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Where the Dead Lay

Written by David Levien

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WHERE THE DEAD LAY

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ONE

The morning was grey, with a cool that wouldn't last. Frank Behr steered his Toronado across East Prospect, and appreciated the empty streets at 5.45 a.m. His neck still throbbed from a guillotine choke he had barely escaped a day ago, and he was having trouble turning his head to the left, but at this hour the city was his. He had a jump on the world, and that felt good. As he drove, he tried to leave his mind distant and unfocused. Better not to dwell on the soft bed he'd just left, or on the physical challenge that loomed ahead of him. In twenty minutes' time he'd be soaked in sweat, his heart hammering, arms and legs turned to molten lead, as he attempted to gain limb-breaking position against a virtually impossible opponent.

Pummelling, clinches, fire feet and sprawl drills, takedowns, guard escapes and technique work. Topped off by lunge walks with a 100lb ground and

pound bag on his shoulder. It was enough to cause a replay of last night's dinner, and that was just for openers, before they began to 'roll', which was what they called sparring at Aurelio Santos's Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Academy.

Behr cut right on Sherman. There wasn't much traffic, but whatever cars were out at this hour would be along 74, so he avoided it. Behr trained alone with Aurelio himself, and because of that made damn sure he was on time for their 6 a.m. starts. It was a matter of respect. Behr had tried the normal group classes in the evenings at the Academy, but leaving the hardest thing of the day until the end was exactly the opposite of how it worked for him now. The spectre of it tended to hang over his entire day. It was a concession to his age, he figured, which was a little chunk on the wrong side of forty, but nowadays he needed to clear the physical effort first.

Aurelio charged him the regular fee of a hundred and fifty bucks a month despite the private lessons that should have cost that much per hour. For that, Behr figured, he owed Aurelio plenty. He had to consider, though, that it might not be a straight-up favour. Behr had a habit of accidentally breaking people. Six foot plenty and two-fortyish was a handful for the recreational martial arts practitioner and Behr had caused some unintentional injuries to various training partners during the decade and a half he'd

studied karate, boxing and kickboxing before taking up Jiu-Jitsu. Regular-sized, civilized, often white-collar folk, plying techniques on someone of his mass and dimension, tended to lose faith in a system when the moves suddenly didn't work. Even those of a much higher belt rank weren't immune. It wasn't unheard of for someone to quit outright and not come back after practising with him. Plain and simple, Frank Behr could be bad for business. Maybe Aurelio had gamed that out.

Behr hit a string of green lights along Campbell, letting the big car drift around some potholes, and then steered towards the Academy on Cumberland. He felt it before he saw it, as he rounded the corner and clicked his right-turn blinker: there was too much activity in the parking lot, which should've been quiet. His eyes zeroed on a pair of patrol cars, done up in graphite and black, the colour scheme for Indianapolis Metro PD since the consolidation with the Sheriff's Department, which still wasn't the norm in his mind after all those years of taupe and brown. There was also an ambulance in the lot. The ambulance had its flashers on, no siren. The patrol cars were split and parked in a wedge, one directly in front of the Academy, the other at the door of the neighbouring cheque-cashing establishment.

That doesn't make much sense, Behr thought, as he

pulled in and parked and saw that the metal grate over the door to the cheque-cashing place was securely closed and the lights turned off. Then his eyes found the door to the studio, which was swung wide open.

Who the hell robs a martial arts school? he wondered. That is no kind of score. Anyone who's ever been inside one could guess the office would contain only disorganized paperwork, out-of-date liability waivers, mouldy addresses, and instead of a safe to break there'd be a petty cash envelope holding fifty dollars maximum. Not even worth the trouble.

Maybe somebody hit the studio hoping to go through the wall into the cheque-cashing place, Behr considered, shutting off his car.

If that was the case, and Aurelio had arrived to discover a thief with the bad fortune to not be finished . . . Well, Behr supposed, that would explain the ambulance. He opened the car door. He wore sweats over shorts and a rash-guard top, and automatically grabbed for his gear bag, which contained mouthpiece, towel and dry clothes for after, and walked towards the studio. *No workout today*, it occurred to him, knowing too well how long the bullshit paperwork with the cops would drag on, until the morning class started to arrive. Then his experience reminded him that burglaries didn't happen at 6 a.m. very often. He quickened his pace.

* * *

The air inside the Academy was thick with it. It was unmistakable. Behr stepped through the door and saw it in tableau. Two paramedics sat back on their haunches, idle and staring at the walls. A pair of cops stood, arms crossed, heads down. Silence. Between them, on the ground, was Aurelio, his face and skull blown away from his neck like a snapped-off match head. Dark blood spattered the blue mat. The once supremely powerful and intelligent body lay there, simply turned off, now just a pile of bone, sinew and other dumb tissue.

Behr edged closer. What stared up at him from the ground made him go cold: death, still and final. He felt his stomach knot and threaten to turn over. He bit back on it hard and held his mud. It was the least he, the living, could do.

Then, even as he stood there, stunned, not saying a word, his eyes began to work, undirected. Aurelio's fists were clenched, the knuckles raised and purpled, as to be expected after his fourteen-year mixed martial arts career. There were damp patches on the mat. Water or sweat? The few pieces of furniture in the studio – chairs and a table – were upturned. A chunk of drywall was caved in. On another wall were a few small, round holes, buckshot pellets lodged in them. The blood streak on the mat grew chunky with solid matter as it neared and stopped at the body.

It came together in an instinctive rush in his

mind: Aurelio had been shotgunned under the palate. It had been an interrogation finished by an execution, but not before a struggle. No *two* men he'd ever met could've held Aurelio down. A gun changed any equation, to be sure, but Behr's gut reaction was that there had to have been three, at least. The body had been dragged a distance, but then abandoned.

'Ah, goddamn it,' he breathed. It just slipped out. Behr cursed himself for the words. He could have used an extra few seconds to take in the details.

But now one of the cops turned to him, 'Regan' printed on his nameplate. 'This is a crime scene. You can't be here. Who are you?' The kid in uniform was blond, maybe twenty-five, but his blue eyes were already going flat and probably lit only when his son or daughter was around. It was what happened.

'Frank Behr. I train here.'

'Behr. You used to be over on the Near Northside?' the other cop, a dark-haired, dark-eyed thirty-year-old, said. His tag read 'Dominic'. 'My uncle Mike's said your name.'

'That's right. A while back,' Behr said, and tried to think. 'How'd the call come in?' They gave him the courtesy.

'Bread truck delivery driver went by on Cumberland. He saw a flash in the window. Didn't think much of it at first, but it stayed with him enough to call 911 further on along his route,' Regan said.

'Don't suppose he saw anybody or any cars in front?' Behr wondered.

'Nah. Course not. Detectives are on the way to question him anyway.'

'You know *this*?' the second cop asked, gesturing to the body.

Behr bristled, but nodded. 'Aurelio Santos.'

'Like the name on the sign.'

'Yeah. It's his place.' Behr heard the defeat in his own voice. He'd seen enough of them to know that this was one cold crime scene. It looked icy. How many dozens of prints and partials would be all over the place thanks to the student traffic? And no witnesses either. A grim, hopeless feeling looked for a place to grab hold in his belly at the waste of it, at the empty hull that was now all that remained of a man.

Then anger settled on Behr, hot and familiar. He felt his breath come in short stabs, a bellows of fury working deep within him. He tried to control it, to not be a 'belly breather', the way Aurelio had taught him when an opponent had knee on chest and was going for full mount and every cubic centimetre of oxygen left in the lungs meant the difference between light and blackness. His jaw set and he knew in that instant that whatever the police did or did not do, no matter how much or how little they threw at the case, no matter how quickly they might try to clear it, *he* would invest the minutes, the hours, the days,

the months it would take to hunt down the scum, the animals, the maggot-motherfuckers who had done this.

A random killing? Behr tried it out in his head. Not the norm for Indianapolis. There'd been too many murders in the city lately, but they all had a crime-on-crime connection and Aurelio was the furthest thing from a criminal. It wasn't right. He felt it again: *someone had wanted something.*

Behr's eye fell on the office in the far corner of the main room. *Information*. It wasn't a mere idea but an imperative that pulsed deep in his cortex, like a reptile's desire for food. He figured Aurelio's Rolodex would be on the desk, and his best hope of a lead would be found inside. But it would be only a matter of moments before the officers threw him out, regardless of whether he'd once been on the job, and went ahead and locked down the crime scene. Like the cop saying went: *when you're in you're a guest, when you're out you're a pest*.

Taking a chance, Behr started for the office, going wide around the body and blood trail, staying on the edge of the mat. His movement seemed to stir the others into action. As he passed the high shelves holding tall, elaborate trophies from Aurelio's wins in the Mundial and Abu Dhabi and Tokyo, the paramedics started closing their unused medical kits and the cops looked to each other.

'Ho, buddy. Where you headed?' asked the dark-haired officer, Dominic. Behr felt them starting after him.

'You guys are gonna need to notify next of kin, I'm gonna get the number,' Behr tossed back over his shoulder.

He reached the office, nudged the door open with a toe, and in the half-light saw an address book with a worn cloth cover on the corner of the desk. Leaving the lights off, Behr dropped his gym bag on top of the book, covering it. Then he took a paperclip off a file cabinet and used it to gently click on the light switch without disturbing any possible prints.

'He's from Brazil. Unmarried. No family in state. Are Homicide Branch and Crime Scene on the way? No one's touched anything, right? You guys seem like you know the dance steps. Goddamn, he was a great guy . . .' Behr used the patter to distract while his eyes darted around the office looking for something he could use before they clocked his bag on the desk. The cops filled the doorway.

'Look at that, huh?' Behr said, of a calendar sponsored by a Brazilian beer called Brahma featuring beautiful copper-skinned girls in dental floss bikinis playing volleyball on Ipanema beach. The young cops glanced at it for a long moment and then Behr saw a sheet of notepaper tacked to the wall over the phone. It was covered with scrawled Portuguese first names

and digits with the +55 prefix needed to call Brazil. Aurelio was from a large, close-knit family, and the list was his frequently dialled numbers back home.

'There you go,' Behr said, stepping back, letting the officers move in. 'If there isn't a family member on that list I'd be real surprised, and there'll at least be a close friend.'

'Thanks,' Regan said. Dominic just grunted. Then the pair raised their notebooks and started copying down the names and numbers. Their backs to him, Behr took the opportunity to pick up his bag, and the address book under it, which he made disappear into the waistband of his sweatpants, pulling his shirt down over it. It didn't look as if the office had been disturbed by whoever had killed Aurelio, and the worn fabric of the book cover wouldn't hold a print very well. The risk had already been taken anyway. There was no going back now.

Behr stepped into the main room again. The blond cop, Regan, followed him out, on point now.

'OK, Behr, Frank,' he said, writing.

'B-e-h-r.' Behr spelled it for him.

'Phone numbers, home, office, cell.'

Behr supplied them, and his address.

'We train four days a week here, for an hour, hour and a half. Then the other instructors, some private students, start to arrive. There's a morning blue-belt

class at eight most weekdays,' Behr went on. He began to feel his emotions beating at the door of the cold recitation. He didn't know how long the barrier would hold.

'Blue belt, what level's that?'

'Fairly beginner, but guys who know their way around.'

'What belt are you?'

'We weren't doing it that way.'

'So, no wife.' Regan shrugged. 'He got an ex-wife?'

'No. Had a girlfriend but they broke up maybe ten months ago. No one steady since then.'

'Uh-huh. I'll need that name.'

'If I can think of it. Maria something.'

'This guy have any beefs?'

'None that I know of. Everybody loved him.'

'Teachers he'd fired? Pissed-off student? Creditor?'

'I'm telling you, everybody loved the guy.'

'Someone didn't fucking love him. Or had a strange way of showing it,' the dark-haired cop, Dominic, said as he joined them.

'Why don't you shut your mouth?' Behr bored holes in him with his eyes. The one paramedic who remained, writing notes on a clipboard, froze.

'Oh.' Dominic turned. 'What're you, gonna cry now?'

'Be a professional, asshole,' Behr said.

'*You* be one.' They stood nose to nose, or thereabouts, since Behr had a good couple of inches on him. The truth was, the guy didn't mean anything by it and Behr knew it. It was just the way cops talked to each other to get through their shift. That didn't make Behr let off any, though.

'Look, you've been helpful, but you're gonna need to fall back for us,' Regan said. 'Watch commander's coming to set.'

Behr broke off with Dominic, nodded, and took one last look at the scene, drinking it in with his eyes. Aurelio wore a green satiny warm-up suit that could've just as easily been his outfit from the night before as it was for that morning. He was wearing Puma track shoes, which he wouldn't have stepped on to the mat with ordinarily, but under the circumstances that didn't seem to mean much. The body still appeared supple. Rigidity hadn't yet set in. The blood was wet. He couldn't have been dead for very long. Behr was turning away when something struck him as wrong. He turned back and tried not to be blinded by the obvious, and then he saw just below where the wound started, Aurelio's neck.

'You didn't remove anything from him, did you?' Behr wondered. The paramedic looked up at him.

'Yeah, a mole from his left butt cheek—' Dominic started in.

'Like what?' Regan said, his voice sounding tired.

'You gonna give us a lesson—' Dominic tried again.

'Jewellery,' Behr said. The paramedic shook his head.

'Nah. There was none,' Regan said. 'Why, you thinking robbery?'

Behr shrugged. He wasn't in the mood to volunteer it but Aurelio wore a thick gold rope chain around his neck that held a figurine of Christ the Redeemer, like the one up on the Corcovado in Rio. He took it off only when he went out on the mat, but like the cop said, it wasn't there. The paramedic finished and exited. The detectives would be showing up within minutes and it would be better if he wasn't around when they did, especially with a piece of evidence tucked into his waistband.

Behr kneeled, almost in communion, near Aurelio's feet, and the room got quiet. Even Dominic gave him the respect. Behr made a final, silent promise, then stood and headed for the door.