

Sweaty Palms**By Brian Leopold****Copyright 2009****I**

There were riots in the streets of Miami. The violence moved through Liberty City like the smell of burnt meat. Crowds surged down Northwest 62nd, toward Biscayne Bay, propelled by the force of sheer rage. The syncopated cymbal crash of breaking glass and a steady cadence of gunfire drove the crowd forward, double-time now. And beneath it all, like a rumbling tympani roll, the very voice of evil, “What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? Now.”

The night glowed yellow with fire. Liberty City went up like a pyre. Flames chased the howling thousands toward downtown, licked at their heels; they had to run to avoid being consumed by the flames of their own anger. And still they moved on, straight toward the wall of riot-clad policemen hastily assembled to check their progress.

It was hard to imagine that the police hadn't seen this coming, the rest of us certainly had. And yet, scanning the faces of the policemen, all standing stock-still in an uneasy line, studying each face, then panning to the next, there was a universal look of confusion and fear. “My God, what have I gotten myself into?” the cops were thinking. “Surely, we're all going to die here.” They lowered their plastic visors, raised their rifles. Their neck muscles tensed. The crowd came at them like a tidal wave. They wondered if they would all be swept out into the Atlantic.

The verdict had been handed down late in the afternoon, just in time for the early newscast. Not guilty, not guilty, not guilty, not guilty; all four police officers acquitted of beating the black insurance agent to death and then covering up the crime.

President Carter had gone live from the White House to appeal for calm. The Governor was calling out the National Guard, but, so far, the violence had resisted all efforts at containment. It escaped Liberty City like swamp gas. Overtown was burning, “the Black Grove,” Brownsville; one-by-one, the siege fires were lit. Orange crocuses of flame burst forth spontaneously all across the flat, boggy Florida plains. People were pulled from their cars, stabbed, beaten, crushed beneath their own tires. The mob set cars ablaze with the drivers still inside, brandishing their baseball bats at the panicked faces pressed against the glass. The innocent were forced to choose the means of their own death. But within the perimeter of flames, any assignation of guilt or innocence seemed futile. Rioters, police; somehow everyone seemed guilty.

The crowd stopped for a moment, assessing the pitifully thin battle lines thrown up to stop them from taking downtown. A man in a clerical collar jumped into the gap between the mob and the police. Sinewy arms pulled him back into the crowd. “The time for praying is over, brother.”

As if a flag had been dropped, both sides charged. Painful, white smoke filled the air. Rubber bullets, rocks, Molotov cocktails, the retching smell of gasoline, bottles bursting like bombs, a woman’s high-pitched scream, spasmodic coughs, the thud of a thousand impacts. Arms, hands, elbows, jostling; the two lines met. Riot clubs, cast iron pipes, Louisville sluggers connected with bone, with skull. A black man opened his mouth in the perfect expression of exhilaration.

The expression freezes, time stops, past becomes present. Emiliano turns to me, taps the video monitor enthusiastically, pointing to the man’s ovoid face. “There he is,” he says. “That’s the guy who nearly ended a brilliant journalistic career.” He slowly turns the shuttle knob on the videotape player. The face begins moving in palsied progression, the shot widening. The man draws back a slow-motion hand grasping a softball-sized

rock. With a grimace, he hurls the rock straight at the line of television cameras. The rock describes a perfect arc through the charged air, disappearing from the camera's view. For a few seconds, nothing seems to happen, as if time has been put on hold. Then, like a runaway barge breaking loose from its mooring, the camera drifts up into the sky, catching the smoky outline of the crescent moon and slams into the ground. The camera comes to rest on its side, a thousand burning buildings reflected in the splinters of broken glass on the sidewalk, the riot as seen through a kaleidoscope. Emiliano stops the tape.

"Don't worry, Kevin" he says, answering the obvious question I am far too tactful to ask. "The camera is fine." He points to the hardhat lying on the countertop. There is a massive dent in the helmet's crown, softball-sized. Emiliano's head is bandaged, but he doesn't seem to mind. He is using his Florida Gators cap to hold the bandages in place.

"You're going to get your cap all bloody," I tell him.

"It's my chance to prove to all of you that I bleed orange and blue, just like I've been telling you all these years," Emiliano says in his lilting Cuban accent. He is happy at the blood.

I can't really blame him. A story like this can cement a News photographer's reputation forever. He is now a "bandage me up and get me back out on the streets" guy. Those are the guys who get picked up by the network, the videographic superstars who end up covering stories in Central and South America. And even if Emiliano doesn't want to cover drug lords in Medellin, uprisings in Panama, or the latest Nicaraguan dictator, even if he chooses to stay at our humble station in Miami, that dent in his hardhat will earn him bragging rights that will carry him all the way to retirement. He lights a cigarette. It's only then that I realized his hands are shaking.

“I’m sure things got pretty hairy back here in the Control Room as well,” Emiliano says. It is an obvious, ham-handed swipe at me, but I take it good-naturedly, since I am not, at present, bleeding.

“Yeah,” I say. “Three hours into the riots I got a nasty paper cut off one of the script pages.” I hold up my index finger so he can see the band aid. Emiliano nods. It’s the only war wound I have to show for my involvement in the Lib City Riots. I am the producer of the flagship newscast at WMGC-TV in Miami and I have been in the control room since the riots began.

“Most days I wouldn’t change places with you for all the money in the world.” Emiliano says. “But today was not one of those days.”

I clap him gently on the back and start once again for my ultimate goal, shining like a beacon in the distance, the Men’s Room. It is calling to me from across the News Room, an urgent, urgent siren’s call.

Why my distress, you might ask? Largely because I have been imprisoned for over six hours, prevented from leaving my chair in Production Control Room One for any reason, force-fed cup after cup of bad coffee; always more coffee, more coffee, poured down our throats to keep us “on top of our game.” In many countries around the world, this passes for torture, but here in Miami they place a lot of stock in the redemptive power of strong coffee.

The live riot coverage began at roughly four o’clock, just after the McDuffie verdict was handed down. It is almost eleven now and the producer of the eleven o’clock show has only just taken my spot in PCR1. My bladder has reached the point of involuntary paralysis. I will get kidney stones for sure, I think.

Miami’s mayor is in the next urinal. He looks worse than I do. Since our station is only a mile east of Liberty City, the politicians have been tramping in and out of our

news studio all evening, whenever they feel the need to make another plea for calm or reassure the general citizenry that they are in no danger of being gutted in their own homes, that is, provided they aren't in Liberty City, Overtown, the Black Grove or Brownsville, in which case they'd better run for their lives. As we wash our hands, the mayor acknowledges my presence with a friendly flip of his head.

Looking into the bathroom mirror, I think, this would not be a good day to be mayor of Miami. Our mayor is Cuban; no surprise there, since the majority of the city's registered voters are of Cuban descent. But unfortunately, this mayor was elected on the campaign slogan, "Bringing Miami Together Again." Since taking office a year ago, he has vowed to give voice to all of Miami's disaffected ethnic communities; blacks, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Haitians. And now, right before his eyes, the city is fracturing along racial and cultural lines and shows every sign of falling into open warfare. "Didn't I vote for you to keep this from happening?" It's a question a lot of voters are bound to be asking about now. The Mayor stands to my right, straightening his American flag lapel pin. He glances at me with trepidation, like he's considering my question.

The Mayor is fond of referring to Miami as a "gumbo of different customs and peoples, each one adding its own unique flavor to the mix." Now it appears the ingredients in the soup bowl are all trying to throttle one another. Our "unique gumbo" has turned into a devil's brew, with snipers firing from the roofs of burning buildings, shouted racial slurs passing for conversation and everybody out for revenge. Our new mayor's legacy is rapidly becoming burned-out buildings and Molotov cocktails. On the streets, there are fifteen dead and still counting. Have another spoonful of gumbo, your honor.

I glance to my right. The Mayor is giving me a freak show look, like my thoughts are banging around in his brain as well. And maybe they are. I am completely exhausted, I think, and that's when this always seems to happen to me. I dry my hands quickly and duck out the bathroom door.

You never really know which moments plucked from time will be the life-changing ones. Sometimes, it's the simplest things, ignoring that odd knocking sound under your hood, going to bed instead of calling your mother, deciding to pick up a pizza on your way home from work. Life, it turns out, is about as random as a flip of a coin. You might choose to buy a newspaper on your way to work and end up winning the lottery. You might leave two shirt buttons undone instead of one and offend some lunatic who puts a bullet in your head. You might get lost trying to find your expressway entrance and end up in the middle of the Liberty City riots. But it was the pizza that did me in.

My plan had been to clean up my desk and get out the door before anyone noticed I was gone. But as I whisked all the pastel blue and green script pages into the wastebasket, I realized I hadn't had anything to eat in hours. I thought about what I might find in the refrigerator back at my apartment, a dismal thought that forced an immediate gastronomical change in plans. So I slid back into my chair and called Pagliani's. A large pie with sausage, mushrooms and extra cheese was the least I deserved after a day like this, I thought.

Pagliani's is on Biscayne Boulevard, up in Miami Shores and I was reasonably sure that, that far north, the riots were probably just a bad smell in the air and a glow on the horizon. Sure enough, the man on the phone gladly took my order without mentioning the moral chaos running rampant just a few miles away from his shop. Apparently, commerce triumphs over all.

“They’re coming for us. Everyone, back in the van, quick.” The sound of the two-way radio booms in the newsroom, panic hanging in the air like overripe fruit.

“Watch out. Watch out. Incoming. Let’s get the hell out of here. Go. Go. Go.” Staccato shouts from a microwave live truck trapped somewhere in the melee. I feel my adrenaline surge again. A voice at the assignment desk calls out frantically in an attempt to placate the embattled news crews and then, to redirect them as close to the action as possible without getting them killed in the process.

Another camera crew arrives in the newsroom, fresh from the scene. They are soaked in sweat, still wearing their hardhats, screaming at the assignment desk to get them into an edit booth, get them in now, so they can get their footage on air. Sitting at my desk, I come to the realization that I have become invisible in the tumult. Liberty City is somebody else’s problem now. I am off the clock.

I get to my feet again, begin moving stealthily across the news room. The anticipatory taste of tomato sauce and mozzarella dances across my taste buds. I have survived the riots, unscathed. Or have I?

I am just twenty feet from freedom when Phil Knapp flies out the door of the News Director’s office like he’s just been thrown out of a bar. His trajectory lands him squarely in the middle of my escape route. I stop. Phil stops. He has no choice. He’s hit the wall opposite the door hard enough to knock the wind out of himself. Phil is one of our investigative reporters and seeing his stunned antelope glaze is enough to arrest my motion as well.

Phil is a disheveled mess, unusual, since he prides himself on his flawless appearance. Phil is always dressed as if Miami Magazine is waiting in the next room to shoot a spread for their next issue. His black hair has just the proper hint of premature gray and is permanently immune to the effects of wind and rain. He works out religiously

and never perspires, even on the warmest of Miami afternoons. Phil's eyes gain focus, he collects himself, bats at his hair, adjusts his tie knot and takes a deep breath. An ursine growl emerges from the office of Jim Addison, our News Director, and the ensuing slam of the office door shakes the building off its foundation. Interesting, I think.

“I need to talk to you,” Phil wheezes. “Right now.”

“Aw, Phil,” I say. “Can’t this wait? I just ordered a pizza.”

“I’m not really hungry, Kevin,” Phil says. “Let’s go outside.”

Phil exits the Newsroom quickly, leaving me to follow in his magnificent wake. I mutter to myself as I walk. Outside, the night is still steamy. The stars wink through a hazy film that hangs in the air like cotton candy. It is dead quiet, except for the sound of distant gunfire. Off to the west, the glow of false sunset clings to the horizon, the glow of Liberty City burning.

“You can smell the tear gas,” I say, since Phil seems momentarily lost in some sort of mental struggle, or perhaps he’s still groggy from bouncing off the newsroom wall.

“I just got fired.” he says, suddenly emerging from his somnambulant fog.

“What? Fired?” My first thought; Phil is making some reference to the blazing skyline of Lib City.

“No, I mean fired as in canned,” he says. “The station isn’t going to renew my contract.”

“God, I’m sorry Phil. I had no idea. Did Addison tell you just now? Right in the middle of the riots?”

“Yeah, right in the middle of the stinking riots. Then he threw me out his office door.”

“Yes, he certainly did,” I say, reliving Phil’s projectile exit in my mind. “But maybe Addison didn’t mean it, Phil. It’s been a stressful day for everyone, you know. I’m sure he’ll cool down by tomorrow.” While I attempt to mollify Phil, I am thinking; sausage, mushrooms ...

“No, no,” Phil says, dismissing my explanation out-of-hand. “Addison made it clear. It’s over.”

Although I am surprised by the timing of this news, I have to admit Phil’s sacking does not come as a complete surprise. As a journalist, Phil is strictly run-of-the-mill. Now, his voice, his face, his posture, his clothes; they are all perfect. Phil’s every pore oozes that elemental reporter essence, just as long as you don’t listen to what he’s saying. Some of our more sarcastic staffers refer to Phil’s reports as “Knapp Time,” and I have to admit that even I occasionally doze off when Phil’s stories hit the screen. Phil is long on style, but short on substance.

“Thanks for the compliments,” Phil says, interrupting my train of thought. “I think.” We stare at one another for a moment, both of us unsure of what to say.

Phil has been getting a lot of heat from our news management recently about the “soft” tenor of his investigative stories. Since Watergate, investigative reporters are expected to be capable of bringing down a president, a governor, a mayor, a councilman, an evangelist ... someone. The new model investigative reporter can smell deception like a buzzard drawn to carrion, ferret out corruption like a Key West building inspector on the prowl for termite damage, produce more journalistic meat than a schizophrenic butcher. Unfortunately, Phil’s stories are strictly mashed potatoes. A meaty story for Phil is following city workers who spend their extended lunch breaks playing the horses at Hialeah Race Track.

“Hey, I thought that was good story,” Phil says, a hint of acrimony in his voice. He straightens up and turns to give me that devastating three-quarter close-up. He would be the best reporter in the whole damn world, I think, if he never had to open his mouth.

“Hey Kevin,” Phil says, putting a hand on my shoulder. “You do know that I can hear you, don’t you?”

All right, self-admission time. I have a problem, a problem with my brain. I have this most unnerving tendency to speak my thoughts aloud. As far as I know, I was never dropped on my head as a baby, so I think the problem must be a genetic one, but, somehow, my internal wiring wasn’t done according to the schematic. Maybe it’s Turret’s Syndrome, maybe Asperger’s, no one seems to know for sure. All I know is that all those uncharitable thoughts that run through your head, run through my head as well, but, in my case, they just keep going until they’re out my mouth.

Not that I’m some sort of drooling crazy person, holding extended conversations with the fruit in the produce aisle. These days, I’ve learned to control “my condition” reasonably well and my problems seem to arise only when I’m nervous or fatigued. A psychologist friend of mine told me that I lack something called “executive function.” Inside everyone’s brain, he explained to me, there is a little man who says, “I wouldn’t say that if I were you.” Inside my brain that little man is gagged and tied to a pole. Like a pressurized can of whipped cream, the musings of my brain just escape sometimes, leaving everyone within earshot flecked in foam. To me, talking and thinking are the same thing.

“Sorry,” I say to Phil. Then I bite down on my lower lip, so it won’t happen again.

“No, you’re right,” Phil says to me. “Addison said I wasn’t relevant anymore, whatever that means. He called me a pretty boy, an airhead, an animated Ken Doll.”

Jim Addison is not noted for his tact, I think.

“You’re telling me,” Phil says. “He screamed at me, Kevin.” Phil begins to imitate Addison’s manic, stream-of-consciousness rant.

“Miami is the dirtiest town in the history of modern civilization. You can’t swing a dead cat out there without hitting a drug dealer, a mobster, or some South American revolutionary. And they’re all looking for any excuse to spray one another with Uzi fire. Fourteen-year-old kids are trading cocaine for smuggled munitions and you bring me the pothole patrol and tainted tomatoes at the Publix?” (two recent “Knapp Time” exposés)

A squadron of military choppers screams overhead. Once they are out over the Bay, they wheel to the right and disappear down the coastline.

“Do you think the riots had anything to do with Addison’s decision?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” Phil throws his hands into the air in disgust. “All I know is that I don’t want to lose my job.”

“How long do you have until your contract is officially up?”

“A little less than four months.”

“Well that’s good,” I say. “In four months, I’m sure your agent can scare you up another good job and...”

“Kevin, you’re not listening. I don’t want to leave Miami. My wife’s got a good job here. We love our house. We love our neighborhood. We love our church. (Phil and I go to the same church, down in Coconut Grove) We love where our kids go to school. That’s worth fighting for, don’t you think?”

“I guess it is,” I answer, a bit confused.

I wonder why I’m standing out in the stifling Miami heat. Originally, I thought Phil was just blowing off steam, but now I am beginning to suspect that there might be some ulterior motive behind this steamy tirade of his? But what could it be? I ponder the question for a moment, while Phil drones on about his inordinate love of south Florida.

Then suddenly, I figure it out. Phil is going to ask me to help him put together a résumé tape. I begin to relax.

“A résumé tape?” Phil says indignantly. “Hell no. I don’t want a résumé tape. I want you to help me save my job.”

“How am I going to do that?” I say.

“It’s simple, Kevin. What I need is a really big story. Watergate big. I need to break a story so big that Addison can’t fire me.”

Well, that’s simple enough, I think? I’ll just reach into my briefcase, find that folder marked “Watergate and Other Huge Stories,” and hand Phil one. Phil groans.

“Your sarcasm is not appreciated,” he says. “And besides, Kevin, if I already had an idea for a big story, what would I need you for?”

“Moral support?” I offer weakly.

“Oh, it’s way too late for that,” Phil says. “No, what I need is the story to end all stories. I know if we put our heads together, we can come up with something great. You’re really talented, Kevin and really smart.”

Please God, I think, let me be struck stupid. I bite down hard on my lower lip to keep that thought from escaping without my consent.

“What about a political scandal?” Phil says, undeterred. “This is Miami. There’s not a clean politician within miles of this place and political stories are always award-winners.”

“Remind me again,” I say, my sarcasm roiling up into the humid Miami night. “How long did Woodward and Bernstein work on the break-in story?”

“Who?”

“The Watergate guys, Phil.”

“Oh yeah, those guys. I hate those guys. If it wasn’t for them, I’d still have a job.”

“All right, what do you say we scratch politics off the list then?” I offer. “We’ve got less than four months. We’re going to have to come up with something quickly.”

“Right,” Phil says. “And what I need is a story that’ll reach into everyone’s living room, grab them by the throat and shake them, until they can’t help but notice me.”

“Like a race riot?”

“Please, Kevin. That ship’s already sailed.”

“Well, what then?” I say. “What about organized crime, or maybe some kind of murder story?”

“Murder?” Phil shouts, becoming increasingly agitated. “This is Miami. There are so many dead bodies on the streets around here, it’s hard to find a parking spot. Every day the cops find another South American cocaine lord floating face-down out in the Bay. Nobody in this town gives a hoot about murder.”

He’s right, of course. My nightly newscasts are littered with dead bodies. So, not murder. But, if the good people of Miami don’t care about murder, what do they care about?

“Good question.” Phil says.

A squadron of Metro-Dade police cars hurry north on Biscayne Boulevard from downtown, lights flashing, sirens wailing; taking up all four lanes. Behind them, a dozen military jeeps follow, machine guns conspicuously mounted on the back deck. A long line of troop carriers trail the convoy. The truck beds are all covered in camouflaged green tarp, but I can make out dark forms clutching rifles. The trucks scream past the station. We hear them make the left on 68th and start off toward Liberty City.

“What do people in Miami care about?” I say, repeating the question. My stomach growls. “Stone crabs, that’s what they care about. Frozen Margaritas, salsa music, Café Cubano, guyaberras, conch fritters, Spuds McKenzie dogs.”

“Right,” Phil agrees. “Driving the perfect car, scuba diving in the Keys, finding a really nice pair of wayfarers on sale...”

Phil is listing the things he cares about, I think. He shoots me an acerbic look.

“Money,” I say with certainty. “That’s what south Florida cares about. If we told them they were going to have to wait in gas lines again, they’d care about that.”

“Yeah. Thank God those days are over,” Phil says. He shakes his head and looks up into the smoky sky. “What do Floridians care about?” he repeats, mulling it over. He ticks through possibilities. “What do they care about? I don’t know, rum runners, flip-flops, sun stroke, tarpon fishing in the Gulf,” he says under his breath. “What, what, what, what? Football, that’s what they care about.”

“Wait a second,” I shout out. “That’s it, Phil. That’s brilliant.”