer.

That Christina Marks is interested in Mick Stranahan is evident from the moment she first meets him when the TV team is filming him and his stilt house. Subsequently she goes to the stilt house, uninvited, just in time to witness Chemo's maniacal attack. She displays considerable resourcefulness in getting the wounded Stranahan to hospital and runs interference for him when he is visited by homicide detectives as he lies there feigning unconsciousness.

The interlude in New York gives Christina another chance to get close to Mick when he stays at her apartment, but the only outcome is that she finds they do not share tastes in paintings or Italian cuisine. It is only when Mick and Christina spend the night together at Old Rhodes Key and nude nighttime bathing leads to a successful sexual encounter, that Stranahan finds out that Christina can remember the names of the Beatles and is, therefore, of the same age as himself. He declares his love for her and



some time during the night proposes marriage but by now Christina is feeling rebuffed and rejected because he adamantly refuses to let her in on his ambush of the crooked homicide detectives. The prospect of a tender loving relationship developing between Christina and Mick seems to be doomed until Chemo's kidnapping of Christina propels Stranahan into the role of a knight riding to the rescue.

Maggie Orestes Gonzalez

Margaret Gonzalez was a witness to the disappearance of Victoria Barletta when she worked as a nurse at Dr. Graveline's Durkos clinic. She gave false evidence to the detectives investigating the case but now, four years later, after being left penniless by her deceased husband because of his cocaine habit, decides to extract some more money from Dr. Rudy Graveline. It is Maggie's promise of providing details in the case to Reynaldo Flemm and his TV crew that initiates the sequence of events which leads Mick Stranahan to re-investigate the disappearance of Victoria Barletta.

Maggie's skill in manipulating men leads to her reprieve by her intended assassin, Chemo, when he comes to New York. Not only is she a professional nurse in the field of cosmetic surgery, she is undergoing surgery herself to change her appearance in anticipation of testifying to Graveline's crime.

Roberto Pepsical

Roberto Pepsical is the Dade County Commissioner who is in control of the nine other members of the commission involved in adjusting, at a price, the re-zoning process for Rudy Graveline's Old Cypress Point real estate project. He is also asked by Graveline to bribe the homicide detectives Murdock and Salazar to shoot Mick Stranahan when they arrest him for the murder of his ex-wife, Chloe Simpkins Stranahan. Due to the tawdriness of his first rendezvous with the detectives, he starts to use St. Mary's Catholic church as a meeting place and it is in the confessional that he is killed by a lethal injection from Doctor Graveline who is meant to be delivering the pay-off money.

Tim Gavigan

Tim Gavigan is a very old friend of Mick Gavigan and they worked together on the Barletta case. He is in hospital dying from cancer but it is his identity that the New Jersey hit man uses when he comes looking for Stranahan. This fact leads Stranahan to focus on this case as the reason for someone trying to kill him.

Victoria Barletta

Victoria Barletta is the young woman who disappeared, four years previously, from outside the Durkos clinic after she had had a nose job. The case has never been solved.



Tina

Tina is one of the three sunbathers that Stranahan finds trespassing at his stilt house. She is a model with a superb physique which Stranahan tries to persuade her needs no cosmetic improvement. She and her boyfriend are often out on the water in Biscayne Bay and it is they who rescue Christina Marks and the other women from Stranahan's "party" after their rental boat breaks down in the bay.

Heather Chappell

Heather Chappell is a beautiful and famous film star who comes to Dr. Rudy Graveline for a complete cosmetic surgery makeover which the doctor knows is completely unnecessary. She says she wants the procedure to be video taped. Rudy Graveline becomes completely infatuated with Heather and has her staying at his home in Key Biscayne while he tries to think of what to do. When Chemo kidnaps Christina Marks to get Stranahan to come to a meeting, Stranahan responds by taking the drugged Heather Chappell to the stilt house. Graveline, completely besotted with Heather, goes with Chemo, Maggie Gonzalez, Heather Chappell and Christina Marks to the stilt house for the climactic final confrontation.

Chloe Simpkins Stranahan

Chloe Simpkins Stranahan is one of Stranahan's five ex wives. She has kept his name purely out of spite and is listed in the phone book. This is how she is found by Chemo who persuades her to show him where Stranahan lives. When she finds out Chemo intends to kill Stranahan, she objects and in the ensuing argument calls Chemo "Velcro Face." He dumps her and the boat's anchor over the side and she immediately drowns.

Kipper Garth

Kipper Garth is Stranahan's brother-in-law. He is a very successful personal injury lawyer and Stranahan uses him to start a lawsuit against Dr. Rudy Graveline even though Graveline and Garth are members of the same yacht club. The basis for the lawsuit will be the unfortunate results of a breast implant operation that Graveline has performed on Mrs. Nordstrom. When Mr. Nordstrom returns home to find Garth examining and fondling his wife's breasts, he hurls pelota balls at the lawyer, seriously injuring him in the head.

Mr. and Mrs. Nordstrom

Mr. and Mrs. Nordstrom are persuaded to bring a personal injury suit against Dr. Graveline. After Graveline operated on Mrs. Nordstrom's breast they became rock hard and Mr. Nordstrom suffered a detached retina when making love to his wife. He is



also interviewing for a job as a Jai-Halai coach, despite his Scandanavian origins, and when he finds Kipper Garth taking liberties with his wife, he hurls Jai Halai balls at him, seriously injuring Kipper Garth in the head.

Al Garcia

Detective Al Garcia is a personal friend of Mick Stranahan and becomes involved with Stranahan's investigation of Dr. Graveline, who, Stranahan tells him, is trying to kill him. Al Garcia pleads with Mick Stranahan to not obstruct justice but also saves Stranahan's life when he is attacked by George Graveline, the doctor's brother, who tries to feed the unconscious Stranahan into his wood chipper. Al Garcia is given, by Stranahan, the video tape of Maggie Gonzalez's account of the fate of Victoria Barletta, and it is Al Garcia who comes out to the stilt house to find and arrest Chemo.

Luis Cordova

Luis Cordova is the young marine patrol officer who is a friend of Stranahan and a frequent visitor to the stilt house. He connives with Stranahan to help the homicide detectives find Stranahan's hideout at Old Rhodes Key and later takes Detective Al Garcia to both Old Rhodes Key and shortly after to the stilt house.

Willie Velasquez

Willie Velasquez is the cameraman on the "In Your Face" TV show. He usually has to rescue Reynaldo Flemm from irate interviewees. For the exposé at the Whispering Palms clinic, he finds himself on his own as Reynaldo has by passed the show's producer, Christina Marks, and Flemm is anaesthetized. He manages to record Graveline's lethally botched liposuction operation on the Shock TV Journalist.

Detectives Murdock and Salazar

Detectives Murdock and Salazar are a pair of objectionable and aggressive homicide detectives who violently dislike Mick Stranahan. They accept bribes from County Commissioner Roberto Pepsical, who is acting on behalf of Rudy Graveline. Their mission is to shoot Stranahan when they serve him with a warrant for the murder of his ex wife, Chloe Simpkins Stranahan. Stranahan's ingenious defense against their attack at Old Rhodes Key, leads them both to die in a "boating accident."



Objects/Places

Key Biscayne

Key Biscayne, the bay, the tidal flats and channels are the main location for the story.

Old Cape Florida Light House

The opening scene is the discovery of a corpse floating in the surf near the Old Cape Florida Light House which is at the end of the Atlantic Ocean side of Key Biscayne

Stilt House, Stiltsville

The stilt house is one of many platform based dwellings in the tidal flats of Biscayne Bay. It is the home of Mick Stranahan who lives there in complete solitude after he buys the structure at a US Government Auction.

Stiltsville is the name for the collection of structures, like Mick Stranahan's home, which are to be found in the tidal flats of Biscayne Bay. They are usually used for summer parties and fishing trips. Only Stranahan occupies his stilt house year round.

Clinics

The Durkos clinic was the clinic run by Dr. Rudy Graveline and his associates as a successful and profitable enterprise until the scandal of the disappearance of a young woman named Victoria Barletta. She was never found again after she went to the clinic for a rhinoplastic procedure.

When Dr. Graveline abruptly closed the Durkos Clinic, he opened an even bigger one called the Whispering Palms Clinic which has four surgical theaters and eight practicing surgeon associates.

Metro Dade Police Department

The Metro Dade Police Department is where detective Al Garcia works along with homicide detectives Murdock and Salazar. It is the police department which is concerned with finding the fugitive Blondell William Tatum, aka Chemo, and it is from here that the trumped up murder warrant against Stranahan is issued.



Old Rhodes Key

Old Rhodes Key is an old fishing dock at the end of Biscayne Bay which is owned by an old friend of Stranahan. It is here that Stranahan hides out from the homicide detectives Murdock and Salazar and where Christina and Mick consummate their love affair.

Rudy Graveline's home

Rudy Graveline's home is an ostentatious marble stuccoed house on Miami Beach. It is here that Graveline houses the actress Heather Chappell and where he brings the corpse of Reynaldo Flemm.

Maggie Gonzalez's apartment

Maggie Gonzalez's apartment in Miami is where she bases her blackmail operations which she conducts mostly from the Plaza Hotel in New York. It is here that Mick Stranahan breaks in and finds records of her dealings with the Reynaldo Flemm TV team and where he listens to a male voice calling her from the Whispering Palms clinic.

Hotel Plaza, New York

The Hotel Plaza in New York is where Maggie Gonzalez is staying while she undergoes plastic surgery to disguise her appearance. It is also the place Chemo comes to kill her and where Mick Stranahan and Christina Marks are surprised by Chemo and Maggie when they break and enter to search her possessions.

Gay Bidet Nightclub

The Gay Bidet Nightclub is a night club in Miami where Chemo has a job as a bouncer. It is the haunt of skin heads, bikers and other groups and the venue for bands with outrageous names such as "Cathy and the Catheters."

Marlin Fish Trophy

The Marlin fish trophy was inherited by Stranahan when he bought the stilt house. He uses it as an improvised weapon of self defense when the hit man from New Jersey comes calling.



Liza the barracuda

Liza is the name Stranahan gives to a giant barracuda who frequents the piles on which the stilt house rests. He feeds it regularly and it is always on the look out for morsels below the stilt house

Tarpon Gaffe

Mick often carries a stainless steel tarpon gaffe with him when he needs to intimidate hostile or reluctant interviewees.

Marine Craft

Stranahan's skiff

This is Stranahan's main means of getting to and from his stilt house. In the last scene he blows a hole in it to prevent it being used as a means of escape by Chemo.

Seacraft motor boat

The Seacraft, 20ft speed boat is used by the hit man from New Jersey when he looks for, and finds, Mick Stranahan.

Bayliner Capri

The model Tina and her girlfriends use a borrowed Bayliner Capri powerboat to call on Mick Stranahan at the Stilt House.

Kawasaki Jet Ski

A yellow Kawasaki jet ski is rented by Chemo to get out to the stilt house when he tries again to eliminate Mick Stranahan. Chemo also uses this craft to get back to the canal next to the Whispering Palms clinic when his second attempt on Stranahan's life fails.

AquaSport

The Aquasport power boat is the official police high speed water craft used by Murdock and Salazar when they go to Old Rhodes Key to arrest Mick Stranahan.

Boston Whaler

At the end of the story, Christina Marks quits her TV producing job and buys a second hand Boston Whaler, presumably to search for the missing Mick Stranahan.



Personal Adornments

Heuer Dive Watch

When Chemo fails in his attempt on Stranahan's life, he falls into the water at the stilt house. The giant barracuda, Liza, mistakes the Swiss diving watch that Chemo is wearing for its usual fish morsel and strikes, severing Chemo's hand, which falls to the bottom still wearing the watch. In the final scene Stranahan returns the watch to Chemo to persuade him not to attempt to swim ashore.

Lightweight Household Six Volt Weed Whacker

Chemo finally settles on a household version of a weed whacker as a prosthetic for his missing hand. It is a great success for subduing unruly clients at the Gay Bidet, and for damaging Jaguar sedans and for intimidating his enemies.

Television Items

TV program "In Your Face"

The TV program devised by and run by Reynaldo Flemm comprises confrontational interviews with controversial personalities. It often includes scenes of the journalist being physically threatened by the victims of his shock interviews.

Betacam video camera

The critical device in recording the interviews on "In Your Face" and also in recording ancillary scenes and interviews is a portable, professional model of a Betacam video camera.

Lethal Weapons

Remington Shot Gun

Mick Stranahan recovers his pump action Remington shotgun from his sister's house after the first attempt on his life. Thereafter he keeps it at the stilt house where it is used to overwhelm pistol wielding assailants and as a club to subdue them.

Ingram .45 sub machine gun

Chemo gets hold of an Ingram .45 sub machine gun as his weapon for the second attack on Stranahan in his stilt house.

Colt .38 revolver



A Colt .38 revolver is used by the hit man from New Jersey, by Chemo in New York and one is borrowed from Luis Sandoval by Stranahan when he goes ashore at Old Rhodes Key.

Plastic Monofilament

Seemingly innocent plastic Monofilament line is used to avert the attack by the homicide detectives and, together with their lack of seamanship and their reckless operation of their speed boat, results in their demise.

Tree Wood Chipper

The industrial strength wood chipper, normally used to pulverize wood branches and such like into small chips, is owned and operated by George Graveline and, at his brother Rudy's behest, is used to get rid of unwanted corpses.

Jai-Halai balls and wicker cesta

Jai-Halai is a unique game in Florida, of Basque origin. In it hard pelota balls are hurled against a wall by players who use distinctive, long wicker baskets (cestas) to propel the ball. Such a device is used by the outraged Mr. Nordstrom when he finds Kipper Garth taking advantage of his wife.

Automobiles

Jaguar Sedan

As part of Dr. Rudy Graveline's penchant for the good life he owns and drives Jaguar sedans. Among other activities he uses his "Jag" as an ploy in his sexual activities. Both Stranahan and Chemo destroy or damage Graveline's Jaguar sedan as a means of getting even with him.

Chrysler Imperial

Stranahan drives an old Chrysler Imperial until he uses it as a firebomb to torch Graveline's Jaguar as a method of registering his disapproval of Graveline trying to have him killed.

Bonneville Sedan

Chemo drives a Bonneville sedan and sequesters the kidnapped Christina Marks in the trunk. Fortunately the trunk is large enough to contain her and there are enough rust holes in the vehicle's body that she is not asphyxiated.



St. Mary's Church

St. Mary's Catholic Church is where Roberto Pepsical chooses to have his private meetings after finding the strip club next to Miami Airport unsuitable. It is in the confessional there that he is lethally injected by Rudy Graveline. The official verdict is that he died of a heart failure while making confession.

Plastic Surgery Procedures and Instruments

Storz number four Osteotome:

The Storz number four Osteome is a surgical chisel used to break the bones in the nose during a Rhinoplasty procedure

Mammary Prosthesis—Examples are:

Mentor Model 7000 Gel-Filled Mammary Prosthesis

Porex soft silicone implants

McGhan Biocell 100

Silastic II Teardrop model

Rhinoplasty

The Rhinoplasty procedure, colloquially known as a "nose job" is the cosmetic operation which changes the shape of a patient's nose.

Dermabrasion

The treatment, by machine, removes unwanted skin from a patient's skin.

Liposuction, suction-assisted lipectomy

The procedure whereby excess fat is remove from a patient's abdomen by machine suction.



Themes

Marine Elements

Given the location of Stranahan's home and various locations throughout the tidal flats of Biscayne Bay, it is not surprising that there is a strong undercurrent of awareness of the marine elements of tide, wind and water depths. The facility with which Stranahan, his friend the bone fishing guide and Luis Cordova the marine patrol man, make their way over and around the channels is in contrast to the predicaments that inexperienced venturers on to the waters of Biscayne Bay often find themselves experiencing. It is not just for finding fish that the fishing guides are employed.

Stranahan demonstrates his skill and knowledge of the marine environment by being able to supply himself, and his guests, with sustenance by his ability to catch fish wherever he finds himself in the Bay. His detailed knowledge of the habits of the great barracuda also gives him the knowledge to use this denizen of the sea as an ally in safeguarding his stilt house.

People who regard the waters and tidal flats of Biscayne Bay as simply an extension of the free way system, and the various powerboats they use as equivalent to land automobiles, are often unpleasantly surprised by the problems they experience. Thus the homicide detectives Murdock and Salazar go looking for Stranahan without even a nautical chart to show them where the channels are at low tide. Events prove that they are not even aware of the state of the tide. When they mistakenly roar up the narrow channel at Old Rhodes Key, the power of their engine, which has enabled them to ignore the various currents, now becomes a contributing factor in the boating accident that kills them.

Likewise, the maniacal Chemo uses the power of the Kawasaki jet ski to dash over the waters of Biscayne Bay, completely oblivious to the risks he takes in not having any protection from the elements. He is nearly naked, with no life jacket and certainly no nautical chart. Again it is the power of the machine which saves him, though if the highly revved engine were to break down he would soon pay the price of his recklessness.

When the women in the party leave the stilt house to Stranahan, Chemo and Graveline, Stranahan is aware that the tide is going out and that they will be safe even though the film star Heather may not be able to swim. When in fact the women's rental boat breaks down, they find how difficult it is to attract help out in the Bay, marine patrol boats notwithstanding.

It is something of a relief to learn, in the Prologue, that Christina Marks sets off on her quest for the disappearing Stranahan, using a sea-worthy craft, a Boston Whaler, and that she has got herself at least one nautical chart.



Mortal Weirdness

The actions of the various players in the story usually involve firearms. The ubiquitous .38 revolver is used by the hit man from New Jersey, by Chemo, both in New York and at the stilt house, and even Stranahan borrows one from the marine patrolman when he goes to Old Rhodes Key. Stranahan also relies on his Remington shotgun to counter act Chemo's Ingram sub-machine gun. Despite all this, none of these firearms are used successfully to dispatch anyone. The hit man from New Jersey dies, transfixed by the mounted Marlin spike, George Graveline disappears into his own wood chipper, Commissioner Pepsical dies from a lethal injection in St. Mary's church, Murdock and Salazar die in a boating accident on a remote key, Reynaldo Flemm dies on the operating table while he undergoing a routine liposuction and Rudy Graveline dies from a blow from a Stortz number four osteotome.

As the detective Al Garcia observes to Stranahan, these are a really weird set of deaths. Certainly the coroner cannot complain about the change from routine Gun Shot Wounds (GSW's), which is the normal method of violent death in Miami.

Grotesque Entertainment

Chemo is employed as a bouncer at the Gay Bidet nightclub. As the owner manager Freddie points out to Dr. Graveline, he inherited the name, it rythmes and no it does not connote a gay bar. As Graveline observes, it stinks, and the music is atrocious. Bands such as "Cathy and the Catheters" routinely perform there along with a punk band called the "Chicken Chokers" who specialize in wringing out their sweaty jock straps into a cocktail glass and then guzzling it down on stage, and another band called the "Crotch Rockets" whose big hit is called "Lube-Job Lovers".

It is in this environment that the seven foot tall Chemo, his scarified face, frozen in concentration on his job, wields his weed whacker prosthetic under the pulsating strobe lights to subdue riots between rival skin head Nazi gangs and over blown bikers.

It is something of a relief when the Commissioner and the two homicide detectives meet in a strip club near Miami airport, where the naked mud wrestlers cavort on stage and they have to go to the restroom to conduct their business, before returning for the adult finger painting competition.

When, in contrast to places like the strip club and the Gay Bidet, Pepsical chooses a church as a quiet dark meeting place for his pay off by Rudy Graveline, his death from a lethal injection, administered by the doctor, seems a fitting reward for his desecration of the sanctity of St. Mary's church. His death, of an apparent heart attack in the confessional at which no priest was in attendance, is a further weird death for the detective Al Garcia to ponder.



Cosmetic Surgery: Vanity or Necessity.

The mainstay of the economics of the plastic surgery profession is the unrelenting demand for people to have their appearances changed by cosmetic surgical procedures. As Rudy Graveline remarks, wintertime in Florida is the prime time for such activity. The demand for cosmetic surgery is so great that The Whispering Palms clinic runs four operating theaters and a staff of eight associate surgeons. Regardless of the malpractices of such as Dr. Graveline, there still appears to be an enormous demand for self-improvement by physical modification, irrespective of the unrealistic expectations. For Graveline's patients there is no consideration for any change of lifestyle to affect a change in appearance of facial or physical attributes. One can understand why a facial modification might be appropriate for cosmetic surgery but liposuction, surely, can be replaced by healthy exercise and lifestyle.

Thus Victoria Barletta was trying to change her nose shape for her boyfriend who loved her anyway, while Reynaldo Flemm's desire for plastic surgery was a result of a paranoiac, hysterical preoccupation with his appearance. Film stars such as Heather Chappell get cosmetic surgery because of a deep seated desire to flaunt their bodies and to obsessively seek miniscule improvements, while Tina, the model is shown by Stranahan, using a carpenter's level, to have perfectly formed and level breasts. In both these cases plastic surgery appears to be largely a matter of fashion. Maggie Gonzalez uses plastic surgery to protect her from identification while Chemo spends most of the rest of his life trying to correct a disastrous dermatological procedure.



Style

Point of View

Except for the first chapter, which can be regarded as a preface, and the prologue, which are presented in an omniscient third person point of view, the reader is presented with multiple points of view. The thoughts and feelings of each character involved in a scene are presented in a third person point of view. Occasionally, where appropriate, such as in the exposition of why Maggie Gonzalez takes up her blackmail scheme, or, where the personal history of Chemo is depicted, an omniscient third person point of view is used.

Setting

The main settings for the story is the stilt houses in Biscayne Bay, in the Whispering Palms clinic in Miami and various houses and locations in the Biscayne and Miami area. An important interlude occurs when the principal characters go to New York separately and confront each other in Maggie Gonzalez's hotel room.

Undoubtedly the main environment is the tidal flats in Biscayne Bay and on Mick Stranahan's stilt house. This unique and fascinating scenario adds color and interest to the story and offsets the gruesome and forensic type scenes played out in the Whispering Palms clinical operating theaters.

Language and Meaning

The language is typical urban American English, with only the occasional Hispanic name for a character, alluding to the prevalent Cuban or Hispanic Spanish language and culture in the Miami area.

The language of the various characters, such as Chemo and the homicide detectives, is laced with expletives, which are faithfully included in the dialogue. This, however, is true form for the characters themselves, and, as in real life, does not shock the reader but merely serves to present the characters in an unwelcome light.

Structure

The structure of the book is in the form of thirty-four unlabeled chapters. In large part each chapter deals with one or more related incidents. Often the narrative cuts from scene to scene when contemporaneous actions are described. The exposition of the various aspects of the lives of the main characters is presented in a gradual fragmented fashion as the narrative unfolds. This leads to an increase in tension on the part of the reader who finds an additional reason to continue reading the story.



Quotes

"Name of Tony Traviola, wise guy. Jersey state police got a fat jacket on him. Tony the Eel, loan-collector type. Not a very nice man, from what I understand." Chapter 2, p. 17.

"Reason I ask, I had one of those operations. You know, a boob job. For the kind of modeling I do, it was necessary. I mean, I was about a thirty-two A, if you can imagine." Chapter 3, p. 29.

" 'Tell him,' he said, 'that if he points that goddamn camera at me again, he'll be auditioning for the Elephant Man on Broadway. That's how seriously I'll mess up his face.'" Chapter 4, p. 45.

"She went on: 'They won't leave me alone, these TV people. They said the case is going to a grand jury. They said Stranahan's going to testify.' She fished in her purse for a tissue. 'I thought you ought to know.'" Chapter 5, p. 57.

"Christina Marks leaned forward, 'Fine. All fine, except for one thing. She names names.'" Chapter 6, p. 67.

" 'Wherever,' Chemo said. 'Anyway, he hauls Mr. Stud-hunk outside and glues him buck naked to the hood of his Caddy.'" Chapter 6, p. 75.

" 'I said, keep your voice down!'
'Screw you, Velcro-face.'" Chapter 8, p. 102.

" 'Graveline's a butcher,' Dr. Dicer said. 'A hacker. Everybody in town's mopped up after him, one time or another. Fortunately, he doesn't do much surgery himself anymore. He got wise, hired a bunch of young sharpies, all board certified. It's like a damn factory up there.'" Chapter 10, p. 123.

"Stranahan looked at her as if she were five years old. 'Now what do you think? Of course I'm going to shoot him. I intend to blow the mother fucker's head off, unless you've got some objection.'" Chapter 13, p. 160.

" 'Can you believe it? First he hires some mobster to do the hit, now he's got the world's tallest white man with the world's worst case of acne. I don't know what to tell you, but frankly it's got me a little pissed off.' Stranahan looked down at his sling. 'This is from a .45-caliber machine gun. Honestly, George, wouldn't you be upset, too?'" Chapter 15, p. 181.

"Joe and I don't like this joint. It's noisy, it's dirty, it's a shitty fucking joint to hold a serious conversation. We are offended, Commissioner, by what we see taking place on



the stage out there—naked young females with wet mud all over their twats. You shouldn't have invited us here." Chapter 20, p. 244.

"Chemo produced a small aerosol can of WD-40 and began lubricating the rotor mechanism of the Weed Whacker. Without glancing up from his chore, he said. 'By the way Frankenstein, you're getting off easy. The last time a doctor screwed me over, I broke his frigging neck.'" Chapter 21, p. 260.

"A half hour out of the marina, Joe Salazar said to his partner 'May be we should have asked what he meant about the tides.'" Chapter 23, p. 277.

"'The plan is simple,' Murdock said. 'We arrive with bells on—sirens, lights, the works. We yell for Stranahan to come out with his hands up. Go ahead with the whole bit—serve the warrant, do the Miranda, all that shit. Then we shoot him like he was trying to get away.'" Chapter 23, p. 282.

"Roberto nudged him. 'I don't mean to tell you what to do,' he said, 'but in here it's not proper to pray with your hands in your pockets.'" Chapter 26, p. 317.

"'See, this is what's got me so agitated, Mick. Ever since I got into this thing with you and the doctor, so many people are dying. Dying weird too. There's your ex, and Murdock and Salazar-another funeral! Then the business with that homicidal tree man. So after all that, here I am standing in the rain, watching them plant some scuzzbucket politician who croaks on his knees in an empty confessional, and my frigging beeper goes off. Lieutenant says some big shot lawyer got beamed by a jai-halai ball and could be a homicide any second. A jai-halai ball! On top of which the big shot lawyer turns out to be your brother-in-law. It's like a nightmare of weirdness!'" Chapter 29, p. 355.

"'Before we get started, there's something I ought to tell you. The cops have Maggie's video tape, so they know about what you did to Victoria Barletta. Whether they can convict you is another matter. I mean, Maggie's not exactly a prize witness. In fact she'd probably change her story again for about twenty-five cents.'" Chapter 33, p. 404.

"' Ah !' said Mick Stranahan. 'The lovely Nurse Tatum,'" Chapter 33, p. 405.

Topics for Discussion

When the story opens, Mick Stranahan, in self-defense, stabs an unknown assailant who is trying to shoot him at his stilt house. Why does he not call the police? Is he afraid that this will generate even more unwelcome publicity as to his whereabouts, or is there something in his past that makes him suspicious of the police department from which he was forced to resign? Discuss the ramifications of Stranahan's actions.

In the original investigation into the disappearance of Victoria Barletta, both Stranahan and Gavigan miss the significance of the fact that a tree trimmer and his wood chipper were on the scene. What is the justification, four years later, of this being missed in the first investigation? Discuss whether this is the result of hindsight and whether an attempt on the life of one of the investigators changes the whole picture.

Among other plastic surgeons in Miami, Dr. Rudy Graveline has the reputation of being a butcher and on numerous occasions he has escaped being struck off the medical rolls, either through luck or the well-placed bribe. Given the fatal consequences of his incompetence, is not the medical profession, as a whole, guilty of collusion? Why is it up to the lurid sensationalism of a TV reporter to expose the problem? Discuss the ethics of doctors, lawyers, reporters and the patients' own responsibility in weeding out quacks and incompetents.

Chemo fails to eliminate Mick Stranahan in his first attempt when he torches the wrong house. Why does he not simply repeat the incendiary procedure on his second attempt? Storming into a shuttered house, even with an Ingram sub machine gun, is a highly risky course of action. Is this just another sign of Chemo's thoughtless impulsivity or did he actually have a plan? Discuss.

Maggie Gonzalez believes that Chemo decides not to kill her as he has been instructed, because she, like him, is suffering from plastic surgery. She reckons that when the bandages come off her face she will be able to use her charms and seduce him. Even so, she admits she has no idea what motivates him. Does the reader know what motivates Chemo? Discuss the basic motivation and *raison d'etre* of Blondell Wayne Tatum.

When someone like Victoria Barletta has plastic surgery to correct an specific defect in her appearance, the motivation is obvious. However, the model Tina and the film actress Heather Chappell have no obvious flaws in their splendid bodies. Is the reason they are always cavorting around naked and discussing their physiques simply an excuse for narcissistic exhibitionism? Discuss legitimate and non-legitimate reasons for cosmetic surgery.

Mick Stranahan admits to five unsuccessful marriages, always to young cocktail waitresses. Repeated failure, following identical courses of behavior, indicates some



kind of obsessive, compulsive disorder. His requirement, that future candidates for matrimony recite the names of the Beatles as a means to ensuring that they are of the same age bracket, seems a little superficial. Is Mick Stranahan a suitable suitor for Christina Marks? Discuss his possible future relationships.