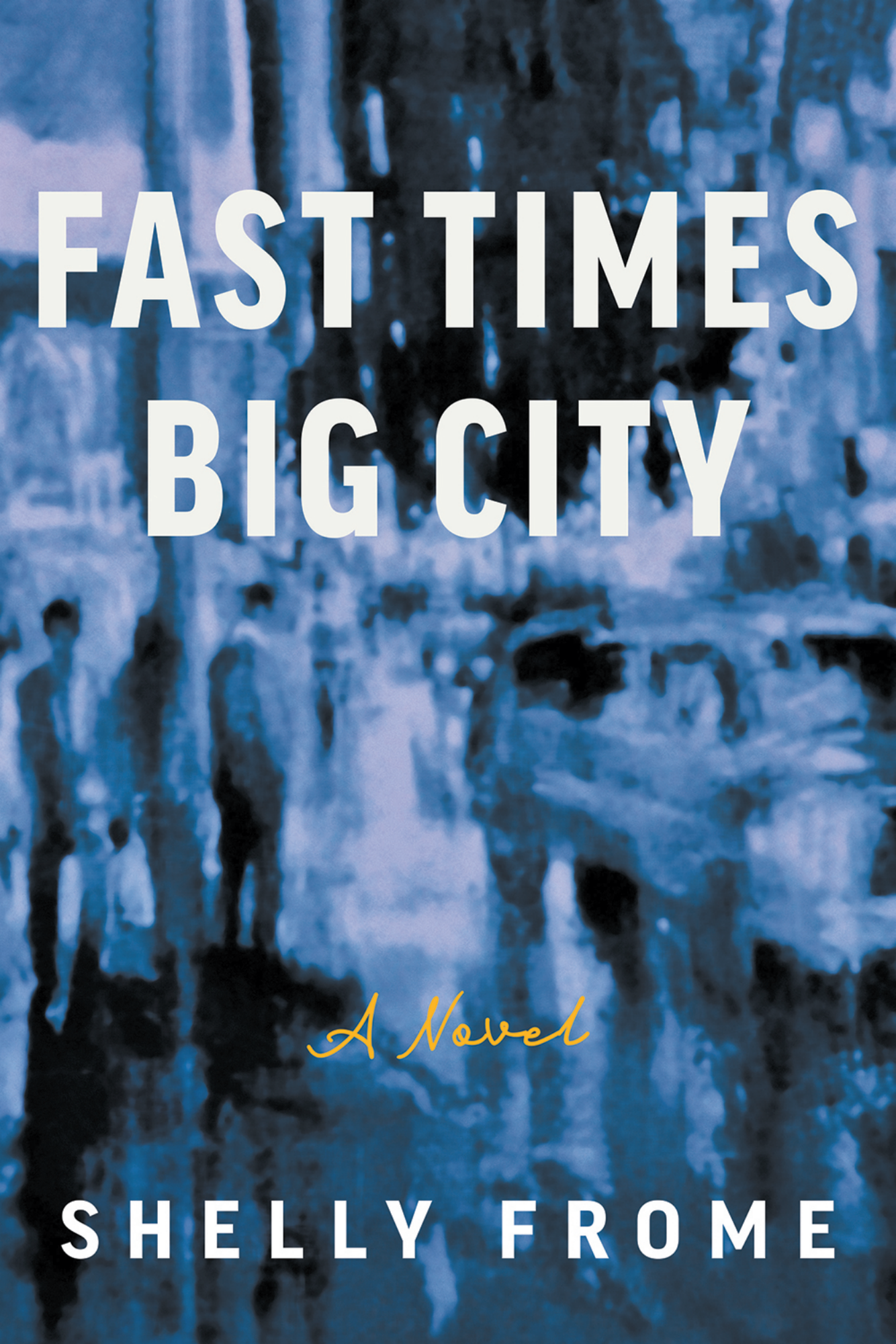
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BIG CITY
A Novel
SHELLY FROME

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CHAPTER ONE

Bud Palmer slipped on his sunglasses and set off in his Ford Sunliner convertible on this balmy subtropical Saturday morning. All the while he tried to convince himself he could get this meeting over with quickly no matter what his shady uncle Rick was up to.

Then again Bud wished he'd just hung up on him. Not put up with "Can't tell you over the phone. I need you here in person, soon as possible." That way he wouldn't be driving across the MacArthur Causeway. Moreover, if his mother hadn't asked him to look out for her kid brother while she and his dad were on their Caribbean cruise, he'd never have been reminded of Rick's schemes such as hanging up a dual Realtor/ PI sign. He wouldn't be thinking of Rick Ellis at all.

As he drove on, more disconcerting images came to mind: a wiry little guy clutching a polaroid camera, hiding behind the poinsettias as some floozy snuck into a garish motel with someone's husband in tow.

Not that Bud himself was always straightforward. At twenty-nine, while his friends were married with kids he was still easing out of relationships the minute he was asked, "Tell me, Bud, how much does a sportswriter make?" Or, "I hear there's a new subdivision going up in Miramar, each house with a Lanai. Perfect for raising a family." In comparison with Rick, however, Bud was always honest about his intentions whether it be his work or love life. In contrast, when playing tennis for instance, Rick was always

looking for an angle. He'd crouch behind the net ready to pounce or cut off an opponent's serve, always looking to throw the server off his game.

Bud crossed over onto Miami Beach, tooled around, passed the ballfield at Flamingo Park, eased by the pastel sidewalks taking him up to Ocean Drive and the fresh fruit juice stand at 10th Street Beach. He parked by a curb directly in line with the juice stand, got out and crossed the sun-dappled street.

Glancing around, he took in the cool tinge of fall blowing in from the ocean, fusing with the salty scent of the water. The sun's rays streamed through the fluffy clouds; the waves rippled, beckoning the smattering of sunbathers to take a dip. Everywhere Bud looked nothing had changed. Which included the sight of middle-aged women across the way in their flowery sun dresses, whiling away the hours on the patios of their pink-stucco efficiency apartments; shuffling mahjong tiles; glancing over at the white sands stretching off into the distance in hopes of spotting some lonely bachelor. It was all predictable. Even his paper, the *Miami Herald* and source of his livelihood, discarded on the empty green bench, seconded the motion. There was a photo of President Eisenhower above the fold playing golf nearby at Jackie Gleeson's country club, and a sidebar noting the U.S. was gaining in the space race with the Soviets.

Whatever Rick was champing at the bit about had to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt.

As if in agreement, a voluptuous blond in a fuchsia bikini came into view, turned on the outdoor shower a few yards away, casually washed off the salt water residue on her shoulders, and winked.

Bud smiled back, checked his watch and gazed beyond the mahjong ladies to a gap in the row of efficiency apartments at the end of the block where the weathered bungalow sat a few yards

back. The one with the fading sign fronting the bamboo porch railing that read *Walk-ins Welcome*: *Services Unlimited***.**

He crossed over, hurried past the row of squat apartments, pivoted by the sign, noted the rear end of the rusty Studebaker sitting in the carport, and nodded. It was all the same-old same-old promising more of the same. He bound up the steps, called out "Hello?" opened the screen door and walked right in.

And, sure enough, there Rick was ready and waiting, sporting that signature Charlie Chaplin mustache, flowered short-sleeved shirt and white linen slacks. The first worrisome signal, however, was his bleary, blood-shot eyes as he over-poured a carafe of steaming black coffee into a mug. He whipped out a handkerchief, plunked the carafe and mug on the edge of the desk in the center of the room, and mopped up the spill. At the same time, Bud took in the rest of the place and saw that it hadn't changed a bit, starting from the girlie calendars on the walls, milk boxes full of paperbacks on the floor; the cluttered desk topped by a scuffed black rotary phone, notary stamp, and the Smith-Corona typewriter flanked by a hat stand with a random display. To complete the picture, there was the rack of glossy magazines so that Rick could keep up with the latest, plus a wooden perch that once accommodated a talking parrot on the near side of a shaded window and a sun-bleached deck chair.

Everything was the same and not at all the same.

Slurping some coffee, Rick said, "Right . . . Bud . . . great, you made it." He moved a pile of papers aside and dug out an old photo album.

Taking a few steps further inside, Bud said, "Okay. Well, here I am. So?"

"Terrific," Rick said, clutching the album. "What a guy, after giving you only a moment's notice. And hey, look what I dug up

while I was waiting here killing time. Get a load of this." Slipping out a black-and-white Polaroid, he said, "Look at you on East Flagler, walking out of the Seybold Arcade, sporting a fedora from this very rack like Sam Spade from *The Maltese Falcon.*" Dropping the photo, he skirted around the desk, snatched a dusty hat off the rack and plopped it on his head. Affecting a hardboiled Humphry Bogart impression while trying to shake off an involuntary twitch, he said, "Listen, sweetheart, everybody's got a story to tell."

Countering, Bud said, "Come on, Rick, cut the tap dance. What does that have to do with anything that demands my immediate presence, making me drive all the way over here?"

When Rick didn't reply, Bud said, "What is it? God, Rick, you look terrible."

"Haven't slept. Drank too much booze for starters."

"Uh-huh, all right, go on."

"I'm getting to it, I'm getting to it." Replacing the fedora, he circled back behind the desk to the paperbacks stacked up in the milk boxes. "You looked into something for me. And not so long ago either. Went deep into the Glades, into the Fakahatchee Strand despite the swamp and alligators."

"Oh, no, not that again."

He rubbed his eyes, bent over, snatched a paperback and said, "Ta-daa! You were my Archie Goodwin. While I, with my asthma, was Nero Wolfe. You know. The armchair consultant, the mastermind while you were my leg man, my younger man of action. And you went along with it."

"I didn't go along with it. It's some old radio show, and what are you getting at?"

Not at all sure his uncle hadn't gone off the deep end, Bud began spelling it out for him. "As it happens, I didn't go to all that trouble for your sake. I did it because my mom, your sister, was worried you were getting yourself into something really dicey

this time. Just to make her happy, I drove up there, slogged through the wetlands, asked around and found out the guy you were in cahoots with was a poacher."

"Not really."

"Yes really. Out to clone ghost orchids. To hook up with collectors while he propagated them in a nursery in Coconut Grove. Except for the fact the Strand is a preserve. Except they caught up with the guy red-handed and arrested him."

"Yeah, well . . . anyways, still, you did real good . . . got the knack."

"I don't have any such thing. I cover sports for the *Herald*, that's what I do. So, can we get off this and come to the point?"

Shaking his head, Rick scuffed over to the venetian blinds covering the window and started fiddling with the draw-cord.

"Come on, Rick. Will you just talk to me?"

Opening the blinds and staring out into the glare of the noonday sun, Rick began easing into it. "Okay. We got the Shriners in town. You know, those guys wearing the round, red hats with a tassel, from the burbs in Indiana, letting off steam. Get them in a card game, perfect marks—you can't miss."

"Go on."

"Naturally, when Lenny the building contractor fills me in how they're gonna develop Sanibel Island, secluded retreat and such near Fort Myers . . . if I get in now, divvy up, become a shareholder, I'm golden. No more scrounging around."

Rick yanked at the draw-cord, sending the blinds flying up. His hands shaking so bad Bud had to go over, straighten the blinds, and lower them down again. "Just break it to me, that's all I ask."

But as Rick began to hem and haw, it was near impossible to piece it all together. Something about a high stakes poker game at the nearby Tropic Isle Hotel that ran till dawn. But there weren't only "boozy Shriner bozos" playing it fast and loose. There was a

sharpie from Chicago. And rounds of single malt scotch. And here is where Rick really lost it.

"Way after midnight the hicks and bozos folded . . . ante got raised, pot got bigger and bigger. But when to hold, when to fold? What's he got: a pocket queen, Ace in the hole, three of a kind? He stands pat . . . check . . . rolls his eyes . . . looks off . . . says he'll see you . . . raises, stands pat again. Could be a pair . . . can't fill an inside straight or can he? Had him . . . lost him, over and over until at first light . . . until . . . "

"Tell me," Bud said, unable to take it anymore. "Why was I summoned? Why am I here?"

"Only one way out," Rick said, turning to Bud, tears running down his cheeks. "Gotta buy a little time. It's a trifecta: a pile of money I owe, a little floozy who took off, and a briefcase. What am I gonna do?" Rick lurched at him, grabbed his shoulders and said, "You gotta do this for me, Bud. Else that's all she wrote, end of the line. They roughed me up good, got my phone number, license plate, address. But you're on your feet, bright and fit. Else they'll break my legs, wrap me in a canvas bag and feed me to the barracudas! Bury me in Biscayne Bay!"