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The Death Box

Written by J. A. Kerley

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J.A. Kerley

THE DEATH BOX

HARPER

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1

The stench of rotting flesh filled the box like black fog. Death surrounded Amili Zelaya, the floor a patchwork of clothing bearing the decomposing bodies of seventeen human beings. Amili was alive, barely, staring into the shadowed dark of a shipping container the size of a semi-trailer. Besides the reek of death, there was bone-deep heat and graveyard silence save for waves breaking against a hull far below.

You're lucky, the smiling man in Honduras had said before closing the door, *ten days and you'll be in Los Estados Unitos, the United States, think of that*. Amili had thought of it, grinning at Lucia Belen in the last flash of sunlight before the box slammed shut. They'd crouched in the dark thinking their luck was boundless: They were going to America.

"Lucia," Amili rasped. "Please don't leave me now."

Lucia's hand lay motionless in Amili's fingers. Then, for the span of a second, the fingers twitched. "Fight for life, Lucia," Amili whispered, her parched tongue so swollen it barely moved. Lucia was from Amili's village. They'd grown up together – born in the same week eighteen years ago – ragged but happy. Only when fragments of the outside world intruded did they realize the desperate poverty strangling everyone in the village.

"Fight for life," Amili repeated, drifting into unconsciousness. Sometime later Amili's mind registered the deep notes of ship horns. The roar and rattle of machinery. Something had changed.

"The ship has stopped, Lucia," Amili rasped, holes from popped rivets allowing light to outline the inside of the module, one of thousands on the deck of the container ship bound for Miami, Florida. The illegal human cargo had been repeatedly warned to stay quiet through the journey.

If you reveal yourselves you will be thrown in a gringo prison, raped, beaten . . . men, women, children, it makes no difference. Never make a sound, understand?

Eventually they'd feel the ship stop and the box would be offloaded and driven to a hidden location where they'd receive papers, work assignments, places to live. They had only to perform six months of house-keeping, yard work or light factory labor to relieve the debt of their travel. After that, they owned their lives. A dream beyond belief.

"It must be Miami, Lucia," Amili said. "Stay with me."

But their drinking water had leaked away early in the voyage, a split opening in the side of the huge plastic drum, water washing across the floor of the container, pouring out through the seams. No one worried much about the loss, fearing only that escaping liquid would attract attention and they'd be put in chains to await prison. The ship had been traveling through fierce storms, rainwater dripping into the module from above like a dozen mountain springs. Water was everywhere.

This had been many days back. Before the ship had lumbered into searing summer heat. The rusty water in the bottom of the module was swiftly consumed. For days they ached for water, the inside of the container like an oven. Teresa Maldone prayed until her voice burned away. Pablo Entero drank from the urine pail. Maria Poblana banged on the walls of the box until wrestled to the floor.

She was the first to die.

Amili Zelaya had initially claimed a sitting area by a small hole in the container, hoping to peek out and watch for America. An older and larger woman named Postan Rendoza had bullied Amili away, cursing and slapping her to a far corner by the toilet bucket.

But the module was slightly lower in Amili's square meter of squatting room. Rainwater had pooled in the depressed corner, dampening the underside of Amili's ragged yellow dress.

When the heat came, Amili's secret oasis held water even as others tongued the metal floor for the remaining

rain. When no one was looking Amili slipped the hem of her dress to her mouth and squeezed life over her tongue, brown, rusty water sullied by sloshings from the toilet bucket, but enough to keep her insides from shriveling.

Postan Rendoza's bullying had spared Amili's life. And the life of Lucia, with whom Amili had shared her hidden water.

Rendoza had been the eighth to die.

Three days ago, the hidden cache had disappeared. By then, four were left alive, and by yesterday it was only Amili and Lucia. Amili felt guilt that she had watched the others perish from lack of water. But she had made her decision early, when she saw past tomorrow and tomorrow that water would be a life-and-death problem. Had she shared there would be no one alive in the steaming container: there was barely enough for one, much less two.

It was a hard decision and terrible to keep through screams and moans and prayers, but decisions were Amili's job: Every morning before leaving for the coffee plantation Amili's mother would gather five wide-eyed and barefoot children into the main room of their mud-brick home, point at Amili and say, "Amili is the oldest and the one who makes the good decisions."

A good decision, Amili knew, was for tomorrow, not today. When the foreign dentistas came, it was Amili who cajoled her terrified siblings into getting their teeth fixed and learning how to care for them, so their mouths did

not become empty holes. When the drunken, lizard-eyed Federale gave thirteen-year-old Pablo money to walk into the woods, Amili had followed to see the Federale showing Pablo his man thing. Though the man had official power it had been Amili's decision to throw a big stone at him, the blood pouring from his face as he chased Amili down and beat her until she could not stand.

But he'd been revealed in the village and could never return.

Good decisions, Amili learned, came from the head and not the heart. The heart dealt with the moment. A decision had to be made for tomorrow and the tomorrow after that, all the way to the horizon. It could seem harsh, but decisions made from a soft heart often went wrong. One always had to look at what decisions did for the tomorrows.

Her hardest decision had come one month ago, when Miguel Tolandoro drove into the village in a truck as bright as silver, scattering dust and chickens. His belly was big and heavy and when he held it in his hands and shook it, he told of how much food there was in America. "*Everywhere you look*," he told the astonished faces, "*there is food*." Tolandoro's smiling mouth told shining tales about how one brave person could lift a family from the dirt. He had spoken directly to Amili, holding her hands and looking into her eyes.

"You have been learning English, Amili Zelaya. You speak it well. Why?"

"I suppose I am good in school, Señor Tolandoro."

"I've also heard of your prowess with the mathematics and studies in accounting. Perhaps you yearn for another future, no?"

"I have thought that . . . maybe in a few years. When my family can—"

"Do it today, Amili. Start the flow of munificence to your family. Or do they not need money?"

Amili was frightened of the US, of its distance and strange customs. But her head saw the tomorrows and tomorrows and knew the only escape from barren lives came with money. Amili swallowed hard and told the smiling man she would make the trip.

"I work six months to pay off the travel?"

"You'll still have much to send home, sweet Amili."

"What if I am unhappy there?"

"Say the word and you'll come back to your village."

"How many times does that happen?"

"I've never seen anyone return."

Amili startled to a tremendous banging. After a distant scream of machines and the rattle of cables the container began to lift. The metal box seemed to sway in the wind and then drop. Another fierce slam from below as the module jolted violently to a standstill. Amili realized the container had been moved to a truck.

"Hang on, Lucia. Soon we'll be safe and we can—" Amili held her tongue as she heard dockworkers speaking English outside.

"Is this the one, Joleo?"

"Lock it down fast. We've got two minutes before Customs comes by this section."

Amili felt motion and heard the grinding of gears. She drifted into unconsciousness again, awakened by a shiver in the container. The movement had stopped.

"Lucia?"

Amili patted for her friend's hand, squeezed it. The squeeze returned, almost imperceptible. "Hang on, Lucia. Soon we'll have the *agua*. And our freedom."

Amili heard gringo voices from outside.

"I hate this part, opening the shit-stinking containers. They ought to make the monkeys not eat for a couple days before they get packed up."

"Come on, Ivy. How about you work instead of complaining?"

"I smell it from fifty feet away. Get ready to herd them to the Quonset hut."

Light poured into the box, so bright it stole Amili's vision. She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Okay, monkeys, welcome to the fuckin' U S of – Jesus . . . The smell . . . I think I'm gonna puke. Come here, Joleo . . . something's bad wrong."

"I smelled that in Iraq. It's death. Orzibel's on his way. He'll know what to do."

Amili tried to move her head from the floor but it weighed a thousand kilos. She put her effort into moving her hand, lifting . . .

"I saw one move. Back in the corner. Go get it."

"It stinks to hell in there, Joleo. And I ain't gonna walk over all those—"

"Pull your shirt over your nose. Get it, dammit."

Amili felt hands pull her to her feet and tried to turn back to Lucia. "Wait," she mumbled. "*Mi amiga Lucia está vivo.*"

"What's she saying?"

"Who cares? Haul her out before Orzibel gets here."

"Orzibel's crazy. He'll gut us."

"Christ, Ivy, it ain't our fault. We just grab 'em off the dock."

Amili felt herself thrown atop a shoulder. She grabbed at the body below, trying to make the man see that Lucia was still breathing. The effort was too much and the corners of the box began to spin like a top and Amili collapsed toward an enveloping darkness. Just before her senses spun away, ten final words registered in Amili's fading mind.

"*Oh shit, Joleo, my feet just sunk into a body.*"

2

One year later

It seemed like my world had flipped over. Standing on the deck of my previous home on Alabama's Dauphin Island, the dawn sun rose from the left. My new digs on Florida's Upper Matecumbe Key faced north, the sun rising from the opposite direction. It would take some getting used to.

On Dauphin Island the morning sun lit a rippled green sea broken only by faint outlines of gas rigs on the horizon. Here I looked out on a small half-moon cove ringed with white sand, the turquoise water punctuated by sandy hummocks and small, flat islands coated with greenery. Like most water surrounding the Keys, it was shallow. I could walk out a hundred yards before it reached my belly.

Which seemed a pleasant way to greet the morning. I set my coffee cup on the deck rail and took the steps to the ground, walking two dozen feet of slatted boardwalk to the shoreline. There were no other houses near and if there had been I wouldn't have seen them, the land around my rented home a subtropical explosion of wide-frond palms strung with vines, gnarly trees dense with leaves and all interspersed with towering stands of bamboo. It resembled a miniature Eden, complete with lime trees, lemons, mangoes and Barbados cherries. After a rain, the moist and scented air seemed like an intoxicant.

At water's edge I kicked off my moccasins and stepped into the Gulf, bathtub-warm in August. The sand felt delicious against my soles, conforming to my steps, familiar and assuring. I seemed to smell cigar smoke and scanned the dawn-brightening shoreline, spying only two cakewalking herons pecking for baitfish. Neither was puffing a cigar. I put my hands in the pockets of my cargo shorts and splashed through knee-deep water toward the reeded point marking one horn of the crescent cove, revisiting the conversation that had led me so swiftly and surprisingly to Florida.

"Hello, Carson? This is Roy McDermott. Last time we talked, I mentioned changes in the Florida Center for Law Enforcement. We're creating a team of consulting specialists."

"Good for you, Roy."

"Why I'm calling, Carson . . . We want you on the team."

"I don't have a specialty, Roy. I'm just a standard-issue detective."

"Really? How about that PSIT team you started . . . specializing in psychopaths and sociopaths and general melt-downs? And all them freaky goddamn cases you guys solved?"

I smelled cigar smoke again. Looking to my right I saw a black man walking toward the shore with a stogie in his lips, five-seven or thereabouts, slender, his face ovoid, with a strong, straight nose beneath heavy eyebrows. His mouth was wide, garnished with a pencil mustache, and suggested how Tupac Shakur would have looked in his mid-sixties, though I doubt Shakur would have gone for a pink guayabera shirt and lime-green shorts. A crisp straw fedora with bright red band floated on the man's head and languid eyes studied me as if I were a novel form of waterfowl.

"You the one just moved in that yonder house?" he asked.

"Guilty as charged."

"The realtor tell you two people got killed in there? That the place was owned by a drug dealer, a Nicaraguan with metal teeth?"

The law allowed the confiscation of property employed in criminal enterprises and the place had indeed been the site of two killings, rivals to the drug dealer who had owned the house. The dealer went to prison and the house almost went on the market, but the FCLE was advised to hold it in anticipation of rising home values.

And it wouldn't hurt for time to lapse between the killings and the showings. When I told Roy I was thinking of looking at places in or near the Keys, he'd said, "*Gotta great place you can crib while you're looking, bud. Just don't get too used to it.*"

I nodded at my impromptu morning companion. "I heard about the murders. Didn't hear about the teeth."

"Like goddamn fangs. Heard one had a diamond set in it, but I never got close enough to check. You buyin' the place from the guv'mint? Nasty history, but the house ain't bad – kinda small for the neighborhood – but a good, big chunk of land. As wild as it was when Poncy Deleon showed up."

The house itself – on ten-foot pilings to protect against storm surges – wasn't overwhelming: single story, three bedrooms. But it had broad skylights and a vaulted ceiling in the main room, so it was bright and open. Outside features included a hot tub and decks on two sides. Mr Cigar was right about the land: four untamed acres, like the house was in a tropical park. Plus the property abutted a wildlife sanctuary, a couple hundred swampy acres of flora gone amok. I figured the dealer had picked the place for the wild buffer zone, privacy for all sorts of bad things.

"Afraid I'm just renting," I said. "It's too pricy for me."

A raised eyebrow. "Kinda work you do, mister?"

"In two weeks I start work for the Florida Center for Law Enforcement. I came from Mobile, where I was a cop, a homicide detective."

A moment of reflection behind the cigar. “So I guess we both made a living from dead bodies.”

“Pardon me?”

“I used to own funeral parlors in Atlanta, started with one, ended up with six. Retired here last year when my wife passed away.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? I like it here.”

“I mean about your wife. Was she ill?”

“Healthy as a damn horse. But she was twenny-five years younger’n me an’ only died cuz one a her boyfriends shot her.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I walked his way, splashing up to shore with my hand outstretched. “Guess we’ll be neighbors, then. At least for a while. Name’s Carson Ryder.”

His palm was mortician-soft but his grip was hard. “Dubois B. Burnside.” He pronounced it *Du-boys*.

“The B for Burghardt?” I asked, a shot in the dark. William Edward Burghardt DuBois was an American civil-rights leader, author, educator and about a dozen other things who lived from the late 1800s to the sixties. The intellectual influence of W.E.B. DuBois was, and still is, felt widely.

“That would be right,” he said, giving me a closer look.

“You live close by, Mr Burnside?”

He nodded at a line of black mangroves. “Other side of the trees. Daybreak used to find me heading to the

mortuary to get working. Now I head out here and watch the birds." He took another draw, letting blue smoke dribble from pursed lips. "I like this better."

"Dubois!" bayed a woman's voice from a distance, sending a half-dozen crows fleeing from a nearby tree. "Du-bois! Where you at? Duuuuuuuu-bois!"

My neighbor winced, pulled low the brim of the hat and started to turn away. "Stop by for a drink some night, Mister Ryder. We can talk about dead bodies. I may even have one you can look at."

I splashed away, the sun sending shadows of my temporary home out into the water to guide me ashore. I slipped wet feet into my moccasins and jogged the boardwalk to the porch, moving faster when I heard my cell phone chirping from the deck. The call was from Roy McDermott, my new boss.

"Looks like we got a regular Sunshine State welcome for you, Carson. I'm looking at the weirdest damn thing I ever saw. Scariest, too. I know you don't officially get on the clock for a couple weeks, but I'm pretty sure this can't wait."

"What is it you're looking at, Roy?"

"No one truly knows. Procurement gave you a decent car, I expect?"

"I signed some papers. Haven't seen a car."

A sigh. "I'm gonna kick some bureaucratic ass. Whatever you're driving, how about you pretend it's the Batmobile and kick on the afterburners. Come help me make sense of what I'm seeing."

I hurled myself through the shower and pulled on a pair of khakis and a blue oxford shirt, stepping into desert boots and tossing on a blue blazer. My accessorizing was minimal, the Smith & Wesson Airweight in a clip-on holster. On my way out I grabbed a couple Clif Bars for sustenance and headed down the stairs.

The elevated house was its own carport, with room for a dozen vehicles underneath, and my ancient gray pickup looked lonely on all that concrete. I'd bought it years ago, second-hand, the previous owner a science-fiction fan who'd had Darth Vader air-brushed on the hood. After a bit too much bourbon one night, I'd taken a roller and a can of marine-grade paint and painted everything a sedate, if patchy, gray.

The grounds hadn't been groomed since the dope dealer had ownership, overgrown brush and palmetto fronds grazing the doors as I snaked down the long crushed-shell drive to the electronic gate, eight feet of white steel grate between brick stanchions shaded by towering palms. I panicked until remembering I could open the gate with my phone and dialed the number provided by the realtor.

Phoning a gate, I thought. *Welcome to the Third Millennium.*

I aimed toward the mainland, an hour away, cruised through Key Largo and across the big bridge. My destination was nearby, a bit shy of Homestead. Roy had said to turn right at a sign saying FUTURE SITE OF PLANTATION

Point, A New Adventure in Shopping and head a quarter mile down a gravel road.

"You can't miss the place," he'd added. "It's the only circus tent in miles."

3

It wasn't a circus tent in the distance, but it was sideshow size, bright white against scrubby land scarred by heavy equipment, three Cat 'dozers and a grader sitting idle beside a house-sized pile of uprooted trees. Plastic-ribboned stakes marked future roads and foundations as the early stages of a construction project.

A Florida Highway Patrol cruiser was slanted across the road, a slab-shouldered trooper leaning on the trunk with arms crossed and black aviators tracking my approach. He snapped from the car like elastic, a hand up in the universal symbol for Halt, and I rolled down my window with driver's license in hand. "I'm Carson Ryder, here at the request of Captain Roy McDermott."

The eyes measured the gap between a top dog in the

FCLE and a guy driving a battered pickup. He checked a clipboard and hid his surprise at finding my name.

"Cap'n McDermott's in the tent, Mr Ryder. Please park behind it."

It felt strange that my only identification was a driver's license. I'd had my MPD gold for a decade, flashed it hundreds of times. I'd twice handed it away when suspended, twice had it returned. I'd once been holding it in my left hand while my right hand shot a man dead; his gamble, his loss. It felt strange and foreign to not produce my Mobile shield.

You made the right decision, my head said. My heart still wasn't sure.

I angled five hundred feet down a slender dirt road scraped through the brush, stopping behind the tent, one of those rental jobs used for weddings and whatnot, maybe sixty feet long and forty wide. I was happy to see a portable AC unit pumping air inside. On the far side, beside a house-sized mound of freshly dug earth, were a half-dozen official-looking vehicles including a large black step van which I figured belonged to the Medical Examiner or Forensics department.

Beside the van three men and a woman were clustered in conversation. Cops. Don't ask how I knew, but I always did. A dozen feet away a younger guy was sitting atop a car hood looking bored. I wasn't sure about him.

The entrance was a plastic door with a handmade sign yelling ADMITTANCE BY CLEARED PERSONNEL ONLY!!! the ONLY underscored twice. Though I hadn't been

cleared – whatever that meant – I'd been called, so I pressed through the door.

It was cool inside and smelled of damp sand. Centering the space was a pit about twenty feet by twenty. Above the pit, at the far end of the tent at ground level, were several folding tables. A woman in a lab coat was labeling bags atop two of the tables. Another table held a small microscope and centrifuge. I'd seen this before, an on-site forensics processing center.

I returned my attention to the pit, which resembled the excavation for an in-ground swimming pool, wooden rails keeping the sandy soil from caving. Centering the hole was an eight-foot-tall column with two lab-jacketed workers ticking on its surface with hammers. I estimated the column's diameter at five feet and watched as a white-smocked lab worker dropped a chipped-off shard into an evidence bag. When the worker stepped away, a photographer jumped in. The scene reminded me of a movie where scientists examine a mysterious object from the heavens. Shortly thereafter, of course, the object begins to glow and hum and everyone gets zapped by death beams.

"You there!" a voice yelled. "You're not supposed to be in here."

I snapped from my alien fantasy to see a lab-jacketed woman striding toward me, her black hair tucked beneath a blue ball cap and her eyes a human version of death beams. "Where's your ID?" she demanded, pointing at a naked space on my chest where I assumed

an identification should reside. "You can't be here without an—"

"Yo, Morningstar!" a voice cut in. "Don't kill him, he's on our side."

I looked up and saw Roy McDermott step from the far side of the column. The woman's thumb jerked at me.

"Him? This?"

"He's the new guy I told you about."

The woman I now knew as Morningstar turned big brown death rays on Roy. "I'm in charge of scene, Roy. I want everyone to have a site ID."

Roy patted dust from his hands as he approached, a luminous grin on his huge round face and the ever-present cowlick rising from the crown of semi-tamed haybright hair. He called to mind an insane Jack O'Lantern.

"I'll have someone make him a temporary tag, Vivian. You folks bring any crayons?"

Morningstar's eyes narrowed. "Condescension fits you, Roy. It's juvenile."

Roy climbed the steps from the pit and affected apologetic sincerity. "I forgot his clearance, Vivian. I'm sorry. All we have time for now is introductions. Carson, this is Vivian Morningstar, our local pathologist and—"

"I'm the Chief Forensic Examiner for the Southern Region, Roy."

"Carson, this is the Examining Chief Region of the – shit, whatever. And this, Vivian, is Carson Ryder. We're still figuring out his title."

Morningstar and I brushed fingertips in an approximation of a handshake, though it was more like the gesture of two boxers. Roy took my arm and swung me toward the pit. We stepped down on hastily constructed stairs, the wood creaking beneath us.

"Now to get serious," Roy said. "Damndest thing I've seen in twenty years in the biz."

Three techs stepped aside as we walked to the object. Seemingly made of concrete, it resembled a carved column from a temple in ancient Egypt, its surface jagged and pitted with hollows, as though the sculptor had been called away before completion.

"More light," Roy said.

The techs had been working with focused illumination. One of them widened the lighting, bringing the entire object into hard-edged relief.

A woman began screaming.

I didn't hear the scream, I saw it. Pressing from the concrete was a woman's face, eyes wide and mouth open in an expression of ultimate horror. She was swimming toward me, face breaking the surface of the concrete, one gray and lithic hand above, the other below, as if frozen in the act of stroking. The scenic was so graphic and lifelike that I gasped and felt my knees loosen.

Roy stepped toward me and I held my hand up, *I'm fine*, it lied. I caught my breath and saw ripples of concrete-encrusted fabric, within its folds a rock-hard foot. I moved to the side and saw another gray face peering from the concrete, the eyes replaced with sand

and cement, bone peeking through shredded skin that appeared to have petrified on the cheeks. One temple was missing.

My hand rose unbidden to the shattered face.

"Don't think of touching it," Morningstar said.

My hand went to my pocket as I circled the frieze of despair: two more heads staring from the stone, surrounding them a jumble of broken body parts, hands, knees, shoulders. Broken bones stood out like studs.

My hands ached to touch the column, as if that might help me to understand whatever had happened. But I thrust them deeper into my pockets and finished my circle, ending up at the screaming woman, her dead face still alive in her terror.

"It was found yesterday," Roy explained. "A worker was grading land when his blade banged a chunk of concrete. The foreman saw a mandible sticking out and called us. We had the excavation started within two hours."

Most municipal departments would have needed a day to pull the pieces together, maybe longer. But that was the power of a state organization. The FCLE arrived, flashed badges, and went to work.

"What formed the column?" I asked.

Morningstar tapped the object. "The concrete was poured into an old rock-walled cistern. Stones initially surrounded the object, but the techs spent last night dislodging them."

"Any idea when it was put here?"

"Could be a few months, could be two years. I'll get closer as we analyze more samples."

"You're gonna find different times," called a basso voice from above. "Older bodies, newer ones. The bottom bodies may go back years, decades even."

I looked up at a guy on ground level, mid-forties or so, dark complexion, black suit, gray shirt. His sole concession to festivity was a colour-speckled tie that seemed from one of Jackson Pollock's brighter days. The man's gleaming black hair was swept back behind his ears. He wore dark sunglasses on a prize-winning proboscis, more like a beak. With the clothes, nose, and down-looking pose he called to mind a looming buzzard.

"What you been up to, Vincent?" Roy asked.

The guy brandished the briefcase. "Copying property records at the Dade County assessor's office. Someone had to know the cistern was here, right?"

Roy nodded approvingly. "Come down into the hole, Vince. Got someone you should meet."

I shook hands with Vincent Delmara, a senior investigator with the Miami-Dade County Police Department. Though the FCLE might swoop in and start bee-buzzing a crime scene, shutting out the locals invited turf wars which, in the long run, had no winners.

"You're thinking these bodies were built up over time, not just dumped all at once?" Roy asked Delmara.

"We got us a serial killer," Delmara exulted. "He's been using the hole as a dumping ground over years. We're gonna solve a shitload of disappearances."

I understood Delmara's enthusiasm. Miami-Dade, like any large metro area, had a backlog of missing persons. If this was a serial killer and the bodies were identified, a lot of cases could be cleared and families granted closure.

"I'm thinking he used an ax," Delmara said. "He dumps the corpse in the cistern and pours in concrete to cover. They were supposed to stay hidden for ever, except development got in the way."

"What do you think accounts for the brownish cast to the concrete?" I asked. "And the rusty streaks, like here?"

"Mud mixing with the cement. Dirt."

Roy produced an unlit cigar to placate his fingers. "The only problem I got is picturing a guy mixing a tub of 'crete every time he dumps a body. It gets riskier with repetition."

"Maybe he gets off on the risk," Delmara said. "Mixes his concrete as an appetizer, dumps the body for his entree, jacks off into the hole for dessert." Delmara circled his fingers and mimed the concept.

"For Christ's sake," Morningstar said.

"How many crime scenes you been at where jism's squirted all over the place, Doctor Morningstar?" Delmara grinned. "More than a few, I'll bet."

I closed my eyes and pictured the area as if it were a time-lapse documentary, day turning into night and back to day, clouds stampeding across blue sky, white clouds turning black, sun becoming rain becoming sun again.

"Maybe the concrete was poured in dry to save time

and risk," I suggested. "Rain would soak the cement powder, time would harden it."

"Genius," Roy said, clapping a big paw on my shoulder. "No fuss, no muss, no mixing. Plus cement contains lime, which helps decomposition." He looked at Delmara. "What you think, Vince?"

"Tasty."

"You think we got us a serial killer, Carson?" Roy asked.

I turned to the column to study a splintered ulna, a severed tibia, a caved-in section of rib cage. Many seemed the kind of injuries I'd noted in car crashes. Whereas Delmara was seeing an ax used on the bodies, I was picturing a sledgehammer. Or both, the violence was that horrific. Something felt a shade off, though I couldn't put my finger on it; having no better idea, I nodded.

"It's the way to go for now."

"Hell yes," Delmara said, punching the air. "We're gonna close some cases."

Morningstar stepped forward. "Excuse me, boys. But if you're done being brilliant, I'd like to get back to work."

Delmara made notes. Roy and I retreated up the steps as Morningstar motioned her team back into place. The chipping of chisels began anew.

We stopped at the entrance. Roy lowered his voice. "Look, Carson, I want you to start work early and be the lead on this case."

"No way," I said.

"I need you, Carson."

"Your people are gonna be drooling for this case, Roy. It's a biggie."

"How many bodies did John Wayne Gacy stack up under his house before he got nailed?" Roy said. "Twenty? Thirty? How about Juan Corona? We might have a grade-one psycho out there, Carson. Your specialty, right . . . the edge-walking freaks?"

"I've not even met your people, Roy. If I start by giving orders I'll start by stepping on toes. Bad first step."

"You were here ten minutes and figured out the concrete angle."

"A conjecture."

"It's the kind of thinking I need. And don't worry – I'll deal with any delicate tootsies." He slapped his hands – *conversation over* – and headed outside. I followed, thinking that if his people let a newbie waltz in as lead investigator on a case this big, they must be the most ego-free cops the world had ever produced.

4

The semi-truck rumbled down the sandy lane in the South Florida coastal backcountry, a battered red tractor pulling the kind of gray intermodal container loaded on ships, traversing oceans before being offloaded to a truck or train to continue its journey. Tens of thousands of the nondescript containers traveled the world daily and it had been calculated that at any given moment over three per cent of the world's GDP lay within the containers of Maersk, the world's largest intermodal shipper.

But those were official loads. This particular shipment was a ghost, its true contents never recorded in any official documents. With the complicity of bribed clerks and customs agents, this simple gray box had boarded a ship in Honduras, sailed to the Port of Miami and been offloaded to the red tractor, with only the kind of glancing

notice that came from eyes averted at the precise moment the container ghosted past.

"Looks quiet to me, Joleo."

The passenger in the cab porched his hand over a scarred and sunburned brow, his dull green eyes scanning a stand of trees in the distance. Between the treeline and the truck was a corroded Quonset hut, a hundred feet of corrugated aluminum resembling a dirty gray tube half sunk in the sand. The passenger's name was Calvert Hatton, but he went by Ivy, tattooed strands of the poison variety of the weed entwining his arms from wrist to shoulder.

"Our part's almost over," the driver said, pulling to a halt. He was tall and ropey and his name was Joe Leo Hurst, but over the years it had condensed to Joleo. "Go move 'em to the hut, Ivy."

Ivy jumped from the cab and walked to the rear with bolt cutters in work-gloved hands as Joleo climbed atop the hood to scan the area.

"I still hate opening that damn door," Ivy grumbled. "After that shipment last year . . ."

"We've done a bunch more since then. You remember one shipment that went bad?"

"I get nightmares," Ivy whined.

Ivy wore a blue uniform shirt that strained over a grits-and-gravy belly and his thinning hair was greased back over his ears. He reached the bolt cutter's jaws to the shining lock on the container and snapped the shackle. He climbed the tailgate to undo the latch on the doors, jumping down as they creaked open.

"The goddamn stench," Ivy complained, pinching his nostrils as he peered into the module. "OK, monkeys, welcome to the Estados Unitas or whatever. Come on, get off your asses and move."

A rail-thin Hispanic man in tattered clothes lowered himself from the container on shaky legs. He was followed by twenty-two more human beings in various stages of disarray, mostly young, mostly women. They blinked in the hard sunlight, fear written deep in every face.

"They all OK?" Joleo asked, now beside the cab and smoking.

"All up and moving."

The Hispanics stood in a small circle at the rear of the truck, rubbing arms and legs, returning circulation to limbs that had moved little in a week. Ivy was lighting a cigarette when his head turned to the incoming road.

"Cars!" he yelled. "Orzibel's coming."

Joleo squinted in the direction of the vehicles and saw a black Escalade in the distance, behind it a brown panel van.

"Relax, Ivy. He's just gonna grab some of the load."

"That fucker scares me. He gets crazy with that knife."

"Right, you get nightmares."

Joleo was trying to joke, but his eyes were on the Escalade and his mouth wasn't smiling, watching the car and van drive round the final bend and bear down on them. The black-windowed Escalade stopped hard at the rear of the truck, the van on its bumper. The Hispanics,

senses attuned to danger, backed away, the circle re-forming beside the truck.

The driver's side door opened on the Escalade and a man exited, as large as a professional wrestler and packed into a blue velvet running suit bulging with rock-muscled arms and thighs. He seemed without a neck, a round head jammed atop a velvet-upholstered barrel. The head was bald and glistened in the sun and its features were oddly small and compact, as if its maker's hand had grasped a normal face and gathered everything to the center. And perhaps the same maker had tapped the eyes with his fingers, drawing out all life and leaving small black dots as cold as the eyes of dice. The dead eyes studied Ivy and Joleo as if seeing them for the first time.

"Yo, Chaku," Joleo said. "S'up, man?"

If the driver heard, he didn't seem to notice. The package of muscle nodded at the passenger side of the Escalade and another man exited the vehicle, or rather flowed from within, like a cobra uncurling from a basket.

His toes touched the sand first, sliver-bright tips of hand-tooled cowboy boots made of alligator hide. He wore dark sunglasses and walked slowly. His black silk suit seemed tailored to every motion in the slender frame. His snow-white shirt was ruffled and strung with a bolo tie, a cloisonné yin-yang of black enamel flowing into white.

The man was in his early thirties with a long face centered by an aquiline nose and a mouth crafted for broad smiles. His hair was black, short on the sides

and pomaded into prickly spikes at the crown, a casual, straight-from-the-shower look only a good stylist could imitate.

A brown hand with long and delicate fingers plucked the sunglasses from the face to display eyes so blue they seemed lit from behind. The eyes looked across the parched landscape admiringly, as if the man had conceived the plans for the intersection of earth and sky and was inspecting the results. After several moments, he walked to the Hispanics, a smile rising to his lips.

"*Hola*, friends," the man said, clapping the exquisite hands, the smile outshining the sun. "*Bienvenidos a los Estados Unidos. Bienvenido a gran riqueza.*"

Welcome to the United States. Welcome to your fortunes.

Eyes rose to the man. Heads craned on weary necks.

"I represent your benefactor," the man said in Spanish. "We are happy you made the journey. If you work hard you can make vast amounts of beautiful American dollars."

His words sparked a nodding of heads and the beginnings of smiles. This was why they had left their homes and villages. The man gestured to the Quonset hut. "Most of you will go to the building and wait. Soon you will continue to Tampa, Pensacola, Orlando, Jacksonville. Some will be returning with me to Miami. Wherever you go, money awaits. All you have to do is honor your contract, and . . ." the hands spread in munificence, "the divine cash will shower into your palms."

The smiles were full now, the heads a chorus of bobs. Someone yelled "*Viva el Jefé*."

Long live the Chief.

The smiling man entered the group, basking in smiles and *Viva*s and hands patting his back as though a saint walked among them. He studied each face in turn, paying particular interest to the dark-haired women. One kept shooting glances through bashful, doe-like eyes. He took her small hand, holding it tight as she instinctively tried to pull it away.

"What is it, little beauty?" he said, patting the hand. "Why were you staring so?"

A blush crept to her neck. "I first thought . . . when you stepped from the beautiful car . . . we were in the Hollywood."

"What makes you say that, little one?"

The blush swept her face as her eyes dropped to the ground. "You are so handsome," she whispered. "Surely you are in the cinema."

"You are far too kind. What is your name?"

"Leala . . . Leala Rosales."

"I need four women and one man for Miami, Leala Rosales. Would you like me to show you the most beautiful city in the world, my city?"

"I . . . I . . . don't know if . . ."

"You have stepped into a new world, Leala. Now you must trust yourself to jump."

"I will . . . Yes, I will go with you, señor. Can my friend Yolanda come as well?" She pointed to a nearby girl.

"Perhaps the next time, Leala. There is only so much room in the car."

"It looks very big."

"Appearances can be deceiving. Hurry to the car, Leala. I will meet you there in a moment."

The girl ran to the Escalade. The man's white teeth flashed. "Did you want a fresh boy, Chaku?" he said in English. "Come look at the selection."

The first sign of life in the driver's eyes. He tapped the skinny shoulder of a male youth no older than fourteen, and pointed to the van. The boy understood nothing but that he was to move toward the vehicle, so he moved.

The handsome man walked among the Hispanics, directing three more women to the van, pointing the others toward the Quonset hut. The driver and passenger jumped from the van, two bandana-headed Hispanics with tattoos on arms and necks. They hurried the four selections into the rear of the vehicle. As the new occupants climbed inside, the driver opened a side door and retrieved two magnetic signs saying A-1 Window Treatments and applied them to the sides of the van.

The handsome man turned to the hulking driver. "Let me talk to these gentlemen in private, Chaku." The comment was followed by a small and cryptic flick of the blue eyes. The driver retreated to the Escalade as the man gestured Ivy and Joleo to the side of the trailer. In the distance the Hispanics walked toward the gray hut. They were smiling and laughing.

The handsome man's eyes flicked between the men. "Did it go smoothly?"

"Yes, sir," Joleo said. "Like always."

"Are you receiving your compensation correctly?" He turned his eyes to Ivy.

"Yes, sir," Ivy said, trying to keep his gaze from falling to his shoes. "A day after every delivery. Th-thank you, Mr Orzibel."

Orlando Orzibel flashed his supernova smile. "Good work deserves no less. And good work means quiet work, right?"

Both heads bobbed. Orzibel nodded in satisfaction and turned away. He stopped and turned back. The smile had disappeared. "So how is it I heard of lips speaking my name in a filthy little bar last month? A rathole called Three Aces?"

Ivy seemed to waver on his knees. His mouth fell open to show darkened teeth. "I . . . I . . . it was a mistake, Mr Orzibel. It'll never happen again. And all I said, was—"

An arm from nowhere wrapped around Ivy's neck, lifting him off the ground. The huge driver had somehow left the Escalade and crept across the crunchy sand and beneath the trailer without making a sound.

"And your lips not only used my name," Orzibel said, "they implied my business."

"A mistake . . ." Ivy gasped, pulling at the arm around his neck as his face reddened. "It'll never hap . . . gain. Please—"

Orzibel nodded and the hulk named Chaku opened his arms and Ivy fell to the ground. Orzibel lowered to a squat. A knife had appeared in his hand, a dark-bladed commando knife with few purposes but destruction.

"Please, Mr Orzibel . . ." Ivy begged, tears falling down his cheeks. "Remember how I helped you with the cement last year . . . made your problem go away? How I worked all night for you . . ."

The knife whispered through the air and Ivy's lower lip dropped in the dirt below his face. His eyes were disbelieving as his fingers touched the open teeth, coming away shining with blood.

Orzibel picked up the lip with the point of the knife and held it before Ivy's horrified eyes. "Eat it," he hissed. "Eat it or die."

"No, pleagggh . . ." Ivy wailed.

"Eat," Orzibel commanded. "Eat the lip that spoke my name."

"I ca-ca-cand," Ivy bubbled, blood spattering with his words.

"You have three seconds," Orzibel said. "One . . ."

Ivy's shaking hands plucked the flesh from the knife, tried to bring it to his mouth, dropped it in the sand. "I c-c-cand," he moaned, his words mushy through blood and the mucus pouring from his nose.

"Two."

Ivy retrieved his lip and brought it to his open teeth. He began to bite gingerly at the strip of meat, but a

torrent of vomit exploded from his throat and washed the lip from his fingers.

"Three!" The knife whispered again and Ivy grabbed at his throat, his forearms glistening with the blood pouring from his slit neck. After scant seconds his eyes rolled back and he fell backward. Orzibel bent over the twitching body and wiped the knife on its shirt.

"You have the plastic in the trunk, Chaku?"

"Always."

"When he drains, wrap him tight and put him in the trunk. Tonight we'll drop him down the hole in the world. Be sure to purchase ample concrete."