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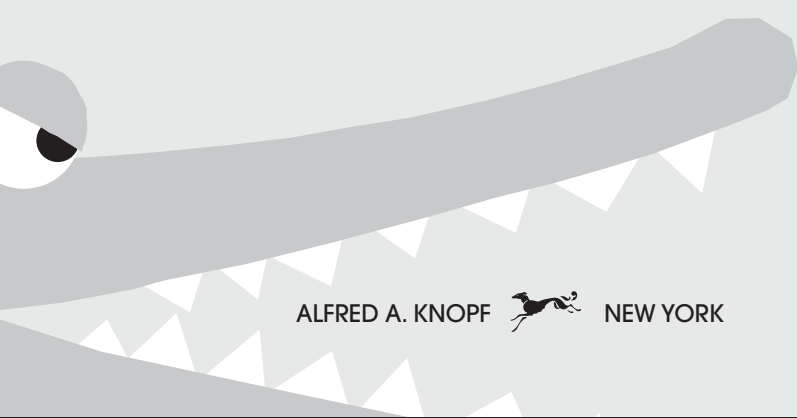
CHOMP



CHAPTER SAMPLER

Carl Hiaasen

CHOMP



ALFRED A. KNOPF



NEW YORK

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK . . .

ONE

Mickey Cray had been out of work ever since a dead iguana fell from a palm tree and hit him on the head.

The iguana, which had died during a hard freeze, was stiff as a board and weighed seven and a half pounds. Mickey's son had measured the lifeless lizard on a fishing scale, then packed it on ice with the turtle veggies, in the cooler behind the garage.

This was after the ambulance had hauled Mickey off to the hospital, where the doctors said he had a serious concussion and ordered him to take it easy.

And to everyone's surprise, Mickey did take it easy. That's because the injury left him with double vision and terrible headaches. He lost his appetite and dropped nineteen pounds and lay around on the couch all day, watching nature programs on television.

"I'll never be the same," he told his son.

"Knock it off, Pop," said Wahoo, Mickey's boy.

Mickey had named him after Wahoo McDaniel, a professional wrestler who'd once played linebacker for the Dolphins. Mickey's son often wished he'd been called Mickey Jr. or Joe or even Rupert—anything but Wahoo, which was also a species of saltwater fish.

It was a name that was hard to live up to. People naturally expected somebody called Wahoo to act loud and crazy, but that wasn't Wahoo's style. Apparently nothing could be done about the name until he was all grown up, at which point he intended to go to the Cutler Ridge courthouse and tell a judge he wanted to be called something normal.

"Pop, you're gonna be okay," Wahoo would tell his father every morning. "Just hang in there."

Looking up with hound-dog eyes from the couch, Mickey Cray would say, "Whatever happens, I'm glad we ate that bleeping lizard."

On the day his dad had come home from the hospital, Wahoo had defrosted the dead iguana and made a peppercorn stew, which his mom had wisely refused to touch. Mickey had insisted that eating the critter that had dented his skull would be a spiritual remedy. "Big medicine," he'd predicted.

But the iguana had tasted awful, and Mickey Cray's headaches only got worse. Wahoo's mother was so concerned that she wanted Mickey to see a brain specialist in Miami, but Mickey refused to go.

Meanwhile, people kept calling up with new jobs, and Wahoo was forced to send them to other wranglers. His father was in no condition to work.

After school, Wahoo would feed the animals and clean out the pens and cages. The backyard was literally a zoo—gators, snakes, parrots, mynah birds, rats, mice, monkeys, raccoons, tortoises and even a bald eagle, which Mickey had raised from a fledgling after its mother was killed.

“Treat ’em like royalty,” Mickey would instruct Wahoo, because the animals were quite valuable. Without them, Mickey would be unemployed.

It disturbed Wahoo to see his father so ill because Mickey was the toughest guy he’d ever known.

One morning, with summer approaching, Wahoo’s mother took him aside and told him that the family’s savings account was almost drained. “I’m going to China,” she said.

Wahoo nodded, like it was no big deal.

“For two months,” she said.

“That’s a long time,” said Wahoo.

“Sorry, big guy, but we really need the money.”

Wahoo’s mother taught Mandarin Chinese, an extremely difficult language. Big American companies that had offices in China would hire Mrs. Cray to tutor their top executives, but usually these companies flew their employees to South Florida for Mrs. Cray’s lessons.

“This time they want me to go to Shanghai,” she explained to her son. “They have, like, fifty people over there who learned Mandarin from some cheap audiotape. The other day, one of the big shots was trying to say ‘Nice shoes!’ and he accidentally told a government minister that his face looked like a butt wart. Not good.”

“Did you tell Pop you’re going?”

“That’s next.”

Wahoo slipped outside to clean Alice’s pond. Alice the alligator was one of Mickey Cray’s stars. She was twelve feet long and as tame as a guppy, but she looked truly ferocious. Over the

years Alice had appeared often in front of a camera. Her credits included nine feature films, two National Geographic documentaries, a three-part Disney special about the Everglades and a TV commercial for a fancy French skin lotion.

She lay sunning on the mudbank while Wahoo skimmed the dead leaves and sticks from the water. Her eyes were closed, but Wahoo knew she was listening.

“Hungry, girl?” he asked.

The gator’s mouth opened wide, the inside as white as spun cotton. Some of her teeth were snagged and chipped. The tips were green from pond algae.

“You forgot to floss,” Wahoo said.

Alice hissed. He went to get her some food. When she heard the squeaking of the wheelbarrow, she cracked her eyelids and turned her huge armored head.

Wahoo tossed a whole plucked chicken into the alligator’s gaping jaws. The sound of her crunching on the thawed bird obscured the voices coming from the house—Wahoo’s mother and father “discussing” the China trip.

Wahoo fed Alice two more dead chickens, locked the gate to the pond and took a walk. When he returned, his father was upright on the sofa and his mother was in the kitchen fixing bologna sandwiches for lunch.

“You believe this?” Mickey said to Wahoo. “She’s bugging out on us!”

“Pop, we’re broke.”

Mickey’s shoulders slumped. “Not *that* broke.”

“You want the animals to starve?” Wahoo asked.

They ate their sandwiches barely speaking a word. When they were done, Mrs. Cray stood up and said: "I'm going to miss you guys. I wish I didn't have to go."

Then she went into the bedroom and shut the door.

Mickey seemed dazed. "I used to like iguanas."

"We'll be okay."

"My head hurts."

"Take your medicine," said Wahoo.

"I threw it away."

"What?"

"Those yellow pills, they made me constipated."

Wahoo shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"Seriously. I haven't had a satisfactory bowel movement since Easter."

"Thanks for sharing," said Wahoo. He started loading the dishwasher, trying to keep his mind off the fact that his mom was about to fly away to the far side of the world.

Mickey got up and apologized to his son.

"I'm just being selfish. I don't want her to go."

"Me neither."

The following Sunday, they all rose before dawn. Wahoo lugged his mother's suitcases to the waiting taxi. She had tears in her eyes when she kissed him goodbye.

"Take care of your dad," she whispered.

Then, to Mickey, she said: "I want you to get better. That's an order, mister."

Watching the cab speed off, Wahoo's father looked forlorn. "It's like she's leaving us twice," he remarked.

“What are you talking about, Pop?”

“I’m seein’ double, remember? There she goes—and there she goes again.”

Wahoo was in no mood for that. “You want eggs for breakfast?”

Afterward he went out in the backyard to deal with a troublesome howler monkey named Jocko, who’d picked the lock on his cage and was now leaping around, pestering the parrots and macaws. Wahoo had to be careful because Jocko was mean. He used a tangerine to lure the surly primate back to his cage, but Jocko still managed to sink a dirty fang into one of Wahoo’s hands.

“I told you to wear the canvas gloves,” scolded Mickey when Wahoo was standing at the sink, cleaning the wound.

“You don’t wear gloves,” Wahoo pointed out.

“Yeah, but I don’t get chomped like you do.”

That was hogwash. Mickey got chomped all the time; it was an occupational hazard. His hands were so scarred that they looked fake, like rubber Halloween props.

The phone rang and Wahoo picked it up. His father weaved back to the couch and flipped through the TV stations until he found the Rain Forest Channel.

“Who was it that called?” he asked when Wahoo came out of the kitchen.

“Another job, Pop.”

“You send ’em to Stiggy?”

Jimmy Stigmore was an animal wrangler who had a ranch up in west Davie. Mickey Cray wasn’t crazy about Stiggy.

“No, I didn’t,” Wahoo said.

His father frowned. “Then who’d you send ’em to? Not Dander!”

Donny Dander had lost his wildlife-importing license after he got caught smuggling thirty-eight rare tree frogs from South America. The frogs had been cleverly hidden in his underwear, but the adventure ended in embarrassment at the Miami airport when a customs officer noticed that Donny’s pants were cheeping.

Wahoo said, “I didn’t send ’em to Dander, either. I didn’t send ’em anywhere.”

“Okay. Now you lost me,” said Mickey Cray.

“I said we’d take the job. I said we could start next week.”

“Are you crazy, boy? Look at me, I can’t see straight, I can’t hardly walk, my skull’s ’bout to split open like a rotten pumpkin—”

“Pop!”

“What?”

“I said *we*,” Wahoo reminded him. “You and I together.”

“But what about school?”

“Friday’s the last day. Then I’m done for the summer.”

“Already?” Wahoo’s dad didn’t keep up with Wahoo’s academic schedule as closely as his mother did. “So who called about the job?”

Wahoo told him the name of the TV show.

“Not him!” Mickey Cray snorted. “I’ve heard stories about that jerk.”

“Well, how does a thousand bucks sound?” Wahoo asked.

“Pretty darned sweet.”

“That’s one thousand a *day*.” Wahoo let that sink in. “If you want, I’ll call ’em back and give him Stiggy’s number.”

“Don’t be a knucklehead.” Wahoo’s father rose off the sofa and gave him a hug. “You did good, son. We’ll make this work.”

“Absolutely,” said Wahoo, trying to sound confident.

TWO

Hundreds of iguanas had died and tumbled from the treetops during the big freeze in southern Florida. As far as Wahoo knew, his dad was the only person who'd been seriously hurt by one of the falling reptiles.

Mickey Cray had been standing with a cup of hot cocoa beneath a coconut palm in the backyard when the dead lizard had knocked him stiff. Later, after he was brought home from the hospital, Mickey had ordered Wahoo to search the property, capture any iguanas that had survived the frigid weather and relocate them to an abandoned orchid farm half a mile away.

Wahoo hadn't searched very hard. It wasn't the fault of the iguanas that they'd frozen to death. They weren't meant to be living so far north, but Miami pet dealers had been importing baby specimens from the tropics for decades. The customers who bought them had no idea they would grow six feet long, eat all the flowers in the garden and then leap into the swimming pool to poop. When that rude reality set in, the unhappy owners would drive their pet lizards to the nearest park and set them free. Before long, South Florida was crawling with hordes

of big wild iguanas that were producing hordes of little wild iguanas.

The cold snap had put an end to that, at least temporarily.

On the first morning of summer vacation, Wahoo found his father in the backyard scanning the trees.

“See any, Pop?”

“All clear,” Mickey Cray reported.

Although months had passed since the accident, he was still paranoid about getting clobbered with another falling lizard.

“You must be feeling better,” Wahoo remarked. He was pleased to see his dad up and moving around so early.

“My headache’s gone!” Mickey announced.

Wahoo said, “No way.”

“All those pills the doctors made me swallow, they didn’t do a darn thing. Then all of a sudden I wake up and, boom, it’s like a miracle.” Mickey shrugged. “Some things just can’t be explained, son.”

But Wahoo had a theory that his father had been cured by five simple words: *one thousand dollars a day*.

Mickey said, “Go fetch some lettuce for Gary and Gail.”

Gary and Gail were two ancient Galápagos tortoises that Wahoo’s dad had purchased from a zoo in Sarasota many years earlier, when he was new to the wildlife business. These days there wasn’t much demand from the TV nature shows for Gary and Gail, because tortoises were not exactly dynamic performers. Mickey Cray kept them around mainly for sentimental reasons. Each of the animals was more than a century old, and

he didn't trust any of the other wranglers to treat them properly. The night before the big freeze, Mickey had gone out back and carefully cloaked Gail and Gary with heavy quilts so they wouldn't die. Wahoo had watched from his bedroom window.

"I don't suppose he's interested in these two," Mickey muttered while the tortoises munched loudly on their lettuce.

"No, they said he wants Alice," said Wahoo, "and a major python."

They were talking about their famous new client, Derek Badger. He was the star of *Expedition Survival!*, one of the most popular shows on cable. Every week, Derek would parachute into some gnarly wilderness teeming with fierce animals, venomous snakes and disease-carrying insects. Armed with only a Swiss army knife and a straw, he would hike, climb, crawl, paddle or swim back to civilization—or until he was "rescued." Along the way, he'd eat bugs, rodents, worms, even the fungus on tree bark—the grosser it looked, the happier Derek Badger was to stuff it into his cheeks.

Wahoo and his dad had watched *Expedition Survival!* often enough to know that most of the wildlife scenes were faked. They were also aware that at no time was Derek's life in actual danger, since he was always accompanied by a camera crew packing food, candy, sunblock, water, first-aid supplies and, most likely, a large gun.

"Derek's never done a show in the Everglades," Wahoo said to his father.

"They say he's a humongous pain in the butt, this guy."

"Just be nice, Pop. It's a lot of money."

Mickey promised to behave. “So, when do we get to meet the man himself?”

“His assistant is supposed to stop by later.”

“What kind of python do they want—Burmese? African rock?”

Wahoo said, “Honestly, I don’t think it matters.”

They set to work building a pen for a young bobcat that was being delivered from a ranch up in Highlands County. The cat had been struck by a Jeep and suffered a broken leg that wouldn’t mend, so it could never be released back into the wild. Mickey Cray had agreed to raise the animal, and he hoped to make it tame enough for TV work.

Bobcats were strong, meaning the pen had to be sturdy. Wahoo knew that a person with double vision shouldn’t be using a nail gun, so he put his dad in charge of measuring and cutting the chicken wire. By noon Mickey’s headache came roaring back, and he was in misery. Wahoo steered him to the house and made him lie on the couch and fed him four aspirins.

Minutes later, somebody started knocking on the front door. Mickey raised up and said, “That’s probably the guy with the bobcat.”

Wahoo looked out the window and saw a woman with a shining stack of red hair. She wore tan shorts and jeweled sandals, and she was carrying a leather briefcase.

“No cat,” he said to his father.

“Well, open the darn door.”

“But what if she’s from the bank?” Wahoo whispered. The Crays were months behind on their mortgage payments.

Mickey peeked out the window. “She is definitely *not* from the bank.”

Wahoo invited the woman inside. She introduced herself as Raven Stark.

“I’m Derek Badger’s production assistant,” she said. “I brought your contract.”

“Excellent,” said Mickey.

Wahoo noticed that Raven Stark had a strong accent. He tried not to stare at her hairdo, which looked like a sculpture made of red chrome.

She asked, “May I take a look around?”

“Nope,” said Wahoo’s father.

Raven Stark seemed surprised.

“First you’ve got to sign a release form,” Mickey said. “I don’t want to get sued if you fall into the gator pond and get bit.”

She laughed. “I’ve been doing this a long time, Mr. Cray.”

“You sign the release, my son will be happy to give you the grand tour.”

A few years earlier, Mickey Cray had invited Wahoo’s elementary school class to come see his wild animals. A boy named Tingley had ignored Wahoo’s warning and reached into one of the cages to tug the tail of a grumpy raccoon, which had spun around and clawed the kid’s arm so badly that it looked like a road map of Hialeah. Mickey paid for Tingley’s doctor bills, though not before telling his parents that their boy was dumb as a box of rocks. Ever since then, Mickey’s insurance company insisted that everyone who came on the property had

to fill out a legal form saying it wasn't Mickey's fault if they got hurt.

While Raven Stark signed the release, Mickey signed the contract from *Expedition Survival!* Wahoo noticed that he scrawled his name crookedly below the line where it was supposed to go, which meant his eyesight was still jumbled.

"How long is the shoot going to take?" Mickey asked.

Raven Stark said, "Until we get it right."

Wahoo's dad looked pleased. "So it's one thousand a day, plus location fees and the animal rentals."

"Correct." She took an envelope from her purse and handed it to him. "Here's eight hundred dollars as a deposit."

Mickey counted the cash and then turned to Wahoo. "Son, go show this fine lady whatever she wants to see."

Because it was going to be an Everglades show, Raven Stark was keenly interested in Alice the alligator. Wahoo led her to the pond and unlocked the gate.

Raven whistled. "That's a monster, eh?"

"Twelve feet," said Wahoo.

"How much?"

"One hundred and fifty dollars a foot, so that's . . ."

"Eighteen hundred even," Raven said. "No problem."

Wahoo couldn't wait to tell his father.

"Do you have another one that's smaller?" asked Raven.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Something Derek could wrestle?"

"Wrestle?"

“Maybe a four-footer,” Raven said. “Five feet, max.”

“I’ll have to check with Pop.” Wahoo foresaw trouble. His father didn’t like anybody messing with the animals.

“Where are your pythons?” Raven asked.

Wahoo led her to the heavy glass tanks where the constrictors were kept. South Florida had become infested with huge exotic snakes that, like the iguanas, had been imported for the pet trade. Hurricane Andrew had blown apart several large reptile farms and scattered baby pythons and boa constrictors all over the place.

“Derek wants a beast,” Raven stated.

Wahoo showed her a fourteen-footer that had been captured while devouring an opossum in a Dumpster behind the Dadeland Mall. The man who’d found the snake was supposed to turn it over to state game officers, but instead he’d sold it to Mickey Cray for three hundred bucks.

Raven agreed it was an impressive specimen. “But can he be handled safely?”

“It’s a she,” Wahoo said, “and she’s a biter.”

“Oh.”

“Pop can work with her. She’ll be okay.”

“I hope so,” said Raven Stark. “How much?”

“Seven hundred for the day.” Wahoo tried to sound steady and businesslike. He wasn’t used to handling the negotiations. The standard rental rate for pythons was fifty dollars a foot.

“Okay, fine. What did you say your name was?”

He told her.

“Is that ‘Wahoo,’ like the fish?”

Everybody made that assumption. “My dad named me after a wrestler,” the boy explained.

“How interesting.”

“Not really,” said Wahoo.

“Can I ask what happened?” She pointed at the white bump on Wahoo’s right hand, where a thumb should have been.

“Yes, ma’am. Alice got it.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Quickly Wahoo said, “It wasn’t her fault, it was mine.”

One day he’d been showing off for a girl who had come over after school to see the animals. Wahoo had brought her down to the gator pond for a feeding, but he stepped way too close to Alice, who jumped up and snapped the thawed chicken out of his grasp, taking his thumb along with it. The girl’s name was Paulette, and she’d fainted on the spot.

Changing the subject, Wahoo asked, “Where is Mr. Badger?”

“Paris,” Raven said.

Wahoo had never heard of any dangerous jungles or swamps in Paris, so he assumed the famous survivalist was taking a vacation.

Mickey Cray came outside and joined them at the snake tanks. Wahoo told him that Ms. Stark was interested in using Beulah, the big Burmese.

“Good choice,” said Mickey. He appeared to be feeling better.

“You’ve seen the program, of course,” Raven said.

“Sure,” said Wahoo. “It’s on Thursday nights.”

“And rerun every Sunday morning,” she said. “So you already know that we’re all about verisimilitude.”

Wahoo didn’t even pretend to understand what the word meant. His father just looked at him and shrugged.

“Making it real,” Raven explained. “On *Expedition Survival!*, we’re all about making it real. Derek considers that his sacred mission, a bond of trust with our viewers.”

Wahoo glanced at the massive snakes, coiled in their tanks. They were real enough; they just weren’t wild and free.

The production assistant turned to Wahoo’s father. “Any questions?”

Mickey smiled. “We put our animals on TV all the time. That’s what we do.”

Raven Stark bent down and tapped a scarlet fingernail on the glass panel that separated her from Beulah the python.

“Well, Mr. Cray,” she said, “I promise you’ve never done a show like Derek’s.”

THREE

Derek Badger's real name was Lee Bluepenny, and he had no training in biology, botany, geology or forestry. His background was purely show business.

As a young man he'd traveled the world with a popular Irish folk-dancing group until he broke a toe while rehearsing for a street parade in Montreal. As he waited in the hospital emergency room, he happened to meet a talent agent who had gotten ill from eating tainted oysters. The queasy talent agent thought Lee Bluepenny looked tough and handsome, and asked if he'd ever considered a career in television.

As soon as Lee Bluepenny's dance injury healed, the agent arranged for him to fly to California and audition for a new reality show. The producers of *Expedition Survival!* loved Lee Bluepenny's new Australian accent, which he had shamelessly copied from the late Steve Irwin, the legendary crocodile hunter. The producers also liked that Lee Bluepenny could swallow a live salamander without throwing up. What they didn't particularly like was his name. Lee Bluepenny was okay for a jazz piano player or maybe an art dealer, they said, but it wasn't rugged-sounding enough for someone who had to claw and gnaw his way out of the wilds every week.

After trying out a few different names—Erik Panther, Gus Wolverine, Chad Condor—the producers settled on Derek Badger, which was fine with Lee Bluepenny. He was so thrilled to be on television that he would have let them call him Danny the Dodo Bird.

Expedition Survival! got off to a rocky start. The first episode was staged in a jungle in the Philippine Islands, where the man now called Derek Badger was supposed to be lost and starving. Disaster struck on the second day, when Derek was bitten severely by a striped shrew rat that he was attempting to gobble for dinner. The rodent had appeared to be dead, but it was only napping. Derek's punctured lips swelled up so badly from the bite that he looked like he was sucking on a football. A medical helicopter rushed him to Manila for rabies shots.

Eventually the rough spots in the show were smoothed out, and *Expedition Survival!* turned into a smash hit. It wasn't long before Derek Badger was an international celebrity, and he quickly learned to act like one.

"How's France?" Raven Stark asked when she called.

"Heaven," he said. "The cheese here is fantastic."

"I'm sure," said Raven Stark, with a note of concern. Survivalists were supposed to be lean and fit, and one of her main responsibilities was to keep Derek from getting too flabby. It wasn't easy—the man loved to eat, and cheese was high on his list.

"Did you find me a proper alligator?" he inquired.

"Yes, a beauty." She could hear him chewing and smacking his lips.

“How big?”

“Twelve feet,” said Raven Stark.

“Brilliant!”

“And they’ve got a slightly smaller one you can tussle with.”

There was a pause on the other end that made Raven Stark uneasy.

Derek said, “But I don’t want to wrestle the small one. I want to wrestle the monster.”

It was exactly the response she had feared. “Too dangerous,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“We can chat about this later, Derek.”

“Indeed we will. What about a python? I told you I wanted a python.”

“The gentleman has offered us a very large Burmese, though it’s not tame.”

“Even better!” chortled Derek.

Raven Stark sighed to herself. She was accustomed to working around Derek’s enormous ego, but there were times when she felt like reminding him that he was basically a tap dancer, not a grizzled woodsman.

“Anything else that’s super-scary?” he asked.

“I noticed they had a large snapping turtle,” she said.

“How large?”

“Large enough to take off a hand.”

“Excellent,” Derek said. “Set up an underwater scene—I’m swimming along through the Everglades, minding my own

business, when the hungry snapper charges out from under a log and drags me to the bottom of the lagoon.”

“Right. Except turtles don’t eat people.”

“How do you know?” Derek demanded.

“Call me when you land in Miami,” said Raven Stark.

Wahoo had an older sister named Julie who was finishing law school at the University of Florida in Gainesville. His father was secretly proud of her, but he wouldn’t let on.

“Just what the world needs—another darn lawyer,” he’d grumble.

“I love you, too, Dad,” Julie would say, and pinch his cheek.

Wahoo thought his sister was pretty cool, although he sometimes felt intimidated because she was so smart and funny and sociable. Wahoo was shy, and not as self-confident. Julie had always been a straight-A student while Wahoo wasn’t: his best-ever report card was two A’s, four B’s and a C (in algebra, naturally).

“Just do your best,” his mom would say. “That’s good enough for us.”

Mickey Cray never really took an interest in the children’s schoolwork because he was too busy with the animals.

“Put the old man on the phone,” Julie said when she called.

“He’s out working with the pythons,” Wahoo reported.

“It’s about the *Expedition* contract. I see problems.”

Wahoo always faxed the TV contracts to his sister for her

to see, even though his father normally signed them without reading a word.

“What’s wrong, Jule?”

“Like, on page seven, it says the show ‘shall have unrestricted use of the designated wildlife specimens for the duration of the production period.’ That means they can do pretty much whatever they please with the animals—and they don’t need to ask Pop’s permission.”

“This is bad,” Wahoo said. He remembered what Raven Stark had said about Derek Badger wanting to wrestle one of the gators.

“Did the old man take any money yet?” Julie asked.

Wahoo told his sister about the eight-hundred-dollar deposit. She said Mickey could still get out of the deal if he returned the cash.

“Too late. He already spent it,” said Wahoo.

“On what—monkey chow?”

“The mortgage.”

“Ouch,” said Wahoo’s sister.

“We’re sort of broke, Jule. Ever since he got hurt, it’s been tough.”

“So that’s why Mom went to China. Now I get it.”

Wahoo didn’t want his sister to worry, so he tried to sound upbeat. “Pop’s been doing way better since we took this job.”

“Who is this Derek Badger character, anyway?”

“You’ve never seen the show?”

Julie chuckled. “I don’t even own a TV, little bro. All I do up here is crack the books.”

“Derek Badger is a survivalist guy,” Wahoo said. He explained the adventure format of the program.

His sister said, “Give me a break.”

“He’s huge, Jule.”

“Tell Dad what I said about the contract.”

“Do I have to?” Wahoo said.

He was only half kidding. He knew it would be his problem soon enough.

Mickey Cray was barefoot in the backyard with Beulah the python. He was admiring the markings on her skin—rich, chocolate-colored saddles on a sleek silvery background. Fourteen feet of raw muscle, and a brain the size of a marble.

Ever since he was a boy, Mickey had kept snakes for pets—green tree snakes, king snakes, rat snakes, water snakes, ring-necked snakes, garter snakes, even a few poisonous rattlers and moccasins. Mickey had caught them all. He still found them fascinating and mysterious.

Now the Everglades was overrun with foreign pythons that were eating the deer, birds, rabbits, even alligators—it was really a rough scene. The pythons weren’t supposed to be there; Southeast Asia was their natural home. So the U.S. government and the state of Florida had declared war on them.

Wahoo’s father understood why: the snakes were totally disrupting the balance of nature. A single adult Burmese could lay more than fifty eggs at a time. They were among the largest predators in the world, growing to a length of twenty feet,

and at that size had no natural enemies. Even panthers avoided them.

Because of his knowledge and experience, Mickey Cray had been asked to go into the swamps and capture as many of the intruder reptiles as he could. The state was paying decent money, but Mickey said no. He knew that every python he caught would be euthanized, and he couldn't bring himself to take part in that. He liked snakes too much. That was the problem.

He sat down on the ground near Beulah and she glided slowly in his direction. Her brick-sized head was elevated, the silky tongue flicking slowly.

Mickey grinned. "When's the last time you got fed?"

Beulah responded by clamping down on Mickey's left foot and throwing a meaty coil around both his legs.

"Easy, princess," he said.

The python wrapped upward with another coil, and then another. Mickey quickly locked both arms in front of his chest to protect his lungs from being crushed, but he was out of shape and Beulah was extremely powerful.

"Wahoo!" he hollered. "Yo!"

"What?" called a voice from the house.

"Get your butt out here!"

The snake was chewing on Mickey's foot as if it were a rabbit. He knew better than to struggle, for that would only cause Beulah to tighten her grip.

Wahoo came running. When he saw what the python was doing to his father, he yelled, "Don't move!"

“Oh, that’s a good one,” Mickey gasped. “I was thinking of dancing a jig.”

“What the heck happened?”

“You forgot to feed her is what happened.”

“No way! She ate last week, I swear, Pop.”

“What did you give her—a cup of yogurt? Look at the poor girl, she’s starving!”

Wahoo suspected his dad might be right—adult pythons often went weeks between meals. Maybe he *had* forgotten to feed her.

“Get the bleeping bourbon,” Mickey said, “and make it fast.” He was already gulping for air.

Wahoo ran back to the house and grabbed a bottle of liquor that his dad kept around for such emergencies. Pythons are equipped with rows of long, curved teeth that cannot be easily pried from their prey. The fastest way to make them let go is to pour something hot or obnoxious into their mouths.

Snakes don’t have taste buds on their tongues like people do, so it wasn’t the flavor of bourbon that Beulah hated. It was the sting. Wahoo got on his knees and sorted through the muscular coils until he located the toothy end of the creature, which had already swallowed half of his father’s foot.

“You didn’t even wear your boots?” Wahoo said.

Mickey grunted. “Get on with it already.”

Wahoo uncapped the liquor bottle and dribbled the brown liquid directly down Beulah’s throat. Within seconds the python began to twitch. Then she hissed loudly, unhooked her

chompers and spit. Mickey purposely remained limp while Wahoo began unwinding the massive reptile.

Beulah didn't put up a struggle; she'd lost all interest in making a meal of Wahoo's father. The alcohol in the bourbon was highly irritating, and she kept opening and closing her mouth in distaste.

It took a few minutes for Mickey to catch his breath and for the circulation to return to his legs. He was able to hop along beside Wahoo as they lugged the big snake back to her tank. Then they went inside to take care of Mickey's foot, which looked like a purple pincushion.

"Promise you fed her? Tell the truth, son."

Wahoo felt awful. "I must have forgot."

"Springtime is when they get active and really start chowing down. I've only told you about a hundred times." With a groan, Mickey sprawled on the couch.

"Dad, I'm really sorry."

"Soon as we're done here, you go fetch her a couple of big fat chickens from the freezer. And nuke 'em good in the microwave, okay? Pythons don't like Popsicles."

"Yes, sir."

Wahoo emptied a tube of antiseptic ointment on his father's foot, and with a butter knife he spread the goop over all the puncture holes. There were too many to count. Pythons weren't poisonous, but a bite could cause a nasty infection.

"I'm sorry," Wahoo said again. "I really messed up."

"Enough already. Everybody makes mistakes," his dad told

him. “Heck, I shouldn’t have been playin’ with a snake that size, like she was a fuzzy little poodle.”

“Hold still, Pop.”

Mickey stared up at the ceiling. “Look, I know this ain’t exactly a normal life for a kid your age.”

“Don’t start again,” Wahoo said.

“No, I mean it,” Mickey went on. “What would I do without you and your mom? I’m lucky she stuck around all these years.”

“Yes, you are. Where’s the gauze?”

Wahoo waited until his dad’s wounds were bandaged before telling him what Julie had said about the *Expedition Survival!* contract.

“I knew the guy was trouble,” Mickey muttered.

“So what do we do now?”

“Our job, son. We do our job.” Mickey levered himself up, swinging his puffy, snake-bitten foot up on the coffee table. “I don’t care what their stupid paperwork says—I’m the only one in charge of my animals. Mr. Dork Badger can go fly a kite.”

“It’s *Derek* Badger.”

“Ha! You think it matters to these critters what his stupid name is?”

“No, Pop.”

“Know what Beulah would say? ‘All you stupid humans taste the same!’ ”

Wahoo found himself wondering if that was really true.

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Carl Hiaasen

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Carl Hiaasen received the Damon Runyon Award for his journalism and commentary, and received the 2011 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing from the Florida Humanities Council. *Hoot*, *Flush*, and *Scat*, Hiaasen's novels for young readers, have all been bestsellers and received numerous awards, including a prestigious Newbery Honor for *Hoot*.



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hiaasen, Carl.

Chomp / Carl Hiaasen. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

“A Borzoi Book.”

Summary: When the difficult star of the reality television show “Expedition Survival” disappears while filming an episode in the Florida Everglades using animals from the wildlife refuge run by Wahoo Crane's family, Wahoo and classmate Tuna Gordon set out to find him while avoiding Tuna's gun-happy father.

ISBN 978-0-375-86842-9 (trade) — ISBN 978-0-375-96842-6 (lib. bdg.) —

ISBN 978-0-375-89895-2 (ebook) — ISBN 978-0-375-86827-6 (tr. pbk.)

[1. Reality television programs—Fiction. 2. Television—Production and direction—Fiction.

3. Missing persons—Fiction. 4. Wildlife refuges—Fiction. 5. Everglades (Fla.)—Fiction.

6. Florida—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.H493Cho 2012

[Fic]—dc23

2011024920

The text of this book is set in 12-point Goudy.

Printed in the United States of America

March 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CHOMP

From bestselling author

Carl Hiaasen

When Wahoo Cray's father takes a job as an animal wrangler on a reality show called *Expedition Survival!* Wahoo will have to do a bit of wrangling himself—to keep his dad from killing Derek Badger, the show's boneheaded star. But the job keeps getting more complicated. Derek insists on using wild animals for his stunts.

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