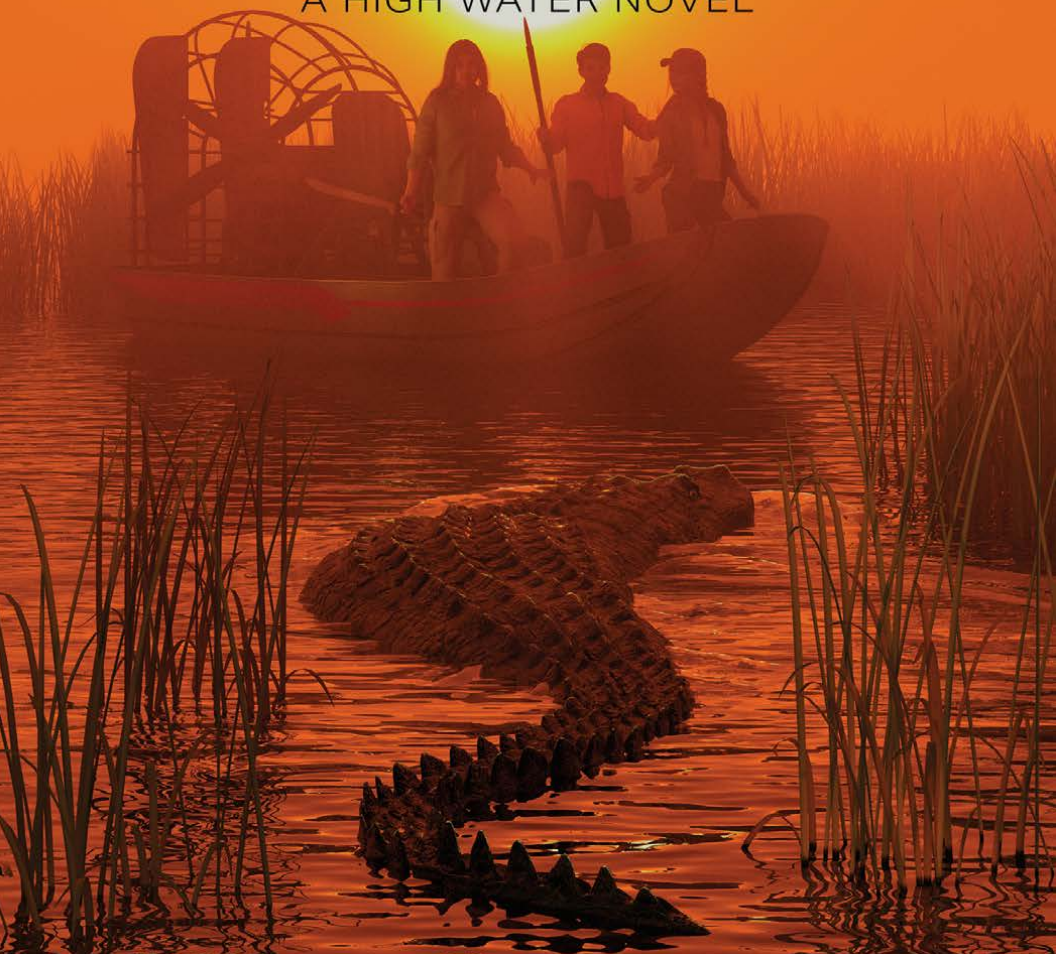


TIM SHOEMAKER

# ESCAPE FROM THE EVERGLADES

A HIGH WATER NOVEL



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**FOCUS**  
ON THE FAMILY<sup>®</sup>

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*Escape from the Everglades*

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*To my three sons . . . Andy, Mark, and Luke . . . who encouraged me to write in the first place. Fiction is one of the most powerful ways to teach truth—because it reaches directly to the heart. I loved reading to you as you grew up . . . watching your eyes grow wide with the suspense and adventure. And when it was time to stop—I loved how you begged me to “read just a little bit more.” May you have the joy of reading to your kids. And always, always . . . read just a little bit more.*



# CHAPTER 1

Everglades National Park

Saturday, June 13

6:55 p.m.

PARKER BUCKMAN STOOD ON the airboat deck and searched the surface of the water. He didn't actually see any alligators, but they were here. Watching. Reminding him that he was an intruder in their world. He was pretty sure the gators didn't mind, though. A visitor could become a meal for some lucky alligator in one careless moment.

An uneasiness clung to him like the muggy air itself. It worked its way inside and wouldn't let go. He couldn't shake the creepy sense that he shouldn't be in the Everglades today.

Which was crazy. He loved the outdoors. Even he had to

admit that Everglades City and the neighboring island town of Chokoloskee were pretty much the armpit of America. But he still found things to love about the place—once you got past the mosquitoes, that is.

And Everglades National Park itself, the swampy wetlands that dominated some 7,800 square miles of southern Florida, was never boring. A place of contrasts. Bright sun that could burn your eyeballs out quicker than a solar eclipse, yet water so dark you'd think there was no bottom. Hardly a speck of ground above water in the wet season, yet trees and brush and grasses grew high above the surface as if there were no water at all. A place as wild and uncivilized as anyplace Parker had ever been, yet there was still an order to it. No streets, no signs, but a seemingly endless maze of watery paths crisscrossing the Everglades. Narrow alleys and routes beat through the sawgrass. As a park ranger's son, he got to explore them as often as he wanted.

Wilson Stillwaters—half Miccosukee and pretty much *all* trouble—was totally in his element here. His tribe had been native to the Everglades long before any white man explored them—a fact he reminded Parker about often. “Where *is* Angelica? She's the one who begged me to find the perfect place to mount her trail cam.”

Angelica Malnatti, better known as Jelly, had always been into shooting nature pictures wherever her family had been stationed. Mountains. Rivers. Anyplace without humans. But ever since her dad got transferred to the Everglades along with Parker's, she'd been practically obsessed with *wildlife* photography. Apparently she wasn't the only one. Parker had seen dozens of camouflaged cameras strapped to cypress trees in the Everglades and along the rivers leading into Chokoloskee Bay. Jelly wouldn't miss a chance to set up her camera in some remote spot. “She'll be here.”

“Yeah, well if she’s not here in two minutes, she’ll have to swim.” Wilson patted the control stick of the airboat. “*Typhoon* wants to whip up a tropical storm out there.”

The name *Typhoon* was written vertically down each of the twin rudders mounted behind the propeller cage. It was the perfect name for the airboat. With a 350-cubic-inch Chevy engine mounted to the non-skid aluminum deck, the airboat could kick up more than just a little squall. Wind generated from the prop reached upwards of 150 miles per hour—rivaling that of a Category 5 hurricane. “Your uncle’s airboat is gorgeous,” Parker said. “You’ve gotta let me drive this thing.”

Wilson jutted his chin toward the mangroves. “Here she comes. It’s about time.”

Sure enough, red braids bucking, Jelly pedaled like she was afraid they’d leave without her. With her dark-green Columbia shirt and cargo khakis, she totally looked like some kind of Everglades tour guide wannabe.

Jelly skidded to a stop and dropped her bike. Seconds later she hopped aboard. “Are you two finally ready?” In one smooth move, Jelly snatched Parker’s cap and slapped it on her head as she passed.

Parker tried to nab it back, but she ducked out of the way. This hat-swiping thing was some new game of hers.

She tipped the visor of his hat and flashed Parker a proud smile. “What are we waiting for, Wilson? You promised me an Everglades run I’d never forget.”

Wilson tested the rudders and slid the key into the ignition. “You’re a real piece of work, Jelly.” He fired up the engine. “Buckle up.”

Which was impossible. *Typhoon* had no working seat belts. And Wilson wouldn’t have used his anyway. Parker climbed onto the

elevated double passenger seat just behind the driver's chair and sat next to Jelly. He dug a pair of foam earplugs from his pocket and twisted them into his ears.

Wilson laughed. "Miccosukees don't need ear protection."

"With the decibels airboats put out? You could damage your hearing, idiot."

"What?"

"Exactly." Parker backhanded Wilson's shoulder.

Wilson grinned and revved the engine. The throaty rumble of the 350 sent powerful vibrations through the airboat that could loosen fillings. And somehow it loosened up Parker at the same time. Calmed him. Maybe all that uneasiness he'd been feeling wasn't some kind of warning from his gut. Maybe it was just his own overactive imagination.

Wilson goosed the gas, and the airboat picked up speed as they entered the "sea of grass," as some locals called it. Wilson waggled the rudders, causing *Typhoon* to fishtail back and forth.

Jelly kicked the back of Wilson's seat. "We don't have seat belts, remember? If I fall off this thing, you're going to be soooo sorry."

Wilson laughed and swung the airboat from side to side again.

The next hour was pure heaven—especially since Parker got to drive most of that time. The grass rake bow skimmed right over spots where new patches of sawgrass seemed to be filling in the waterways. It was like the Everglades was taking back the lanes.

True to his word, Wilson found a spot in the middle of nowhere to strap Jelly's trail cam—which meant climbing out of the airboat into waist-deep water. Jelly was over the side without even the slightest hesitation. Somehow it didn't seem right that she went in alone. What if something snuck up on her while she was focused on mounting the camera?

“I’ll give you a hand.” Parker followed and helped her secure the camera to a cypress—just above the waterline. He scanned the surface nearby, looking for telltale bubbles.

“It has infrared,” Jelly said. “If something moves within fifty feet of this sensor, I’ll get pictures. Even in the dark.”

Like he didn’t know that.

“This spot is perfect.” Jelly gave Wilson an approving nod. “The place is teeming with life.”

“And *death*,” Wilson said. “Never forget that.”

Parker gave Jelly a boost back on deck and hoisted himself up a moment later.

“Don’t get all morbid on me, Wilson.” Jelly towed off and draped the thing over Wilson’s head.

“Hey.” Wilson tossed the towel back at her. “This is about respecting the Glades. My people understand that.”

The way he said “my people” always made Parker smile. With his blond hair—even long and wild as it was—he didn’t look one bit Miccosukee. Maybe that’s why he always had three or four micro-braids going—with bits of twine and beads worked in. Like he wanted to remind others of his native roots.

“People fish in the Glades,” Wilson said. “Hunt in them. Fly over them—like they have the right. Like the place belongs to them. But nobody *owns* the Everglades—and she keeps score. When the time is right, she collects a toll.”

“Ridiculous.” Jelly laughed. “Like a trespassing tax?”

He gave a slow nod. “Paid in blood. Human lives.”

“Don’t get him started,” Parker said. Wilson could go on for hours telling creepy stories about the Glades.

“If I didn’t know better,” Jelly said in that teasing way she was

so good at, “I’d say Wilson believes there’s some kind of curse on the Glades.”

“My people say that’s exactly what it is.”

“It’s *superstition*,” Jelly said, “plain and simple.”

“Make fun all you want,” Wilson said. “There are strange forces at work in the world. Things we don’t understand.”

“Boys are on *that* list—and you two are at the top. Are you going to start this thing back up—or do we have to row?”

Wilson acted like he never heard. “Guess how many people have died in the Glades.”

“Here we go,” Parker said. Wilson gave him this little speech the first time they’d met. They’d been friends ever since.

“Hundreds. Maybe thousands,” Wilson said. He leaned forward. “Nobody really knows. Take airline crashes. 1972 . . . Eastern Flight 401—101 fatalities. 1996 . . . ValuJet Flight 592—all 110 aboard—gone. And then—”

“You need a shrink, Wilson,” Jelly said. “You’re not going to ruin this place for me with all your death-talk.”

“Ruin it?” Wilson slung his arm over the back of the driver’s seat and grinned. “The danger—knowing I cheat death every time I walk out of the Glades in one piece—that’s what I love about this place.”

“There you go again. You’re obsessed with death.”

“No,” Wilson said. “I’m obsessed with *beating* death. Big difference.”

“There,” Jelly said. “You just admitted you’re obsessed. Thank you for clearing that up.”

Parker smiled. There was no way Wilson could be a match for Jelly when she got like this.

Wilson levered the choke, grabbed the key—but stopped short

of starting the engine. “Don’t underestimate the Glades, Jelly. There’s something absolutely evil about this place. A darkness. I’ve *felt* it.”

And in that instant, that weird feeling was back. The sense that they shouldn’t be there right now. Like the Glades were more restless than usual.

Parker eyed the water. Everything looked still. Quiet. Maybe *too* quiet. He couldn’t shed the strangest feeling that the Glades were on the hunt—and about to collect another toll.

The sun kissed the horizon and hovered there like it didn’t want to get any closer to the Everglades than it had to tonight.

*Shake it off, Bucky.* Whatever he was feeling, he was pretty sure it would disappear if they got moving again. “Getting late.” The water looked black now, as if it had turned to oil. “We better get back.”

Wilson nodded. Seconds later, he had *Typhoon* flying across the dark waters.

How Wilson knew his way back, Parker had no idea. Maybe he had some kind of Miccosukee GPS in his head. He pulled back the stick and put *Typhoon* into a sideslip. Parker leaned into the turn—and Jelly grabbed his arm and screamed. Spray showered all three of them and the airboat chattered to a stop.

“Yee-ha!” Wilson revved the engine and jockeyed the rudder stick back and forth—then tromped on the gas again.

The engine roared, and the propeller blast churned the water behind them into frantic ripples. Sawgrass whipped away from them in the prop wash.

Suddenly Wilson fishtailed to a stop and pointed. “Check it out.”

An alligator—a big one—no more than thirty feet away, sitting low and motionless in the water. Pale orange sunlight glinted

off the wet rows of armored scutes lining its back. In its own way, the gator was like an iceberg: more danger below the surface than above—and eyes just as cold.

A monster.

Wilson cut the engine and grabbed a bag of French bread from under his seat.

Parker stood. The sun was gone now—and it would get dark fast. As much as he'd like to stay in the Glades, something definitely didn't feel right. What was wrong with him? *God . . . are you trying to tell me something?*

Wilson twisted off a fist-sized hunk of bread and threw it half-way between them and the gator. "Got your phone, Jelly? Get ready for a great photo op."

The gator stared directly at them. It swept its serrated tail to one side, forming tiny whirlpools on the surface—and glided toward the airboat.

The beast was probably the biggest alligator Parker had seen—that wasn't stuffed and hanging in some Florida souvenir shop, anyway. Honestly, he'd wanted to see one this big—in the wild—since moving here. A rush of excitement swept over Parker, but it quickly gave way to a warning that rumbled like distant thunder somewhere deep in his head. He could almost hear his dad's voice. *Don't be stupid. You're pushing it. Be smart—and do the right thing. Like we always talk about.*

"Guys, I've got a weird feeling about being here." There. He said it. And the feeling grew stronger. "I hate to bust up this party, but we should be heading back." He looked to Jelly, hoping she'd pick up on whatever it was that he was feeling—and talk some sense into Wilson.

She gave Parker the pleading eyes thing—and already had her phone out. “Just a couple shots. I promise.”

So much for her being the voice of reason.

Parker eyed the beast. Or was it eying him? “You know what my dad—and Jelly’s—would say if they knew you were feeding gators?”

Wilson moved to the bow and coaxed the gator closer with another chunk of bread. “We Miccosukee make our own rules out here. Besides, they’re park rangers. They *have* to say it isn’t a good idea.”

Jelly nodded. “And I wouldn’t consider this *feeding*. It’s just some scraps of bread. Hardly enough to feed a gator that big. We’re just giving the thing a snack. An appetizer.”

“And we’re the main course,” Parker said. “We don’t want alligators approaching humans for food. We *are* food.” And this guy looked big enough to eat all three of them.

Wilson laughed. “Now you sound like your dad.”

Actually, to Parker, that was a compliment. His dad was big on doing the right things, even when others didn’t . . . something Parker was working on himself.

Jelly was on her feet, making her way toward Wilson up front. It was like neither of them heard a thing Parker said. “Just a few pictures, then we’ll leave. I promise.”

Wilson ripped off another hunk of bread. He threw it five feet short of the gator.

The beast moved toward the bread without creating a ripple. Like it was in some kind of stealth mode.

Wilson eased over until he stood at the very edge of the airboat, imitating the sound of a baby gator just like a professional Miccosukee guide. “Euhh. Euhh. Euhh. Euhh.”

Jelly stood right behind Wilson and glanced back at Parker. “A female will come to protect the young. A male to eat them.”

A fact that Parker was well aware of. Jelly’s dad had been stationed here only a few months longer than Parker’s dad, but sometimes she still treated him like he was a total newbie.

The gator advanced. Crept closer. Parker estimated the distance between the nose and eyes. Eleven inches easily. So, the brute was an eleven-footer. Definitely bigger than any he’d seen in the few months he’d lived in the Chokoloskee and Everglades City area.

“Easy now. No fast movements,” Wilson said. “Let’s not scare it away.”

The face of it was pure evil. Menacing teeth rimmed its mouth like it was coming to dinner—and brought its own utensils. “It doesn’t look scared.” Parker laughed. “Just hungry.”

Wilson gripped the gator-tooth necklace around his neck. “He sees this—and believe me, he’s scared. That’s why he’s moving so slow.”

Did Wilson—or Jelly—stop to think that maybe the gator was being careful not to scare *its* prey away? “Yeah, or maybe he’s stalking you.”

Wilson laughed and tossed another clump of bread, but closer to the airboat this time. “Euhh. Euhh. Euhh. Euhh.” The gator took the bait and it didn’t stop. “That’s it. Come to papa, you big galoot.”

The alligator closed the distance and snapped up the bread without even the slightest pause.

Jelly stood there next to Wilson, grabbing pictures with her phone as the monster glided toward them. “Now I wish I still had my trail cam.”

Parker rolled his pant leg above the survival knife strapped to

his calf, sensing he needed to be ready. But what good would a knife be against a vicious carnivore like that gator?

“Look at the chompers on that thing,” Wilson said.

Parker couldn’t get past the size—and the terrifying look of it. Black. Powerful. Deadly.

“Move away from the edge, okay, Jelly?” The sides of the airboat weren’t more than fifteen inches above the surface of the water—if that. Could the beast climb over the edge? “You too, Wilson.”

Neither of them budged.

The gator clawed its way onto a small mound of sawgrass and roots next to the boat, allowing the monstrous size of the beast to be seen for the first time. Wilson grinned. “Got your phone, Bucky?”

Parker patted his pocket. “Yeah. Why?”

Wilson backed a couple of feet away from the edge. “Get pictures of me and Jelly with this beaut.”

Right. And if Parker’s dad ever saw the photo there’d be a lot of explaining to do. The gator crept forward and rested its chin on the top edge of the airboat—jaws open with that gator grin going on. The mouth, white and pink inside—and strangely clean looking. The teeth . . . absolutely wicked.

“Can that thing get in here?” Parker pictured it. Grabbing Wilson by the leg—

“Wouldn’t *that* be interesting.” Wilson tore off another hunk of bread and sidarmed it into the alligator’s gaping mouth. A personal pizza-sized trapdoor of sorts opened in the back of the gator’s throat for an instant . . . and the bread was gone. “If gators didn’t have that watertight flap in the back of their throat, they’d drown. Did you know that?”

“Spare me the nature lesson,” Parker said. “Just back away from that thing.” Wilson was close. Too close.

“I’m going to bag me a gator this big one day.” The French bread was half gone. Wilson took the stump and whacked the gator right on the snout. The gator didn’t even react. It just stayed there with its jaws open like it was daring him to try it one more time.

Jelly gasped, but not like she was disgusted or anything. “Do that again. I’m switching to video.”

“Their vision directly in front of their nose isn’t so hot,” Wilson said. He held the loaf off to one side. Immediately the gator swung its head toward it. Wilson jerked the bread away. “Pretty good off to the side, though.”

*Really* good. And it looked like the gator was staring right at Parker now. The thing didn’t blink. Creepy.

Parker wanted a weapon in his hands. Something a lot bigger than his survival knife. The aluminum gaffing hook on board looked ridiculously lightweight. He glanced around the airboat. Small tool box. First aid kit. A wooden paddle. It was probably too thin at the business end of it to do any good against a gator half that size. He picked it up anyway. He’d have liked it better if it were a Louisville Slugger.

There was something almost hypnotic about the gator. Parker knew they should leave, but part of him wanted to stay. Wanted to watch.

Jelly stepped closer to the edge of *Typhoon*—and the beast swung its head her way. She jumped back, stumbled over the dock line, and nearly slid backward off the other side of the airboat. Parker’s hat flipped off her head into the dark water.

Parker grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet.

She gave a weak smile. “That was fun.”

“Uh-huh. Right.” Parker used the paddle to scoop the hat out of the water and drop it on the deck. “Seen enough, Jelly?”

Jelly picked up his cap, smacked it against her thigh to knock off some of the water, and slapped it back on her head. “Just a few more pictures.”

Whatever hypnotic spell the gator had over Parker was broken now. This gator was way too big to mess with. The unsettled feeling grew and crept over Parker. They didn’t belong here. He checked his watch. “Let’s go. If you’re done tormenting the killing machine, that is.”

“*Killing* machine?” Wilson waved the French bread from side to side in front of its nose. “It’s nothing more than an overgrown lizard. With really big teeth.”

“That *lizard* is at the top of the food chain here.”

Wilson shook his head. “As long as we’re in a boat, *we’re* the top of the food chain. Get a picture of this.”

“Seriously?”

“Then we’ll go. I promise.”

Parker gave Jelly a look—silently trying to talk some sense into her. What if the beast lunged into the boat and grabbed her?

“Be sure I’m in the shot,” she said. “I’ve never seen one this huge.”

Big help she was.

“Forget it. Let’s go.”

Jelly smiled the way she did when she was about to talk him into something he didn’t want to do. “Pleeeeeease, Parker? For me?”

Something about the way she said it made him wonder if he was overreacting with all his jittery feelings. Maybe he was. Maybe he wasn’t. It didn’t really matter. Her mind was set on getting more photos. Trying to talk her out of it would eat more time than

taking the stupid picture. Even though it didn't feel right to stay, maybe compromising was the best option.

"You're ridiculous, you know that?" Parker dropped the paddle on the deck and pulled the phone out of his pocket. "Let's just make this fast." He dropped onto one knee near the edge just in front of the propeller cage—a good seven feet from the gator. He swiped to the camera app and held the phone out over the water. He shot a burst of pictures, then checked the screen. "Got it. Now can we go?"

Wilson laughed. "Just shoot a quick video clip." He went back to swinging the loaf from one side of the alligator's head to the other, just out of reach of the monster's jaws. The monster's head swept from side to side a split second behind Wilson.

"He's figuring out your timing."

"Then you'd better film it fast so I can stop."

Jelly struck a pose next to Wilson. "Just ten seconds—then we're done. Promise."

"Okay, but you seriously better hope your dad never sees the footage. He'll put you on a leash, and your trail camera will never be strapped farther than your mailbox." Parker switched to video mode and held it out an arm's length from the boat—nice and low to the water for a dramatic angle. "My idiot friends are demonstrating just how incredibly reckless they can be—"

"Or how brainless alligators really are," Wilson said.

The gator snapped. Wilson jerked backward into Jelly, dropping the bread. The gator scarfed it up from the deck of the airboat. Parker kept filming.

"Whoa!" Wilson grinned. "*That* was fun." Suddenly the smile slid off his face. He stared at his arms for a moment, then rubbed down goose bumps.

The whole gooseflesh thing with Wilson—Parker had only seen that happen to him once before. Wilson had claimed his Miccosukee blood warned him of mortal danger. Which was totally bogus. More likely his years spent in the Glades sharpened his instincts. Wilson's subconscious picked up on some type of present danger.

“What is it?” Apparently Jelly noticed Wilson's reaction too.

Maybe Wilson was seeing the stupidity of what he was doing. Finally. Parker stretched out farther, still filming. “Admit it. This was stupid.” He wanted Wilson's confession on the video.

Wilson looked up, scanning the surface of the Everglades like there was something else behind the goose bumps besides the gator in front of him.

“Bucky!” Eyes wide, Wilson pointed toward the water by Parker's phone.

A second gator, coming from behind the airboat—and Parker. Bigger. Massive black head. Not two feet away from Parker's arm—closing in.

Jelly screamed—and Parker's world spun into slow motion even as he pulled back. He saw every detail.

The gator lunging. Fast . . . so incredibly fast. Jaws opening. Swamp water streaming out. Yellow teeth closing over Parker's forearm.

He felt no pain. Just pressure—and incredible strength.

With a sideways snap of its head, the monster ripped Parker off the platform—and into the black waters of the Everglades.