

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Carl Hiyaasen



WALKER BOOKS

TOURIST SEASON

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—Tony Hillerman, *New York Times Book Review*

Tourist Season

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SUMMARY:

Kriminalroman.

Tourist Season

On the morning of December 1, a man named Theodore Bellamy went swimming in the Atlantic Ocean off South Florida. Bellamy was a poor swimmer, but he was a good real-estate man and a loyal Shriner.

The Shriners thought so much of Theodore Bellamy that they had paid his plane fare all the way from Evanston, Illinois, to Miami Beach, where a big Shriner convention was being staged. Bellamy and his wife, Nell, made it a second honeymoon, and got a nice double room at the Holiday Inn. The view was nothing to write home about; a big green dumpster was all they could see from the window, but the Bellamys didn't complain. They were determined to love Florida.

On the night of November 30, the Shriners had arranged a little parade down Collins Avenue. Theodore Bellamy put on his mauve fez and his silver riding jacket, and drove his chrome-spangled Harley Davidson (all the important Evanston Shriners had preshipped their bikes on a flatbed) up and down Collins in snazzy circles and figure eights, honking the horns and flashing the lights. Afterwards Bellamy and his pals got bombed and sneaked out to the Place Pigalle to watch a 325-pound woman do a strip-tease. Bellamy was so snookered he didn't even blink at the ten-dollar cover.

Nell Bellamy went to bed early. When her husband lurched in at 4:07 in the morning, she said nothing. She may have even smiled just a little, to herself.

The alarm clock went off like a Redstone rocket at eight sharp. "We're going swimming," Nell announced. Theodore was suffering through the please-God-I'll-never-do-it-again phase of his hangover when his wife hauled him out of bed. Next thing he knew, he was wearing his plaid swim trunks, standing on the beach, Nell nudging him toward the surf, saying you first, Teddy, tell me if it's warm enough.

The water was plenty warm, but it was also full of Portuguese men-of-war, poisonous floating jellyfish that pucker on the surface like bright blue balloons. Theodore Bellamy quickly became entangled in the burning tentacles of such a creature. He thrashed out of the ocean, his fish-white belly streaked with welts, the man-of-war clinging to his bare shoulder. He was crying. His fez was soaked. At first Nell Bellamy was embarrassed, but then she realized that this was not Mango Daiquiri Pain; this was the real thing. She led her husband to a Disney World beach towel, and there she cradled him until two lifeguards ran up with a first-aid kit.

Later, Nell would remember that these were not your average-looking bleached-out lifeguards. One was black and the other didn't seem to speak English, but what the heck, this was Miami. She had come here resolved not to be surprised at anything, and this was the demeanor she maintained while the men knelt over her fallen husband. Besides, they were wearing authentic lifeguard T-shirts, weren't they?

After ten minutes of ministrations and Vaseline, the lifeguards informed Nell Bellamy that they would have to transport her husband to a first-aid station. They said he needed medicine to counteract the man-of-war's venom. Nell wanted to go along, but they persuaded her to wait, and assured her it was nothing serious. Theodore said don't be silly, work on your tan, I'll be okay now.

And off they went, Theodore all pale-legged and stripe-bellied, a lifeguard at each side, marching down the beach.

That was 8:44 A.M.

Nell Bellamy never saw her husband again.

At ten sharp she went searching for the lifeguards, with no success, and after walking a gritty two-mile stretch of beach, she called the police. A patrolman came to the Holiday Inn and took a missing-persons report. Nell mentioned Theodore's hangover and what a lousy swimmer he was. The cop to

Mrs. Bellamy that her husband had probably tried to go back in the water and had gotten into trouble in the rough surf. When Mrs. Bellamy described the two lifeguards, the policeman gave her a very odd look.

The case of Theodore Bellamy was not given top priority at the Miami Beach police department where the officers had more catastrophic things to worry about than a drunken Shriner missing in the ocean.

The police instead were consumed with establishing the whereabouts of B. D. "Sparky" Harper, one of the most important persons in all Florida; Harper, who had failed to show up at his office for the first time in twenty-one years. Every available detective was out shaking the palm trees, hunting for Sparky.

When it became clear that the police were too preoccupied to launch a manhunt for her husband, Nell Bellamy mobilized the Shriners. They invaded the beach in packs, some on foot, others on motorcycles, a few in tiny red motorcars that had a tendency to get stuck in the sand. The Shriners wore grim, purposeful looks; Teddy Bellamy was one of their own.

The Shriners were thorough, and they got results. Nell cried when she heard the news. They had found Theodore's fez on the beach, at water's edge.

Nell thought: So he really drowned, the big nut.

Later the Shriners gathered at Lummus Park for an impromptu prayer service. Someone laid a wreath on the handlebars of Bellamy's customized Harley.

Nobody could have dreamed what actually happened to Theodore Bellamy. But this was just the beginning.

They found Sparky Harper later that same day, a bright and cloudless afternoon.

A cool breeze kicked up a light chop on the Pines Canal, where the suitcase floated, half-submerged, invisible to the teenager on water skis. He was skimming along at forty knots when he rammed the luggage and launched into a spectacular triple somersault.

His friends wheeled the boat to pick him up and offer congratulations. Then they doubled back for the suitcase. It took all three of them to haul it aboard; they figured it had to be stuffed with money and dope.

The water skier got a screwdriver from a toolbox and chiseled at the locks on the suitcase. "Let's see what's inside!" he said eagerly.

And there, folded up like Charlie McCarthy, was B. D. "Sparky" Harper.

"A dead midget!" the boat driver gasped.

"That's no midget," the water skier said. "That's a real person."

"Oh God, we gotta call the cops. Come on, help me shut this damn thing."

But with Sparky Harper swelling, the suitcase wouldn't close, and the latches were broken anyway, so all the way back to the marina the three of them sat on the luggage to keep the dead midget inside.

Two Dade County detectives drove out to Virginia Key to get the apple-red Samsonite Royce Tourister. They took a statement from the water skier, put the suitcase in the trunk of their unmarked Plymouth, and headed back downtown.

One of the cops, a blocky redhead, walked into the medical examiner's office carrying the Samsonite as if nothing were wrong. "Is this the Pan Am terminal?" he deadpanned to the first secretary he saw.

The suitcase was taken to the morgue and placed on a shiny steel autopsy table. Dr. Joe Allen, the chief medical examiner, recognized Sparky Harper instantly.

"The first thing we've got to do," said Dr. Allen, putting on some rubber gloves, "is get him out of there."

Whoever had murdered the president of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce had gone to considerable trouble to pack him into the red Samsonite. Sparky was only five-foot-five, but he

weighed nearly one hundred ninety pounds, most of it in the midriff. To have squeezed him into a suitcase, even a deluxe-sized suitcase, was a feat that drew admiring comments from the coroner and seasoned staff. One of the clerks used up two rolls of film documenting the extrication.

Finally the corpse was removed and unfolded, more or less, onto the table. It was then that some of the amazement dissolved: Harper's legs were missing below the kneecaps. That's how the killer had fit him into the suitcase.

One of the cops whispered, "Look at those clothes, Doc."

It was odd. Sparky Harper had died wearing a brightly flowered print shirt and baggy Bermuda-style shorts. Sporty black wraparound sunglasses concealed his dilated pupils. He looked just like any other tourist from Milwaukee.

The autopsy took two hours and twenty minutes. Inside Sparky Harper, Dr. Allen found two gallstones, forty-seven grams of partially digested stone crabs, and thirteen ounces of Pouilly Fuisse. But the coroner found no bullets, no stab wounds, no signs of trauma besides the amputations, which were crude but not necessarily fatal.

"He must have bled to death," the redheaded cop surmised.

"Don't think so," Dr. Allen said.

"Bet he drowned," said the other cop.

"No, sir," said Dr. Allen, who was probing into the lungs by now. Dr. Allen wasn't crazy about people gawking over his shoulder while he worked. It made him feel like he was performing onstage, a magician pulling little purple treasures out of a dark hole. He didn't mind having medical students and observers because they were always so solemn during an autopsy. Cops were something else; one dumb joke after another. Dr. Allen had never figured out why cops get so silly in a morgue.

"What's that greasy stuff all over his skin?" asked the redheaded detective.

"Essence of Stiff," said the other cop.

"Smells like coconuts," said the redhead. "I'm serious, Doc, take a whiff."

"No, thank you," Dr. Allen said curtly.

"I don't smell anything," said the assistant coroner, "except the deceased."

"It's coconut, definitely," said the other cop, sniffing. "Maybe he drowned in pina colada."

Nobody could have guessed what actually had killed Sparky Harper. It was supple and green and exactly five and one-quarter inches long. Dr. Allen found it lodged in the trachea. At first he thought it was a large chunk of food, but it wasn't.

It was a toy rubber alligator. It had cost seventy-nine cents at a tourist shop along the Tamiami Trail. The price tag was still glued to its corrugated tail.

B. D. "Sparky" Harper, the president of the most powerful chamber of commerce in all Florida, had choked to death on a rubber alligator. Well, well, thought Dr. Allen as he dangled the prize for his proteges to see, here's one for my slide show at next month's convention.

News of B. D. Harper's death appeared on the front page of the Miami Sun with a retouched photograph that made Harper look like a flatulent Gene Hackman. Details of the crime were meager, but this much was known:

Harper had last been seen on the night of November 30, driving away from Joe's Stone Crab restaurant on South Miami Beach. He had told friends he was going to the Fontainebleau Hilton for drinks with some convention organizers from the International Elks.

Harper had not been wearing a Jimmy Buffett shirt and Bermuda shorts, but in fact had been dressed in a powder-blue double-knit suit purchased at J. C. Penney's.

He had not appeared drunk.

He had not worn black wraparound sunglasses.

He had not been lugging a red Samsonite.

He had not displayed a toy rubber alligator all evening.

In the newspaper story a chief detective was quoted as saying, "This one's a real whodunit," which was what the detective was told to say whenever a reporter called.

In this instance the reporter was Ricky Bloodworth.

Bloodworth wore that pale, obsessive look of ambition so familiar to big-city newsrooms. He was short and bony, with curly black hair and a squirrel-like face frequently speckled with late-blooming acne. He was frenetic to a fault, dashing from phone to typewriter to copy desk in a blur—yet he was different from most of his colleagues. Ricky Bloodworth wanted to be much more than just a reporter; he wanted to be an authentic character. He tried, at various times, panama hats, silken vests, a black eyepatch, saddle shoes, a Vandyke—nobody ever noticed. He even experimented with Turkish cigarettes (thinking it debonair) and wound up on a respirator at Mercy Hospital. Even those who disliked Bloodworth, and they were many, felt sorry for him; the poor guy wanted a quirk in the workday. But, stylistically, the best he could do was to drum pencils and suck down incredible amounts of 7-Up. It wasn't much, but it made him feel like he was contributing something to the newsroom's energy bank.

Ricky Bloodworth thought he'd done a respectable job on the first Sparky Harper story (given the tight deadlines), but now, on the morning of December 2, he was ready to roll. Harper's ex-wives had to be found and interviewed, his coworkers had to be quizzed, and an array of semi-bereaved civic leaders stood ready to offer their thoughts on the heinous crime.

But Dr. Allen came first. Ricky Bloodworth knew the phone number of the coroner's office by heart, having memorized it as one of the first things he'd done after joining the paper.

When Dr. Allen got on the line, Bloodworth asked, "What's your theory, Doc?"

"Somebody tied up Sparky and made him swallow a rubber alligator," the coroner said.

"Cause of death?"

"Asphyxiation."

"How do you know he didn't swallow it on purpose?"

"Did he cut off his own legs, too?"

"You never know," Bloodworth said. "Maybe it started out as some kinky sex thing. Or maybe it was voodoo, all these Haitians we got now. Or santeria."

"Sparky was a Baptist, and the police are calling it a homicide."

"They've been wrong before."

Ricky Bloodworth was not one of Dr. Allen's favorite newspaper reporters. Dr. Allen regarded him as charmless and arrogant. There had been times, when the prospect of a frontpage story loomed, that Dr. Allen could have sworn he saw flecks of foam on Bloodworth's lips.

Now the coroner listened to Bloodworth's typing on the end of the phone line, and wondered how badly his quotes were being mangled.

"Ricky," he said impatiently. "The victim's wrists showed ligature marks—"

"Any ten-year-old can tie himself up."

"And stuff himself in a suitcase?"

The typing got faster.

"The victim was already deceased when he was placed in the suitcase," Dr. Allen said. "Is there anything else?"

"What about the oil? One of the cops said the body was coated with oil."

"Not oil," Dr. Allen said. "A combination of benzophenone, stearic acids, and lanolin."

"What's that?"

"Suntan lotion," the coroner said. "With coconut butter."

Ricky Bloodworth was hammering away on his video terminal when he sensed a presence behind him.

He turned slightly, and caught sight of Skip Wiley's bobbing face. Even with a two-day stubble it was a striking visage: long, brown, and rugged-looking; a genetic marvel, every feature plagiarized from disparate ancestors. The cheekbones were high and sculptured, the nose pencil-straight but rather long and flat, the mouth upturned with little commas on each cheek, and the eyes disarming—small and keen, the color of strong coffee; full of mirth and something else. Skip Wiley was thirty-seven years old but he had the eyes of an old Gypsy.

It made Bloodworth abnormally edgy and insecure when Skip Wiley read over his shoulder. Wiley wrote a daily column for the Sun and probably was the best-known journalist in Miami. Undeniably he was a gifted writer, but around the newsroom he was regarded as a strange and unpredictable character. Wiley's behavior had lately become so odd that younger reporters who once sought his counsel were now fearful of his ravings, and they avoided him.

"Coconut butter?" Wiley said gleefully. "And no legs!"

"Skip, please."

Wiley rolled up a chair. "I think you should lead with the coconut butter."

Bloodworth felt his hands go damp.

Wiley said, "This is awful, Ricky: 'Friends and colleagues of B. D. Harper expressed grief and outrage Tuesday ... ' Jesus Christ, who cares? Give them coconut oil!"

"It's a second-day lead, Skip—"

"Here we go again, Mr. Journalism School." Wiley was gnawing his lower lip, a habit manifested only when he composed a news story. "You got some good details in here. The red Royal Tourister. The black Ray-Bans. That's good, Ricky. Why don't you toss out the rest of this shit and move the juicy stuff up top? Do your readers a favor, for once. Don't make 'em go on a scavenger hunt for the goodies."

Bloodworth was getting queasy. He wanted to defend himself, but it was lunacy to argue with Wiley.

"Maybe later, Skip. Right now I'm jammed up for the first edition."

Wiley jabbed a pencil at the video screen, which displayed Bloodworth's story in luminous green text.

"Brutal? That's not the adjective you want. When I think of brutal I think of chain saws, ice picks, and handles. Not rubber alligators. No, that's mysterious, wouldn't you say?"

"How about bizarre?"

"A bit overworked these days, but not bad. When's the last time you used bizarre?"

"I don't recall, Skip."

"Try last week, in that story about the Jacuzzi killing in Hialeah. Remember? So it's too early to use bizarre again. I think mysterious is the ticket."

"Whatever you say, Skip."

Wiley was boggling, when he wanted to be.

"What's your theory, Ricky?"

"Some sex thing, I guess. Sparky rents himself a bimbo, dresses up in this goofy outfit—"

"Perhaps a little S-and-M?"

"Yeah. Things go too far, he gags on the rubber alligator, the girl panics and calls for help. The muscle arrives, hacks up Sparky, crams the torso into the suitcase, and heaves it into Biscayne Bay. The good guys grab the girl and take off in Sparky's car."

Wiley eyed him. "So you don't believe it's murder?"

"Accidental homicide. That's my prediction." Bloodworth was starting to relax. Wiley was rocking the chair, a look of amusement on his face. Bloodworth noticed that Wiley's long choppy mane was starting to show gray among the blond.

Bloodworth said, a little more confidently, "I think Harper's death was a freak accident. I think the guy will come forward before too long, and that'll be the end of it."

Wiley chuckled. "Well, it's a damn good yarn." He stood up and pinched Ricky's shoulder affectionately. "But I don't have to tell you how to hit the hype button, do I?"

For the first edition, Ricky Bloodworth moved the paragraph about the coconut oil higher in the story and changed the word brutal to mysterious in the lead.

The rest of the afternoon Bloodworth spent on the phone, gathering mawkish quotes about Spark Harper, who seemed venerated by everyone except his former wives. As for blood relatives, the best Bloodworth could scrounge up was a grown son, a lawyer in Marco Island, who said of his father:

"He was a dreamer, and he honestly meant well."

Not exactly a tearjerker, but Bloodworth stuck it in the story anyway.

After finishing, he reread the piece once more. It had a nice flow, he thought, and the tone graduated smoothly: shock first, then outrage and, finally, sorrow.

It's good, a page-one contender, Bloodworth told himself as he walked down to the Coke machine.

While he was away, Skip Wiley crept up and snatched the print-out of the story off his desk. He was pretending to mark it up with a blue pencil when Bloodworth came back.

"What now, Skip?"

"Your lead's no good."

"Come on, I told you—"

"Hey, Ace, it's not a second-day story anymore. Something broke while you were diddling around News, they call it. Check with the police desk, you'll see."

"What are you talking about?"

Wiley grinned as he tossed the pages into Ricky Bloodworth's lap. "The cops caught the guy," he said.

"Ten minutes ago."

Brian Keyes slouched on a worn bench in the lobby of the Dade County jail, waiting to see the crew the cops just caught. Keyes looked at his wristwatch and muttered. Twenty minutes. Twenty goddam minutes since he'd given his name to the dull-eyed sergeant behind the bullet-proof glass.

Keyes had run into this problem before; it had something to do with the way he looked. Although he stood five-ten, a respectable height, he somehow failed to exude the authority so necessary for survival in rough bars, alleys, police stations, jails, and McDonald's drive-throughs. Keyes was adolescently slender, with blue eyes and a smooth face. He looked younger than his thirty-two years, which, in his line of work, was no particular asset. An ex-girlfriend once said, on her way out the door that he reminded her of a guy who'd just jumped the wall of a Jesuit seminary. To disguise his boyishness, Brian Keyes had today chosen a brown suit with a finely striped Cardin tie. He was clean-shaven and his straight brown hair was neatly combed. Still, he had a feeling that his overall appearance was inadequate—not slick enough to be a lawyer, not frazzled enough to be a social worker, and not old enough to be a private investigator. Which he actually was.

So the turtle-eyed sergeant ignored him.

Keyes was surrounded by misery. On his left, a rotund Latin woman wailed into an embroidered handkerchief and nibbled on a rosary. "Pobrecito, he's in jail again."

On the other side, an anemic-looking teenager with yellow teeth carved an obscenity into the bench with a Phillips screwdriver. Keyes studied him neutrally until the kid looked up and snapped, "My brother's in for agg assault!"

"You must be very proud," Keyes said.

This place never changed. The hum and clang of the electronic doors were enough to split your skull, but the mayhem in the lobby was worse, worse even than the cell blocks. The lobby was crawling with bitter, bewildered souls, each on the sad trail of a loser. Girlfriends, ex-wives, mothers, brothers, bondsmen, lawyers, pimps, parole officers.

And me, Keyes thought. The public defender's office had tried to make the case sound interesting, b

Keyes figured it had to be a lost cause. There'd be some publicity, which he didn't need, and decent money, which he did. This was a big-time case, all right. Some nut hacks up the president of the Chamber of Commerce and dumps him in the bay—just what South Florida needed, another grisly murder. Keyes wondered if the dismemberment fad would ever pass.

From the governor on down, everybody had wanted this one solved fast. And the cops had come through.

"Mr. Keyes!" The sergeant's voice echoed from a cheap speaker in the ceiling.

Keyes signed the log, clipped on a plastic visitor's badge, and walked through three sets of noisy iron gates. A trusty accompanied him into an elevator that smelled like an NFL locker room. The elevator stopped on the fifth floor.

Ernesto Cabal, alias Little Ernie, alias No-Way Jose, was sitting disconsolately on the crapper when the trusty opened the cell for Brian Keyes.

Ernesto held out a limp, moist hand. Keyes sat down on a wooden folding chair.

"You speak English?"

"Sure," Ernesto said. "I been here sixteen years. By here I mean here, dees country." He pulled up his pants, flushed the john, and stretched out on a steel cot. "They say I kill dees man Harper."

"That's what they say."

"I dint."

Ernesto was a small fellow, sinewy and tough-looking, except for the eyes. A lot of cons had rabbinic eyes, but not this one, Keyes thought. Ernesto's brown eyes were large and wet. Scared puppy eyes.

Keyes opened his briefcase.

"You a lawyer, Mr. Keyes?"

"Nope. I'm an investigator. I was hired by your lawyers to help you."

"Yeah?"

"That's right."

"You're a very young guy to be an investigator," Ernesto said. "How old? Dirty, dirty-one?"

"Good guess."

Ernesto sat up. "You any good?"

"No, I'm totally incompetent. A complete moron. Now I've got a question for you, chico. Did you do it?"

"I tole you. No."

"Fine." Keyes opened a manila file and scanned a pink tissue copy of the arrest report.

Ernesto leaned over for a peek. "I know what that is, man."

"Good, then explain it."

"See, I was driving dees car and the policeman, he pull me over on a routine traffic stop ... "

Oh boy, Keyes thought, routine traffic stop. This guy's been here before.

"... and told me I'm driving a stolen be-hickle. And the next thin I know I'm in jail and dey got me charged with first-degree murder and robbery and everythin else."

Keyes asked, "How did you come to be driving a 1984 Oldsmobile Delta 88?"

"I bought it."

"I see. Ernesto, what do you do for a living?"

"I sell fruit."

"Oh."

"Maybe you see me at rush hour. On LeJeune Road. I sell fresh fruit in bags."

Somewhere down the cell block another prisoner started to bang on the bars and scream that his TV was broken.

Keyes said, "Ernesto, how much does your very best bag of fruit sell for? Top-of-the-line?"

"Mangoes or cassavas?"

"Whatever. The best."

"Maybe one dollar ... oh, I see what you getting at. Okay, yeah, that's right, I doan make much money. But I got some great buy on this Oldsmobile. You can't believe it."

"Probably not."

"I got it from a black guy."

"For?"

"Two hundred bucks."

Ernesto seemed to sense he was losing ground. "Some buy. I dint believe it either."

Keyes shrugged. "I didn't say I didn't believe you. Now, according to the police, you were arrested on Collins Avenue on Miami Beach. You ran a series of red lights."

"It was tree in the morning. No one was out."

"Where did you meet the man who sold you the car?"

"Right dare on Collins. Two nights before I got busted. I met him a few blocks from the Fountain blow. Dare's a city parking lot where I hang."

"The one where you do all your B-and-E's?"

"Shit, you just like the policeman."

"I need to know everything, Ernesto, otherwise I can't help. Okay, so you're hanging out, breaking into cars and ripping off Blaupunkts, whatever, and up drives this black guy in a new Olds and says, 'He Ernie, wanna buy this baby for two bills?' That about it?"

"Yeah, 'cept he dint know my name."

Keyes said, "I don't suppose you asked the gentleman where he got the car?"

Ernesto laughed—a muskrat mouth, full of small yellow teeth—and shook his head no.

"Don't suppose you asked his name, either?"

"No, man."

"And I don't suppose you'd recognize him if you ever saw him again?"

Ernesto leaned forward and rubbed his chin intently. A great gesture, Keyes thought. Cagney in *White Heat*.

"I see dis guy somewhere before," Ernesto said. "I doan know where, but I know the face. Big guy. Black black guy. Gold chain, Carrera frames, nice-looking guy. Arms like this, like a foking boa constrictor. Yeah, I'd know him if I saw him again. Sure."

Keyes said, "You had a remote suspicion that the car was hot, didn't you?"

Ernesto nodded sheepishly.

"Why didn't you unload it?"

"I was going to, man. Another day or two it'd be gone bye-bye. But it was such a great car ... aw, you wouldn't know about thins like that, man. You prolly got a Rolls-Royce or somethin. I never had a nice car like that. I wanted to cruise around for a while, that's all. I woulda fenced it eventually."

Keyes put the file back in the briefcase. He took out a recent photograph of B. D. Harper.

"Ever seen this man, Ernesto?"

"No." The puppy eyes didn't even flicker.

"Ever killed anybody?"

"On purpose?"

"On purpose, by accident, any way."

"No, sir!" Ernesto said crisply. "Once I shot a guy in the balls. Want to know why?"

"No thanks. I read all about it on your rap sheet. A personal dispute, I believe."

"That is right."

Keyes rose to leave and called for a guard. Then he thought of something else. "Ernesto," he said, "c

you believe in black magic?"

The little Cuban grinned. "Santeria? Sure. I doan go to those thins, but it be stupid to say I do n believe. My uncle was a santero, a priest. One time he brought a skull and some pennies to m mother's house. He killed a chicken in the backyard—with his teeth he killed dis chicken—and th dipped the pennies in its blood. Two days later the landlord dropped dead." Ernesto Cabal made chopping motion with his hand. "Juss like that."

"You know what I'm getting at, don't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Keyes. I never heard of no santerousing suntan oil for anythin ... "

Keyes started to laugh. "Okay, Ernesto. I'll be in touch."

"Don't you forget about me, Mr. Keyes. Dis is a bad place for an innocent man."

Brian Keyes left the jail and walked around the corner to Metro-Dade police headquarters, another b place for an innocent man. He shared the elevator with a tall female patrol officer who did a wonderf job of pretending not to notice him. She got off on the second floor. Keyes went all the way up Homicide.

Al Garcia greeted him with a grin and a soft punch on the shoulder. "Coffee?"

"Please," Keyes said. Garcia was much friendlier since Keyes had left the newspaper. In the old day he was like a sphinx; now he'd start yakking and never shut up. Keyes thought it might be differer this time around.

"How's business?" Garcia asked.

"Not great, Al."

"Takes time. You only been at it—what—two years. And there's plenty of competition in this town."

No fooling, Keyes thought. He had arrived in Miami in 1979 from a small newspaper in suburb Baltimore. There was nothing original about why he'd left for Florida—a better job, no snow, plenty sunshine. On his first day at the Miami Sun, Keyes had been assigned the desk next to Skip Wiley—the newsroom equivalent of Parris Island. Keyes covered cops for a while, then courts, then local politic His reporting had been solid, his writing workmanlike but undistinguished. The editors nev questioned his ability, only his stomach.

There were two stories commonly told about Brian Keyes at the Miami Sun. The first happened a ye after his arrival, when a fully loaded 727 fireballed down in Florida Bay. Keyes had rented a outboard and sped to the scene, and he'd filed a superb story, full of gripping detail. But they'd dam near had to hospitalize him afterward: for six months Keyes kept hallucinating that burned arms and legs were reaching out from under his bedroom furniture.

The second anecdote was the most well-known. Even Al Garcia knew about Callie Davenport. She wa a four-year-old girl who'd been kidnapped from nursery school by a deranged sprinkler repairman. Th lunatic had thrown her into a truck, driven out to the Glades, and murdered her. After some de hunters found the body, Cab Mulcahy, the managing editor, had told Brian Keyes to go interview Callie Davenport's grief-stricken parents. Keyes had written a real heart-breaker, too, just like the o man wanted. But that same night he'd marched into Mulcahy's office and quit. When Keyes rushed o of the newsroom, everyone could see he'd been crying. "That young man," Skip Wiley had sai watching him go, "is too easily horrified to be a great journalist."

Besides Keyes himself, Skip Wiley was the only person in the world who knew the real reason for th tears. But he wasn't telling.

A few months later Keyes got his private investigator's license, and his newspaper friends we amused. They wondered how the hell he was going to hold together, working for a bunch of sleazo lawyers and bail bondsmen. Brian Keyes wondered too, and wound up avoiding the rough cases. Th cases that really paid.

"Still doing divorces?" Al Garcia asked.

"Here and there." Keyes hated to admit it, but that's what covered the rent: he'd gotten damn good ~~staking out nooner motels with his three-hundred-millimeter Nikon. That was another reason for Al~~ Garcia's affability. Last year he had hired Brian Keyes to get the goods on his new son-in-law. Garcia despised the kid, and was on the verge of outright murdering him when he called Keyes for help. Keyes had done a hell of a job, too. Tracked the little stud to a VD clinic in Homestead. Garcia's daughter wasn't thrilled by the news, but Al was. The divorce went through in four weeks, a new Dade County record.

Now, Brian Keyes had a friend for life.

Garcia poured the coffee. "So you got a biggie, Brian."

"Tell me about it."

"It's a touchy one. Can't say much, especially now that you're lined up with the other side."

"Did you work the Harper case?"

"Hell, everybody up here worked that case."

Keyes tried to sip the coffee and nearly boiled his upper lip.

"Hey," Garcia said, "that piece-of-shit rag newspaper you used to work for finally printed something intelligent this morning. You see it?"

"My paper was in a puddle."

"Ha! You should have read it anyway. Wiley, the asshole that writes that column. I hate that guy normally—I really can't stand him. But today he did okay."

Keyes didn't want to talk about Skip Wiley.

"He wrote about this case," Garcia went on. "About that little scuzzball we arrested."

"I'll be sure to get a copy," Keyes said.

"I mean, it wasn't a hundred percent right, there was a few things he screwed up, but overall he did a okay job. I clipped it out and taped it on the refrigerator. I want my boy to read it when he gets home from school. Let him see what his old man does for a living."

"I'm sure he'll get a charge out of it, Al. Tell me about Ernesto Cabal."

"Dirtbag burglar."

"Was he on your list of suspects?"

Garcia said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you've got thirty detectives working on this murder, right? You must have had a list of suspects."

"Not on this one."

"So what we're talking about is blind luck. Some Beach cop nails the guy for running a traffic light and bingo, there's Mr. Sparky Harper's missing automobile."

"Luck was only part of it," Garcia said sourly.

Keyes said, "You caught Cabal in the victim's car, but what else?"

"What else do we need?"

"A witness or two might be nice."

"Patience, Brian. We're working on it."

"And a motive?"

Garcia held up his hands. "Robbery, of course."

"Come on, Al, this wasn't a knife in the ribs. It was the ritual murder of a prominent citizen. How did Harper get into those silly clothes? Who smeared suntan oil all over him? Who stuffed a goddamn terrapin alligator down his throat? Who sawed his legs off? Are you telling me that some two-bit auto burglar concocted this whole thing?"

"People do crazy things for a new Oldsmobile."

"You're hopeless," Keyes said.

"Don't tell me you believe Cabal's story? Brian, you got to get this liberal-crusader shit out of your system. I thought two years away from that newspaper would cure you."

"You've got to admit, it's a very weird case. You guys checked out the car, right?"

"It was clean, except for Cabal's prints."

Keyes took out a legal pad and started jotting notes. "What about the suitcase?"

"No prints. Its model number matches a batch sent to Jordan Marsh about a year ago, but we can't be sure. Could've just as easily come from Macy's."

Keyes said, "Any sign of the missing legs?"

"Nope."

"Did you trace that terrific Hawaiian wardrobe?"

"Ugh-ugh." Garcia made a zipper motion across his lips.

"Oh, you got something, uh? A store, perhaps. Maybe even a salesman who remembers something about this particular customer—"

"Brian, back off. This is a very touchy case. If the chief even suspected I was talking to you, I'd be shaking out parking meters for the rest of my life. I think we'd better call it quits for today."

Keyes put the legal pad back in his briefcase. "I'm sorry, Al. I appreciate what you're doing." Keyes was telling the truth. Garcia didn't owe him a damn thing.

"Normally I wouldn't mind, Brian, it's just that this one is Hal's case. He's the lead detective. Went out to the scene and all. I don't want to screw it up for him."

"I understand. What's he got you doing?"

Garcia rolled his eyes. "Checking out dead-enders. Take a look at this." He slid a sheet of paper across the desk.

It was a typed letter. Keyes scanned it quickly. He started to read it again, when Garcia snatched it away.

"Crazy, huh? It came in today's mail."

Keyes asked for a Xerox copy.

"No way, Brian. The PD's office would cream over something like this. And it's crap, take my word for it. It's going right into the old circular file as soon as I make a couple routine calls to the feds."

"Read it out loud," Keyes said.

"I'll deny I ever even saw it," Garcia said.

"Okay, Al, you got my word. Read it, please."

Garcia slipped on a pair of tinted glasses and read from the letter:

Dear Miami Chamber of Commerce:

Welcome to the Revolution.

Mr. B. D. Harper's death was a milestone. It may have seemed an atrocity to you; to us, it was poetry. Contrary to what you'd like to believe, this was not the act of a sick person, but the raging of our powerful new underclass.

Mr. Harper's death was not a painful one, but it was unusual, and we trust that it got your attention. Soon we start playing for keeps. Wait for number three!

El Fuego,

Comandante, Las Noches de Diciembre

Al Garcia removed his reading glasses and said, "Not half-bad, really. For a flake."

"Not at all," Keyes agreed. "What do you make of that number-threebusiness? Who was victim number two?"

"There wasn't any, not that I know of."

"So who are the Nights of December?" Keyes asked.

"A figment of some nut's imagination. 'The Fire,' he calls himself. El Fuego my ass. I'll check with the

Bureau, just in case, but J. Edgar himself wouldn't have taken this one seriously. Still, I might as well be around with the guys on the antiterrorism squad."

"And then?" Keyes asked.

"A slam dunk," Garcia said. "Right into the wastebasket."

Cab Mulcahy poured the coffee. Skip Wiley drank.

"The beard is new, isn't it?"

"I need it," Wiley said, "for an assignment."

"Oh. And what would that be?"

"That would be confidential," Wiley said, slurping.

Cab Mulcahy was a patient man, especially for a managing editor. He had been in newspapers his entire adult life and almost nothing could provoke him. Whenever the worst kind of madness gripped the newsroom, Mulcahy would emerge to take charge, instantly imposing a rational and temperate mood. He was a thoughtful man in a profession not famous for thoughtfulness. Cab Mulcahy was also astute. He loved Skip Wiley, but distrusted him wholeheartedly.

"Cream?" Mulcahy offered.

"No thanks." Wiley rubbed his temples briskly. He knew that the effect of this was to distort his face grotesquely, like pulling putty. He watched Mulcahy watching him.

"You missed deadline yesterday, Skip."

"I was helping Bloodworth with his story. The kid's hopeless, Cab. Did you like my column?"

Mulcahy said, "I think we ought to talk about it."

"Fine," Wiley said. "Talk."

"How much do you really know about the Harper case?"

"I've got my sources."

Mulcahy smiled paternally. Wiley's column was on his desk. It lay there like a bird dropping, the first thing to await Mulcahy when he arrived at the office. He had read it three times.

"My concern," Mulcahy began, "is that you managed to convict Mr. Cabal in this morning's newspaper, without benefit of a trial. You have, for lack of a better word, reconstructed the murder of B. D. Harper in your usual slick, readable way—"

"Thank you, Cab."

"—without any apparent regard for the facts. This business about sexual torture, where did that come from?"

Wiley said, "Can't tell you."

"Skip, let me read this out loud: 'Harper was tied up, spread-eagle, and subjected to vicious and unspeakable homosexual assaults for no less than five hours.' Now, before you start whining, you ought to know that I took the liberty of calling the medical examiner. The autopsy showed absolutely no signs of sodomy."

"Aw, it's the imagery that's important, Cab. The utter humiliation of this gentle man. Sodomized or not, can you deny that he was horribly humiliated by this crime?"

"Your concern for the late Mr. Harper's dignity is touching," Mulcahy said. He turned his attention to a stack of newspaper clippings on another corner of his desk. Wordlessly he riffled through them. Wiley knew what they were: more columns.

"Here we go," Mulcahy said, holding up one. "On the subject of B. D. 'Sparky' Harper, this is what you wrote a mere three months ago: 'If there has ever been a more myopic, insensitive, and avaricious cretin to lead our Chamber of Commerce, I can't recall him. Sparky Harper takes the cake—anything else that isn't nailed down. He is the Sultan of Shills, the perfect mouthpiece for the hungry-eyed developers, hoteliers, bankers, and lawyers who have made South Florida what it is today. Newark with palm trees.' "

"I remember that column, Cab. You made me apologize to the New Jersey Tourist Bureau."

Mulcahy leaned back and gave Skip Wiley a very hard look.

Wiley squirmed. "I suppose you want to know why I crucified Harper a few months ago and made hero out of him today. It's simple, Cab. Literary license. You wouldn't understand."

"I've read a book or two. Try me."

"I did it to dramatize the crime problem," Wiley said. "The Harper murder symbolizes the unspeakable mayhem in our streets. Don't you see? To make people care, I needed to bring Spark Harper and his killer to life. Don't look at me like that, Cab. You think I'm a hypocrite? Sure, Harper was a fat little jerk. But if I put that in the paper, no one would care about the murder. I wanted to give 'em goose bumps, Cab."

"Like the old days," Mulcahy said with a sigh.

"What's that supposed to mean? I get more goddamned letters than I ever did. People read the hell out of my column. You should see the mail."

"That's the trouble, Skip. I do see the mail. People are starting to hate you, I mean really hate you. Not just the usual fruitcakes, either."

Not true, Wiley said to himself. The people who counted were on his side.

"So you've been taking some heat, eh?"

Mulcahy looked away, out the window toward the bay.

"A few ad cancellations, perhaps? Like maybe the Richmond Department Store account—"

"Skip, that's one of about forty things on my list. It isn't funny anymore. You're fucking up on a regular basis. You miss deadlines, you libel people, you invent ludicrous facts and put them in the paper. I've got a lawyer downstairs who does nothing but fight off litigation against your column. We've had to print seven retractions in the last four months—that's a new record, by the way. No other managing editor in the history of this newspaper can make that claim."

Wiley was starting to feel a little sorry for Mulcahy, whom he had known for many years. Cab had been the city editor when Wiley had come to work at the Sun. They had been drinking buddies once and used to go bass fishing together out in the Everglades.

It was a shame the old boy didn't understand what had to be done, Wiley thought. It was a shame the newspaper business had gotten such a frozen grip on his soul.

"The public defender's office called me this morning," Mulcahy continued. "Mr. Cabal's lawyer didn't appreciate your description of his client as 'yellow-bellied vermin culled from the stinkpot of Castro jails for discharge at Mariel's harbor of shame.' The Hispanic Anti-Defamation League sent a telegram voicing similar objections. The League also notes that Senor Cabal is not a Mariel refugee. He arrived in this country from Havana with his family in 1966. His older brother later received a Purple Heart in Vietnam."

"Perhaps I got a little carried away," Wiley said.

"Hell, Skip." Mulcahy's voice was tired and edged with sadness. "I think we have a big problem. And I think we're going to have to do something. Soon."

This was a conversation they had been having more often, so often that Wiley had stopped taking it seriously. He got more mail than any other writer, and the publisher counted mail as subscribers, and subscribers as money. Wiley knew they wouldn't lay a glove on him. He knew he was a star in the same way he knew he was tall and brown-eyed; it was just something else he could see in the mirror every morning, plain as day. He didn't even notice it anymore. The only time it counted was when he got into trouble. Like now.

"You aren't going to threaten to fire me again, are you?"

"Yes," Mulcahy said.

"I suppose you want me to apologize to somebody."

Mulcahy handed Wiley a list.

"I'll get right on it—"

"Sit down, Skip. I'm not finished." Mulcahy stood up, brandishing the stack of columns. "You know what makes me sad? You're such a damn good writer, too good to be turning out shit like this. Something's happened the last few months. You've been slipping away. I think you're sick."

Wiley winced. "Sick?"

Mulcahy was a slim man, gray and graceful. Before becoming an editor, he had had a distinguished career as a foreign correspondent: he had covered two wars and a half-dozen coups, and had even been shot at three times. Wiley had always been envious of this; in all his years as a journalist he had never once been shot at. He had never dodged a real bullet. But Cab Mulcahy had, and he had written poetically about the experience. Wiley admired him, and it hurt to have the old boy talk like this.

"I took all your columns from the last four months," Mulcahy said, "and I gave them to Dr. Courtney, the psychiatrist."

"Jesus! He's a wacko, Cab. The guy has a thing for animals. I've heard this from seven or eight sources. Ducks and geese, stuff like that. The paper ought to get rid of him before there's some kind of scandal—"

Mulcahy waved his hands, a signal for Wiley to shut up.

"Dr. Courtney read all these columns and he says he can chart your illness, starting since September. Wiley clenched his teeth so tightly his fillings nearly cracked. "There's nothing wrong with me, Cab."

"I want you to see a doctor."

"Not Courtney, please."

"The Sun will pay for it."

Well, it ought to, Wiley thought. If I'm nuts, it's this place that's to blame.

"I also want you to go to an internist. Courtney says the mental degeneration has occurred so rapidly that it could be pathological. A tumor or something."

"A guy who screws barnyard animals says that I'm pathological."

Mulcahy said, "He's paid for his opinions."

"He hates the column," Wiley said. "Always has." He pointed at the stack of clippings. "I know what's in there, Cab. The one I did six weeks ago about shrinks. Courtney's still mad about that. He's trying to get back at me."

Mulcahy said, "He didn't mention it, although it was a particularly vile piece of writing. 'Greedy, soul-sucking charlatans'—isn't that what you said about psychiatrists?"

"Something like that."

"If I'd been here that morning, I'd have yanked that column," Mulcahy said evenly.

"Ha!"

"Skip, this is the deal. Go see the doctors and you can keep your column, at least until we find out what the hell is wrong. In the meantime, every word you write goes through me personally. Nothing that comes out of your terminal, not even a fucking obituary, gets into this newspaper without me seeing it first."

Wiley seemed stunned. He shrank into the chair.

"Jeez, Cab, why don't you just cut off my balls and get it over with?"

Mulcahy walked him to the door. "Don't write about the Harper case anymore, Skip," he said, gently. "Dr. Courtney is expecting you tomorrow morning. Ten sharp."

Brian Keyes read Skip Wiley's column as soon as he got back to the office. He laughed out loud, in spite of himself. He had become amazed—there was no other word for it—at how much Wiley could get away with.

Keyes wondered if Ernesto Cabal had seen the newspaper. He hoped not. Wiley's column would

absolutely ruin the young man's day.

Assuming Ernesto was innocent—and Keyes was leaning in that direction—the next step was figuring out who would have wanted B. D. Harper dead. It was a most unusual murder, and robbery seemed an unlikely motive. Dumping the body in a suitcase was like the Mob, Keyes thought, but the Mob didn't have much of a sense of humor; the Mob wouldn't have dressed Sparky up in such godawful tacky clothes, or stuffed a rubber alligator down his throat.

Finding a solid suspect besides Ernesto Cabal wasn't going to be easy. B. D. Harper had not risen to the pinnacle of his trade by making enemies. His mission, in fact, had been quite the opposite: to make as many friends as possible and offend no one. Harper had been good at this. He positively excreted congeniality.

Sparky had lived and breathed tourism. His singular goal had been to lure as many people to South Florida to spend as much money as was humanly possible in four days and three nights. He lay awake at night scheming new ways to draw people to the tropical bosom of Miami.

As a reporter, Brian Keyes had come to know B. D. Harper fairly well. There was nothing not to like there simply was nothing much at all. He was an innocuous, rotund little man who was jolliest when Florida was crawling with snowbirds. For years Harper had run his own successful public-relations firm, staging predictable dumb stunts like putting a snow machine on the beach in January, or mailing a ripe Florida orange to every human being in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. This was in the boom days of Miami and, in a way, Sparky Harper had been a proud pioneer of the shameless, witless boosterism that made Florida grow.

In later years, as head of the Chamber of Commerce, Harper's principal task was to compose a snazzy new bumper sticker every year:

"Miami—Too Hot to Handle!"

"Florida is ... Paradise Found!"

"Miami Melts in Your Mouth!"

Brian Keyes's personal favorite was "The Most Exciting City in America," which Sparky propitiously introduced one month after Miami's worst race riot.

Harper shrewdly had peddled his lame slogans by affixing them to color posters of large-breasted women sunbathing on the beach, sprawling on the bows of sailboats, or dangling from a hang-glider—whatever Sparky could arrange. The women were always very beautiful because the Chamber of Commerce could afford to hire the top models.

The annual unveiling of the new tourism poster made Sparky Harper neither controversial nor unpopular. As far as anyone could tell, it was the only tangible thing he did all year to earn his forty-two-thousand-dollar salary.

As for the murder, Keyes thought of the usual cheap possibilities: a jealous husband, an impatient loan shark, a jilted girlfriend, a jilted boyfriend. Nothing seemed to fit. Sparky was a divorced man with a French poodle named Bambi. When he dated at all, he dated widows or hookers. He had been known to get bombed on occasion, but he never made an ass of himself in public. And he wasn't a gambler, so it was unlikely that the Mafia was into him.

Keyes guessed that whoever killed Harper might not have known him personally, but probably knew who he was. With garish methodology the killer had seemed to be making a very strong statement, which is why Keyes couldn't dismiss the "Nights of December" letter, nutsy as it was.

Keyes decided that he needed the autopsy. He drove to the medical examiner's office and asked for a copy. Dr. Joe Allen wasn't in, so Keyes decided to wait. As he sat in a tiled room that smelled sweetly of formalin, he started to read Allen's report line-by-line. Halfway through, his curiosity got the best of him and he unsheathed the color slides. One by one Keyes held them up to the light.

The more he studied the gruesome photographs, the more Keyes was convinced that Ernesto Cab

was telling the truth: he'd had nothing to do with B. D. Harper's murder. It was beyond Ernesto's stunted imagination to have conceived something like this.

"Don't smudge up my slides!" Dr. Joe Allen stood at the doorway, laden with files.

" 'Mornin', Doc."

"Well, Brian. I hear you've hit the big time." Joe Allen had always liked Brian Keyes. Keyes had been a solid reporter and it was a damn shame he'd given it up to become a P.I. Joe Allen wasn't crazy about private investigators.

"This was no robbery, Joe."

"I don't know what it was," Dr. Allen said, "except that it was definitely death by asphyxiation."

"Have you ever heard of a B-and-E artist to show such flair?" Keyes asked.

"It seems the police are of that opinion."

"I'm asking for yours, Joe."

Dr. Joe Allen had autopsied 3,712 murder victims during his long career as the Dade County coroner, so he had seen more indescribable carnage than perhaps any other human being in the whole United States. Throughout the years Joe Allen had charted South Florida's progress by what lay dead on his steel tables, and he was long past the point of ever being shocked or nauseated. He performed meticulous surgery, kept precise files, took flawless photographs, and compiled priceless morbid data which earned him a national reputation. For example, it was Dr. Allen who had determined that Greater Miami had more mutilation-homicides per capita than any other American city, a fact he attributed to the terrific climate. In warm weather, Allen noted, there were no outdoor elements to deter a lunatic from spending six, seven, eight hours hacking away on a victim; try that in Buffalo and you'd freeze your ass off. After Dr. Allen had presented his findings to a big pathologists' convention, several other Sun Belt coroners had conducted their own studies and confirmed what became known as the Allen Mutilation Theorem.

Throughout the years a few spectacular cases stood out vividly in Dr. Allen's recollections, but the rest were just toe tags. Brian Keyes hoped Sparky Harper might be different.

The coroner put on his glasses and held up two of the more sickening slides, as if to refresh his memory. "Brian," he said, "I don't think they've got the right man in jail."

"So how do I get him out?"

"Give them a better suspect."

"Swell, Joe. Anyone in particular?"

"In my opinion, Mr. Harper was the victim of a ritual slaying. I'd say that several persons were involved. I would also say that neither robbery nor sexual assault was the motive. I wouldn't rule out the possibility of an occult ceremony, possibly even human sacrifice. On the other hand, the body showed no common signs of torture—no cigarette burns, welts, or bruise patterns. But you can't ignore what happened to the legs."

Keyes asked, "What did happen to the legs?"

"The legs were removed after death occurred, probably so the body could be concealed in the suitcase. But it's the way the legs were removed that's so interesting."

Keyes said, "Joe, are you doing this just to make me sick?"

"The legs weren't just hacked off with an ax, which is the most efficient way," said Dr. Allen, pausing to choose his words. "It appears from the wounds that Sparky's legs might have been removed by a large animal. They might actually have been ... twisted off."

"God! By what, wild dogs?"

Dr. Allen shook his head somberly. "Judging from the bite pattern, it was no dog. It was something much bigger. Don't ask me what, Brian, because I just don't know."

"Joe, you always brighten my day."

"Happy hunting, my friend."

Brian Keyes's office was on the sixth floor of a dreary downtown bank building off SW Second Avenue, near the Miami River. The consulate of El Salvador was located down the hall, so most of the other tenants lived in perpetual fear of a terrorist attack and behaved accordingly. They all had chipped in to hire extra security guards for the lobby, but the security men had turned out to be professional burglars who one night looted the entire building of all IBM office machinery.

Brian Keyes was not affected by this crime because the only typewriter in his office was an Olivetti portable, a leftover from his days of covering politics for the Miami Sun. The other items of potential value were an antique desk lamp and a telephone tape recorder, but the lamp was broken and the tape recorder was made in Korea so the burglars wanted no part of either.

The highlight of the office was a fifty-gallon salt-water aquarium, a going-away present from his friends at the newspaper. Keyes had erected it in the foyer, where a secretary ordinarily might have sat, and filled it with whiskered catfish that sucked the algae off the glass.

Except for the aquarium, the place was just as cramped, ratty, and depressing as Keyes had feared it would be. He was rarely there. Even when he had nothing to do, he'd find an excuse to leave the bank building and stroll around downtown. He had an answering service, and an electronic beeper that tumbled onto his belt. The beeper didn't make Keyes feel particularly important; every shyster lawyer, dope dealer, and undercover agent in Dade County wore one. It was mandatory.

On the morning of December 5, Keyes was down at Bayfront Park, munching a sandwich and watching the tugboats, when the beeper on his belt went off loudly enough to wake a derelict two benches away. Keyes found a pay phone and called his service. Al Garcia was trying to reach him. It was important. Keyes phoned Homicide.

"Meet me on the beach," Garcia said. "The Flamingo Isles, near Sixty-eighth and Collins. Look for the cop cars out front."

The Flamingo Isles was not a classic Miami Beach motel. There was nothing charming about the color (silt) or the architecture (Early Texaco). At this motel there were no striped canvas awnings, no wizened retirees chirping in the lobby, no lawn chairs lined up on the front porch, no front porch whatsoever. Basically the Flamingo Isles was a dive for pimps, chicken hawks, and hookers. Room cost ten dollars an hour, fifteen with porno cassettes. It was rumored that some of the vestibules were equipped with hidden movie cameras to secretly record the sexual antics of Florida tourists. It was not a good place for an innocent man, but Keyes was hopeful that this was where Sparky Harper had spent his final earthly moments. If so, it meant that Harper had likely died in some bizarre sexual accident and not at the larcenous hands of Ernesto Cabal.

Keyes goosed his little MG convertible across the causeway and made it to the motel in eighteen minutes flat. Al Garcia already was interviewing a Jamaican maid in the lobby. He kept hollering for an interpreter and the maid kept insisting in perfect English that she spoke perfect English, but Garcia wouldn't believe her. He finally enlisted a black Miami Beach detective to take the maid's statement and went upstairs, Keyes in tow. They entered room 223.

"Here you have it," Garcia said.

A pile of men's clothing lay in the middle of the floor: blue silk socks, turned inside-out; a undershirt; a pair of soiled Jockey shorts; and a powder-blue double-knit suit with a J. C. Penney label. The legs of the suit had been sheared off below the knees. Lying beneath the clothes was a pair of highly polished black Florsheims.

The room showed no signs of a mortal struggle. There was a half-finished bottle of Seagram's and a couple cans of soda on the dresser. On the nightstand, next to the Magic Fingers machine, sat three plastic bottles of Coppertone tanning butter with coconut oil. A fingerprint man studiously dusted the containers; he was crouched on his haunches, oblivious of everything.

With a long pair of tweezers, Garcia picked a plastic bag off the floor. The red-and-white lettering on the bag said: "Everglades Novelties."

"This," Garcia intoned, "was used to transport the instrument of death."

"The toy alligator?"

Garcia nodded.

"So this is where it happened."

"The murder? No, we don't think so."

Suddenly a big redheaded cop barged out of the bathroom. It was Harold Keefe, the lead detective.

"Who're you?" he asked Keyes.

"A friend of Al's." Keyes looked at Garcia. Garcia had an oh shit! look in his eyes.

"Don't touch anything," Keefe growled on his way out the door. "Al, don't let him touch anything, got it?"

Garcia checked the bathroom to make sure no other detectives were sneaking around. He didn't say another word until the fingerprint man packed up his kit and left.

"Christ! I didn't know that bastard was in the john!"

"Relax, Al. He doesn't know who I am."

Garcia started stuffing B. D. Harper's clothing in a clear plastic evidence bag. "Check out the stains on the floor," he told Keyes.

Two streaks of dried blood made a wavering trail from the bedroom to the bathroom. It was not very much blood, certainly less than one would have expected.

"The lab guys are on their way," Garcia said, "so I'm gonna give it to you once. Then I want you to get out of here before I get in trouble."

"Whatever you say, Al."

"On the night of November 30, two men rented this room for one week. They paid cash in advance three hundred and sixty bucks."

"What'd they look like?"

"One was described as a muscular black male in a tight yellow pullover," Garcia said, "and the other was a young Latin male wearing blue jeans."

Keyes grimaced. "I suppose you showed Cabal's mug shot to the desk clerk."

"Yeah, and she's seventy-five percent sure it was him."

"Seventy-five won't cut it in court, Al."

"Don't worry, she'll be one hundred percent positive by the time this goes to trial."

"Anyone see them with B. D. Harper?"

"We got a couple faggots in room 225 who saw the Latin male enter this room about eleven P.M. with a chubby Anglo matching Harper's description. They heard some loud voices, and then the door slammed. The fairies peeked out just in time to see Harper being led down the stairs by the black dude and the little Cuban. Oh yeah, and the Cuban is carrying a red Samsonite."

"So they took Harper someplace, killed him, cut his legs off, stuffed him in the suitcase, and—"

"Brought him back here," Garcia said. "This is where the weird shit happens. These blood smears come from dragging the corpse into the bathroom. That's where they dress him up in that stupid flowered shirt and smear the Coppertone all over and stuff him in the suitcase."

"Don't forget the sunglasses," Keyes said.

"Right. Then they drive out to Key Biscayne and heave him into the bay."

"Why all the trouble?"

Garcia said, "Beats the hell out of me. Anyway, the black guy and the Cuban haven't been back since early on the morning of December 1. The maid just opened the room today. She saw the blood on the floor and called the Beach police."

"Well, this is great news, Al."

"I'm not finished. Remember I told you I had a line on those goofy clothes? Well, I got a sales clerk a joint down the street who says she sold them to a skinny little Cuban guy on November 29."

"Ernesto?"

"She's eighty percent sure. The creep was wearing a floppy hat, so she's not absolutely certain."

"Give her time," Keyes said glumly. Things were looking bleak for Senor Cabal. Keyes wondered he'd been wrong about the little guy. Maybe he wasn't just a crummy car burglar trying to get by.

Garcia knotted the top of the evidence bag and scanned the room to make sure he hadn't missed anything. "Time for you to hit the road," he told Keyes. "And remember, I don't know your fuckin' name."

"Right, Al."

Keyes was in the parking lot, strolling toward the MG, when he heard Garcia call from a balcony.

"Hey, Brian, you wanna really help your client?"

"You bet."

"It's easy," Garcia shouted. "Find the black guy."

Keyes arrived at the county jail just as Mitch Klein was leaving. Klein was a scruffy young lawyer with the public defender's office who apparently had drawn the short straw when they farmed out Ernesto Cabal's case. As he walked out of the jail, his shirt damp and his tie loose, Klein did not look like a happy man. He looked like a man who couldn't wait to get into private practice.

Klein greeted Keyes with a lugubrious nod and said, "What's the bad news for the day?"

"They found a motel room on the beach with Harper's clothes and some blood on the floor. Little Cuban guy rented it the night before Harper vanished."

"Beautiful," Klein grumbled.

"The good news is, a big black guy was working with the Cuban. He matches the description of the character Ernesto says sold him the Oldsmobile. Maybe I can find him."

Klein rolled his eyes and made a lewd pumping motion with his right hand. "I think Ernesto is full of shit," he said.

Wonderful, Keyes thought, the guy's own lawyer is dumping on him.

When Keyes entered the cell, he noticed that Ernesto lay stark naked on the cot. Ernesto blinked at Keyes like a gecko lizard stunned by the sunlight.

"Dey took my close."

"Why?"

"'Fraid I'm gonna hang myself."

"Are you?"

"Not now."

"Glad to hear it."

Ernesto rolled over on his stomach, exposing stringy white buttocks. Two prisoners in another cell whooped in appreciation. Ernesto ignored them.

"That man Klein wants me to cop a plea. Says he's trying to save my life. He says dey strap my ass in a lektric chair if diss case go to jury. You thin' he's right?"

Keyes said, "I'm no lawyer."

"Too bad. That Klein, he's got nice shoes. You could use some nice shoes, no?"

Keyes told Cabal about the Flamingo Isles motel. The Cuban sat up excitedly when he heard the part about the black man and B. D. Harper.

"Was the black guy wearing Carrera frames?"

"I don't know."

"I'll bet it's the same dude who sold me that goddamn car."

"I'll try to find him, Ernesto."

"Hey, you tell Klein?"

"Yes."

"What'd he say?"

"He said it sounded very promising."

"I seen the black guy before." Ernesto stood up and started pacing the cell. Keyes found his nakedness a little disconcerting. Mainly it was the tattoo: a commendable likeness of Fidel Castro's face stenciled deftly on the tip of Ernesto's most private appendage.

"Think hard, Ernesto. Where did you see the black guy? On the beach? In a bar? At Sunday school?"

"Sone-thin like dat." Ernesto clasped his hands behind his back and stared through the bars of the cell.

"I'm gone thin about it."

Keyes decided it was time to break the bad news. He told Ernesto about the desk clerk at the Flamingo Isles and the saleswoman at the clothing store, about how they had looked at his mug shot and were almost positive that he was the one.

"Dumb bitches," Ernesto said stoically.

Keyes said, "A skinny Cuban rented that motel room, and a skinny Cuban bought those loud clothes for B. D. Harper."

"Not dissskinny Cuban."

Ernesto sat down on the cot and, mercifully, crossed his legs.

"Do you want me to get your clothes back?"

"Thas all right, man."

"Where do I start looking for the friendly car salesman?"

"Pauly's Bar. Juss ask round. Big black guy with glasses. Not many of dose on the Beach, man."

"Did he have an accent?"

Ernesto giggled. "He's black, man. 'Course he had an accent."

"Jamaican? Haitian? American?"

"He's no Jamaican, and he's no street nigger. Diss boy been to school." Ernesto was very sure of himself. "Diss man, he's slick."

Keyes told Ernesto to think on it some more. He'd need all the help he could get. Especially at Pauly's Bar.

Mr. Remond Courtney didn't blink. He merely said: "I'm not sure I heard you right, Mr. Wiley."

"Oh, sorry." Skip Wiley got up and ambled across the office. He leaned over and positioned his large face two inches from the doctor's nose. "I said," Wiley shouted, as if Courtney were deaf, "Is it really true that you have sex with mallard ducks?"

"No," Courtney replied, lips whitening.

"Mergansers, then?"

"No."

"Ah, so it's geese. No need to be ashamed."

"Mr. Wiley, sit down, please. I think we're avoiding the subject, aren't we?"

"And, what subject would that be, Dr. Goosefucker? May I call you that? Do you mind?"

Courtney looked down at the notebook in his lap, as if referring to something important. Actually the page was blank. "Why," he said to Skip Wiley, "all this hostility?"

"Because we're wasting each other's time. There's nothing wrong with me and you know it. But you had to be an asshole and tell my boss I've got a pathological brain tumor—here I am, about to do something truly pathological." Wiley smiled and grabbed Dr. Courtney by the shoulders.

The psychiatrist struggled to maintain an air of superiority (as if this were just some childish prank) while trying to squirm from Wiley's grasp. But Wiley was a strong man and he easily lifted Courtney

off the couch. "I never said you had a tumor, Skip." Dr. Remond Courtney was remarkably calm, but he'd had plenty of practice. He was by trade a professional witness, a courthouse shrink-for-hire. He was impressive in trial—cool, self-assured, unshakable on the stand. Lawyers loved Dr. Courtney and they paid him a fortune to sit in the witness box and say their clients were crazy as loons. It was laughably easy work, and Courtney was conveniently flexible in his doctrines; one day he might be a disciple of Skinner and, the next, a follower of Freud. It all depended on the case (and who was paying his fee). Dr. Courtney had become so successful as an expert witness that he was able to drop most of his private patients and limit his psychiatric practice to three or four lucrative corporate and government contracts. Dr. Courtney had hoped this would minimize his exposure to dangerous over-the-transom South Florida fruitcakes, but he'd learned otherwise. By the time a big company got around to referring one of its employees to a psychiatrist, the screaming meemies had already set in and the patient often was receiving radio beams from Venus. The worst thing you could do in such a case, Remond Courtney believed, was lose your professional composure. Once a patient knew he could rattle you, you were finished as an analyst. Domination required composure, Dr. Courtney liked to say. "Skip, I can assure you I never said anything about a brain tumor."

"Oh, it's Skipnow, is it? Did you learn that at shrink school, Dr. Goosefucker? Whenever a patient becomes unruly, call him by his first name."

"Would you prefer 'Mr. Wiley' instead?"

"I would prefer not to be here," Wiley said, guiding Dr. Courtney toward the window of his office. Below, fifteen floors down, was Biscayne Boulevard. Courtney didn't need to be reminded of the precise distance (he'd had a patient jump once), but Skip Wiley reminded him anyway. He reminded Dr. Courtney by hanging him by his Italian-made heels.

"What do you see, doctor?"

"My life," the upside-down psychiatrist said, "passing before my eyes."

"That's just a Metro bus."

"A bus, you're right. Lots of people walking. Some taxicabs. Lots of things, Mr. Wiley." The doctor's voice was brittle and high. He was using his arms to fend himself off the side of the building, and doing a pretty good job. After a few seconds Courtney's paisley ascot fluttered from his neck and drifted down to earth like a wounded butterfly. Skip Wiley thought he heard the doctor whimper.

"You okay down there?"

"Not really," Courtney called up to him. "Mr. Wiley, your time's almost up."

Wiley dragged Courtney up through the window.

"Your ankles sweat, you know that?"

"I'm not surprised," the doctor said.

"So you're sticking with this idea that I'm crazy? That's what you're going to tell Mulcahy?"

Courtney brushed himself off. The palms of his hands were red and abraded, and this seemed to bother him. He straightened his blazer. "You're very lucky I didn't lose one of my contact lenses," he told Wiley.

"You're lucky you didn't lose your goddamn life." Plainly unsatisfied, Wiley sat down at the doctor's desk. Courtney reclaimed his spot on the couch, a brand-new spiral notebook on his lap.

"In my opinion, it started with the hurricane column," the psychiatrist said.

"Come on, doc, that was a terrific piece."

"It was uncommonly vicious and graphic. 'What South Florida needs most is a killer hurricane ...' All that stuff about screaming winds and crumpled condominiums. My mother saw that ... that trash," the doctor said with agitation, "and the next day she put her place on the market. The poor woman's scared to death. An ocean view with a nine-point-eight-mortgage—assumable!—and still she's scared out of her mind. Wants to move to bloody Tucson. All because of you!"

"Really?" Skip Wiley seemed pleased.

"What kind of drugs," Dr. Courtney started to ask him, "provoke this kind of lunacy?"

But Skip Wiley already was on his way out the door, a honey-maned blur.

Cab Mulcahy strolled into the newsroom shortly after five. He was a composed, distinguished-looking presence among the young neurotics who put out the daily newspaper, and several of them traded glances that said: Wonder what brings the old man out?

Mulcahy was looking for Wiley. Actually, he was looking for Wiley's column. Mulcahy harbored a fear that Wiley would devise a way to sneak the damn thing into print in defiance of their agreement.

The city editor said he hadn't seen Wiley all day, and reported that no column had arrived by messenger, telephone, or teletype. The city editor also pointed out that, without a column, he was staring at a big sixteen-inch hole on the front page, with deadlines fast approaching.

"Ricky Bloodworth's offered to do the column if Wiley doesn't show up," the city editor said.

"Has he now?"

"He worked up a couple pieces in his spare time. I saw 'em this morning, Cab, and they're not bad. A little purple, maybe, but interesting."

"No way," Mulcahy said. "Tell him thanks just the same."

The city editor looked dejected; Mulcahy knew that he had been yearning to rid himself of the Wiley Problem for a long time. The city editor did not get on well with Skip Wiley. It was a bad relationship that only got worse after Wiley let it slip that he was making five thousand dollars a year more than the city editor, not including stock options. Stock options! The city editor had gone home that night and kicked the shit out of his cocker spaniel.

"Did you call Wiley's house?" Mulcahy asked.

"Jenna hasn't seen him since he left for the doctor's this morning. She said he seemed fine and dandy."

"That's what she said?"

"Verbatim," the city editor said. "Fine and dandy."

Mulcahy phoned Dr. Remond Courtney and told him that Skip Wiley hadn't showed up for work.

"Oh?" Dr. Courtney did not seem surprised, but it was hard to tell. Courtney was an expert at masking his reactions by saying things like Oh and I see and Why don't you tell me about it.

"I was wondering," Mulcahy said impatiently, "how things went today?"

"How things went?"

"With you and Mr. Wiley. You had an appointment, remember?"

More silence; then: "He became abusive."

"Became abusive? He's always abusive."

"Physically abusive," Courtney said. He was trying to remain clinical so Mulcahy wouldn't suspect how scared he'd been. "I believe he threatened my life."

"What did you do?"

"I talked him out of it, of course. I think we were doing much better by the end of the hour."

"Glad to hear it," Mulcahy said, thinking: Wiley's right, this guy is useless. "Tell me, did Skip say where he was going after his visit?"

"No. He left in a hurry. It had been a strenuous session for both of us."

Mulcahy said, "So what's the verdict?"

"Verdict?"

"What the hell is wrong with him?"

"Stress, fatigue, anxiety, paranoia. It's all job-related. I suggest you give him a year off."

"I can't do that, doctor. He's a very popular writer and the newspaper needs him."

"Suit yourself. He's a nut case."

A nut case who sells newspapers, Mulcahy thought ruefully. Next he tried Jenna.

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