

BOBBY'S WAR

RKF ADAMS

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The Uniform Code of Military Justice is the governing code for the Armed Forces. Chapter 47, Subchapter 10, Section 918, Article 118 specifically refers to Murder.

UNCOMMON VALOR WAS A COMMON VIRTUE
~Admiral Nimitz.

- (29)** AND YE SHALL EAT THE FLESH OF YOUR SONS, AND THE FLESH OF YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL YE EAT.
- (30)** AND I WILL DESTROY YOUR HIGH PLACES, AND CUT DOWN YOUR IMAGES, AND CAST YOUR CARCASSES UPON THE CARCASSES OF YOUR IDOLS, AND MY SOUL SHALL ABHOR YOU.
- (31)** AND I WILL MAKE YOUR CITIES WASTE, AND BRING YOUR SANCTUARIES UNTO DESOLATION, AND I WILL NOT SMELL THE SAVOR OF YOUR SWEET ODOURS.

~ LEVITICUS 26

01 TROPICAL DEPRESSION

The truck skidded sideways through the intersection, rear end swinging back and forth until it decided to stay where it belonged, behind me. Windshield wipers at maximum as useless as the brakes, which were recently shod. I plowed through three inches of standing water, turned on the emergency blinkers, exhaled, and backed off the accelerator.

Red starbursts filled the rear view mirrors. Whoop of multiple sirens rose over the noise of the pounding rain. I eased into the right lane searching for an opening into any unoccupied space. The vehicles were on top of me. I coasted through the river running down the turn lane. One, then a second green and white county prowler barreled into the intersection and skidded west onto Navy, followed by three marked Pensacola police cruisers, slipping and spinning on the wet pavement. A fire truck, then an ambulance followed at a more sedate speed, entering the intersection at less than sixty miles an hour, safely turning left due solely to their weight. Few visitors vacationed in the armpit of the continental United States during rainy season, which greatly reduced fatalities and near misses during a parade of power rangers on a mission. Goddam cowboys.

I detoured through an empty filling station, crossed the east bound lanes and turned west when a big black Chevy suburban bounced through the intersection against the light. I pumped the brakes and spun the wheel to the left, using the sideways skid to avoid ramming his back end. No lights, no siren. I let loose on the driver's maternal parentage, took a deep breath, and crossed the center line to re-enter the west bound lane.

Journey's end on such a dreary day was Port Bryant, rescued from bankruptcy by Michael Robert "Bear" Bryant, who was in the process of refurbishing the deep water marina complete with marine terminal services and access to intermodal storage and shipping. I had no idea what any of those terms meant, but I

didn't need to. I owed him manual labor, unpaid and plentiful in exchange for all his help with my own fledgling tourist trap.

Although my very own personal tropical depression had not lessened, the early November rain slackened enough to provide a generous fifteen foot visibility zone in case more emergency response vehicles magically appeared out of the gloom. Damn Bear, I had a million things to do this morning, but I'd made a promise. The man had figured out a way to pull his pension and build boats for people who carried out amphibious assaults. Most of his clients consisted of military industrial complex types and rock stars. We'd made a few unscheduled amphibious landings as Marines. He served his time with distinction, learned a trade, and mustered out. I eventually earned my wings, but refused to become a dancing monkey for the wonders of gender inclusion in combat aviation. I had worked too damn hard and too damn long and I made it known I would never trade my stick nor my self-respect for a microphone. At that point I became a liability. Uncle Sam's angry diversity minions made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Unfortunately for me, breaking shit and killing people had left me ill prepared for the surreal world of civilian life. After a false start, I returned to the city of my youth, settled into a sedate life of selling little trees in little pots to unsuspecting tourists, and performing manual labor for my few friends.

I drove down the gravel drive missing few rain filled chuckholes. The road curved away from the water before gaining the marina, blocking my line of sight into the facility. Bear liked seclusion, and this place was the end of the line past four other marinas of varying sizes and financial states, a recycling plant, and a vinyl manufactory.

Red, white, and blue lights rippled the sodden view through my windshield. Two county prowler cars blocked the open gate. What fresh hell awaited our intrepid hero? Thoughts flew to my dusky, dusty, fusty, marble-muscled Jiminy Cricket, camp philosophizer. So used was I to his low growl asking the questions that held universal meaning, such as: "Letting this guy live gains us what exactly?"

I rolled within twenty feet of the patrol cars, drifting to the right, well out of their way, and parked. I stepped into the heavy mist and flicked away my unfinished cigarette. A black utility truck with its backdoors open blocked the south west corner. It resembled one of the SWAT vehicles that nearly ended my morning commute. Three city squad cars, the fire truck, and ambulance were scattered about the parking lot like Tonka toys. Small clots of response actors in proper costumes stood about without creating much movement other than shifting and fiddling with equipment.

Bear normally parked his truck inside the west loading bay, and left the door open unless he was creating top secret toys. The bay was large enough to accommodate a C-130 transport. The hanger door stood open, and men in an assortment of gear milled about inside the warehouse. I spotted Bear's empty truck, but not Bear.

A county deputy clad in plastic rain gear exited his cruiser and approached me, hand on his holstered firearm. "Stop. You can't go in there." A male voice, young and nervous, far too loud this early in the morning. He was twelve feet away. Perhaps he thought I was hard of hearing.

I held my hands aloft, fingers splayed. "I work here. I've got I.D. What the hell's going on?" A deputy exited the second car and approached, unaware of my hearing problem. "You work here? Put your hands down. Let's see the I.D." A fierce scowl under the brim of his hat gave me pause. Older male, baritone, with a hint of twang. His voice scratched at a soggy memory.

I slowly reached around to my back pocket and pulled out a little metal box that passed as my wallet, hoping to avoid mentioning the .38 tucked in a holster tacked to the back of my belt. Bear insisted that I never, ever venture down his road without a weapon. Apparently, not all of the indigenous wildlife appeared on the endangered species list, but all of it was to be considered hostile.

I tossed the wallet to the scowling officer. He popped it open and shook his head at the glamor shot posted on my license. The youthful patrolman said, “We got a situation here, ma’am, you need to turn around and go home.” He was still yelling.

“Shut up, Sam,” The officer ruffled through the few pieces of plastic in my wallet including a charge card, a library card, and a concealed weapons permit bearing a mugshot similar to the driver’s license.

“You carrying?” He returned the pieces of plastic to the case.

I nodded.

“She’s got a gun.” The younger man struggled with his sidearm. The maneuver was complicated because he hadn’t unsnapped the safety strap. His face scrunched up in anger. He finally freed his sidearm and aimed it at my midsection.

“For the love of God, kid, stow your weapon or I will relieve you of duty. Now.” The older officer’s scowl softened into exasperation. Sam stared wide eyed at his superior, mouth in an Oh of shock, “but, but –”

“No buts. Get in your car. Now.”

Sam the younger stared at me with his most menacing glare, holstered his weapon, missing the first time, and then stomped back to his patrol car. The familiar officer tossed my wallet back. “Just what is it you do here, Mrs. Archer?”

That voice. A spark flickered in the back of my skull. I couldn’t see the face under the rain brim of his patrol hat. He’d pulled it down too low to get a good look. I recognized that voice, though.

“I’m helping my friend get the marina up and running again. I have some skills.”

“Like popping up at the most interesting crime scenes and pulling out in front of tactical vehicles.”

“You all pulled out in front of me.”

He cracked a smile, pushed up the brim of his hat, and stuck a foot up on my front bumper. “Driver got on the radio bitching about a brown and tan Chevy pulling out in front of him. Heroically, he saved both trucks and the lives of the townsfolk.”

“Your driver was running with no lights, but I managed to get my truck out of the way.”

“SWAT doesn’t run lights. The point is stealth, not advertising. And anyway, they are –” His radio crackled. He pinched the mic pinned to his jacket and held up a hand for silence. I caught sight of his name plate. Moreno. I liked Officer Moreno, but I was getting a little tired of standing in the rain. And I couldn’t remember who the hell he was. I avoided meeting law enforcement on a professional basis.

He mumbled a response and signed off. “What I was saying was that they refer to themselves as Emergency Response. It’s kinder and gentler. I gotta say, Archer, two crime scenes I meet you at. Neither one with a criminal in sight. Gotta be a record of some kind. Anyway, city’s in charge, not me, so you go right on in, you being an employee and all. This oughta be good.” Moreno banged on the hood of the rookie patrolman’s Crown Vic and motioned him to move back. A white Ford Econoline rumbled through the open gate. No lights or sirens, a discreet green five pointed star identified the big brute as a county meat wagon. It passed me slowly. I walked in its dismal wake studying the patch on the bumper. A black skull impaled with the medical caduceus and flanked by the scales of justice and a handgun. Gruesome yet accurate. Coroner whimsy.

My phone rang with the electronic sounds of techno-salsa. I flipped it open. Bear asked, “You here?”

“Thirty yards out, following the coroner.” Silence ticked. “Talk to me, what the hell is going on in there?”

“Don’t need any ambulance. They’re all dead in here.”

I stepped aside to let a second ambulance rumble past. “Another wagon is coming in.” I shut the phone and fell behind

the truck, trudging toward the blazing yellow of high powered kliegs, glare bouncing off pools of water. The sprinklers had engaged at some point. The air inside looked smoky, like bars used to be, but it smelled, oh hell, the closer I drew, the unmistakable aroma of cooked meat gained strength.

I stopped inside the gate and scanned the hanger, finally spotting Bear, his head bowed, alone among the law enforcement types. I started toward my friend, but was stopped by a city officer. “You got no business here.”

“Escambia Deputy at the gate sent me in. Survey damage to the property.”

“Thought some big guy was the owner.” The officer’s eyes were red and wet as if he’d been in the smoke.

“I’m an employee. You been in?”

He swallowed visibly. “Not, not all the way, the smell’s enough. I’m supposed to keep out the gawkers.”

Bear approached, sniffing into a blue handkerchief. He held it to me. Without question I jammed two fingers of the cloth inside my nostrils. Deep breath. Bad smells coming. I could taste the fuel. Showing up for work today seemed like a bad idea. Gasoline in the nose was the only defense against the sweet corruption of rotting flesh. Or worse. And this was going to be worse.

I jammed the rag into my nose a second time. Coffee from breakfast tried to escape, but I refused to contaminate the crime scene, or whatever was left of it after the sprinklers deployed, and all the law enforcement players tramped around. Medics huddled together away from the subject of the intense lighting. County and local cops milled at the exits near the fresher air. SWAT crew had departed as there was nobody to kill, and nobody to save.

Bear waited until I’d gotten my stomach under control, and then twitched his head for me to follow him inside the building, toward the source of this morning’s parade of power rangers.

My brain shut down the feelings side and let the math side take notes. Bodies stacked, maybe three, maybe four. Not much recognizable to determine sex or age. Glimpse of limb, upper portions charred down to wet blackened tissue. Darkened areas either clothing or skin where the fats and fluids ruptured the dermis. Ovoid skulls. Classroom voice of long forgotten professor describing what happened to the body in fire whether human or animal. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck. My brain began to process the images providing the data I no longer wanted to know. The fuel in my nose did not dampen the remembered stench of death by fire.

Bear leaned in close. “Fire was out when I got here, the sprinklers done their job. Could smell it soon as I got close. The bay door was shut when I arrived. I hit the remote, pulled in, parked, honked the horn a couple times. Nobody came running out. Spotted the puddles. Tank musta run dry. Enough to put out the fire at least.”

Staring into the blackened pyre, I mumbled “Jesus wept.”

“Ain’t no Jesus here, sweetheart, he done gone to lunch.”

He and I had traveled far and long, stood witness to crimes of the twentieth century, plus a bunch in the new millennium. Pits dug with backhoes, bodies tumbled in, doused with gasoline, and then torched. Anyone attempting escape got a bullet in the gut so they were alive when they went into the hole.

“This is some serious tribal shit, Bear. As in south of the border crazy. But here? This isn’t some socialist paradiso. You know of any locals doing shit like this?”

“Cops might know, but they ain’t talking. This looks personal. Piled up for what reason?”

“Honor? Insult? Hiding something?”

Bear shrugged. “Local news readers got the natives all het up about roving gangs of dangerous brown ruffians. Sanctuary cities running red, yeah, but this ain’t no sanctuary city. The hillbillies

bag a lot of illegal drug runners, territory poachers, but I never seen this shit in-country. This don't look local. This is evil, eighth circle of hell shit."

"Seventh. Burning river of blood."

"Isn't that interesting, you knowing something like that." He twitched his head to the right. "Got another one. All by his lonesome." Bear led me farther into the hanger, lit like a grade B movie set. We stopped short at the pool of water surrounding a lone body, untouched by fire. A young man, early twenties, on his back, eyes open and unfocused. Harsh light shadowing the pits of acne scars. I squatted down, avoiding the water. This man died alone, away from the others. Skin dusty gray from blood loss, thick dark hair longish, teeth untouched by braces or western medicine, mostly intact from what I could see. His fingernails short, dirty, two fingers misshapen, likely old breaks badly set. Above the midline of his throat, ear to ear, someone had severed veins, arteries, muscle. Strength went into making that wound, making it clean and deep. He would have bled out quickly. The downpour from the sprinklers washed the wound clean. I stood and put a hand on my friend for balance, breakfast climbed to the top of my throat.

"Maybe he tried to run away from the fire, got caught," I suggested.

"Maybe somebody is making a statement about them, but not this man, hell, he's practically a kid."

"Maybe he's a kid here in the land of milk and honey, but I don't think he's from here." The smell was piling up inside my head. I tore my eyes from the dead man, and looked up at Bear. His eyes as shiny as mine felt. He took my arm, and circumnavigated the burn pile, aiming for the open door and rain freshened air.

Limbs tightened, fats rendered, a successful burn left behind charred bone, ash, occasional teeth or shrapnel. This was not a successful burn. Temperatures necessary to reduce the human form to ash were impossible outside of a cremation oven. This

was someone making a statement. This was a funeral pyre, but not to honor these dead.

I prayed for their souls. I prayed they had been unconscious when set alight. Sidestepping puddles accumulated from the sprinklers, we made it outside as the yips and yaks started. I leaned against the front end of an ambulance and bent over, panting, pulling in oxygen and trying not to throw up. Unbidden, the baby floated into my mind.

Swaddled in dirty burlap, she had been tossed into the brush, thereby escaping the wholesale slaughter of her mother and traveling companions. A trench had been dug, the peasants shoved in alive, doused with fuel, then set afire, attempts at escape were met with lead as evidenced by the amount of spent shells surrounding the ditch. The stench of kerosene still strong, the rot of corruption made worse in the South American climate. The baby was inexplicably undisturbed by wildlife when I spotted her. She had succumbed to dehydration and exposure. I tucked the coarse fabric around the frail body and cradled her in my arms. Tears tracked through the dirt on my face and darkened her shroud. Without a word, the child was taken from me as tenderly as if she were alive. My people, my brothers, they provided a proper burial for the nameless infant. Her people were gone, her village burned. The child had been a dark rider in my memories for decades.

My stomach lurched upon reentry to the here and now. I blinked tears from my eyes and slowed my breathing. Another of Pensacola's finest approached. "Hey, what the hell are you doing here? Who are you?" He pointed at Bear and demanded, "On whose authority is she in here?"

"Mine. Who the hell are you?"

"I don't have to –"

Bear interrupted. "Yes, you do. Jurisdiction with Escambia County Sheriff's department."

Still bent over, I told the officer, “Some guy said PPD’s in charge. I personally do not care who is. You two duke it out. I am going home.”

“No, you’re not. I want identification right now.”

The deputy’s outdoor voice hurt my head. I stood upright slowly, rubbed the tears out of my eyes, turned left, seeking escape, and ran into a wall of dark blue windbreakers. The ocean roared in my ears drowning out the voices. Deputy Moreno, the officer formerly with SWAT had entered the melee, and his voice broke the din. “You boys got here awful fast.”

Another male voice among the blue jackets, even louder than Moreno yelled. “We can’t afford to have the scene fucked up by a bunch of locals.”

Not a fainter by nature, but my knees had lost strength. Bear got a massive arm around my waist and propped me up. I whispered, “I have to lie down. Oh Jesus. They were ... tell me that wasn’t real.”

“Who the hell are you?” Demanded a booming voice belonging to one of the blue windbreakers with the bright yellow letters.

“I’m the one who’s gonna throw up on your shiny new boots.” I swallowed and exhaled, adding “Sir” to my warning.

Voices multiplied as more law enforcement joined the fray. City, county, federal. I looked toward the gate, and my escape route. Two meat wagons, several marked and unmarked police cars filled the parking lot, obvious in their cheap camouflage. The fire truck had gone. I calculated the odds of getting to my truck without getting shot at less than zero.

The man whose boots I’d threatened to throw up on cranked up his volume. “How about you and your mouth sit in Jacksonville for a few days until you remember who you’re talking to, missy.”

Bear growled at me to shut up and addressed the agent politely. “You did not declare yourself. You barged in yelling at

our local heroes and didn't bother to notice that a lady is present, and at present needs to lie down in a quiet room for an hour. And the lady is going to do just that."

Moreno chimed in. "I gave her clearance to enter. She's an employee. I know who she is and where she lives. If she's needed for questioning, I'll fetch her myself. Until then, we let the lady go home."

My newly declared friend asked if I were okay to drive. I nodded and mouthed thank you. Bear took a few steps with me. I hugged him tight and whispered, "Call me."

Jelly legs carried me to my truck. I jammed the key in the ignition and remembered those eyebrows, fat furry black caterpillars wrestling on a moon pie. Moreno. We'd met months before in a maintenance shed at the eastern most edge of my island. He'd been with the emergency response team known as SWAT, responding to an event to which I was attached. He recognized me today even though I wasn't festooned with blood and globs of brain matter which had belonged to a dead Chicago gangster, nor did I sport facial lacerations, contusions, or dangling strips of duct tape.

That day I had thrown up on someone's boots, but not his, thank goodness. He was one the good guys. And was again today.

Internal autopilot delivered me back over the bridge, to the sanctity and sanity of my aunt's island home. Built from old-growth cypress, her shotgun shack expanded over the years, was insulated, updated, reinforced, and protected with force from shifty zoning boards, corrupt locals and dishonest feds. Developers mysteriously self-injured when they annoyed my aunt with their offers. By sheer force of will, Aunt Hannah's little slice of paradise had been spared all attempts at destruction save hurricanes. Even the wrath of nature seemed protective of her home. Hannah Thompson was a respected member of the community, sat on several boards, attached her name to various

charities. Never gratuitously, Hannah was a true believer in the principal of a Hand-Up, never a Hand-Out.

Rumor had it she had dented a mobster's skull with a cast iron skillet.

On the way home I stopped only twice to dry heave.