

SLACK TIDE

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 921, Article 121 specifically refers to Larceny and Wrongful Appropriation.

YOU CANNOT DEFEAT AN ENEMY YOU DO NOT ADMIT EXISTS

~LIEUTENANT GENERAL MICHAEL FLYNN

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THE REVENGER OF BLOOD HIMSELF SHALL SLAY THE
MURDERER: WHEN HE MEETETH HIM, HE SHALL SLAY HIM.

~ NUMBERS 35:19

01 COMFORTABLE STRANGERS

I glanced at the map on the seat double checking the mailbox number, and slowed into the turn, tires crunching over gravel. A dark four-door sedan shot out of the driveway hurling rock and crushed shell, crossed the centerline, and fishtailed into the southbound lane of Blue Angel Parkway. The asshole burned a patch of rubber roaring down the road. My truck bounced onto the opposite shoulder, sliding between a telephone pole and mailbox, and shuddered to a stop. Modern cars, modeled on the abysmal style of brutalism, offered little in the way of distinction. Dark, rental-looking, fresh scrapes on driver's side. The driver was possibly male, possibly light skinned, definitely dark haired, possibly little or no facial hair. The description fit at least half the men in the county, rendering the sparse information useless.

I backed between the posts, cut the wheel hard left, and goosed the accelerator to climb the embankment incline. I turned into Budgie's fenced drive mentally prepared for more surprises. Due to my amazing observational skills and driving abilities, I missed ramming the idiot by inches. I refused to entertain the notion of dumb luck. It was far too early for bad drivers. Idiot was probably an aluminum siding salesman and found a chilly welcome here in the heart of Peck's Bonsai.

Oak, Big Tooth Maple, and other hardwoods strategically lined the curving lane reducing the early morning sunlight to shadow. Low hanging branches softly scraped the cab of the truck as I crept down the drive, line of sight less than thirty yards forward or aft. Fresh ruts in the gravel where the idiot had accelerated and dug into the scree of the lane tugged at the steering wheel. Intermittent tree trunks bore scars of automobile paint. I urged the speedometer to ten, any faster would be suicidal. The man I'd come to see knew how to build a defensive tunnel that doubled as a horticultural marvel.

Budgie, aka Mike Lee Peckham, proprietor of Peck's Bonsai, a self-declared Choctaw who claimed his given name was Talako.

He swore his father renamed him Budgie when he ran off to fight in a white man's war. I didn't give a flying rat's ass about his genealogy any more than I did my own, caring only for his ability to grow or secure interesting trees. Budgie skirted the line between illegal antiquities with manufactured papers to unique specimens with impeccable provenance. Considering I used to break things and kill people at the whim of Uncle Sam, I made few judgements concerning a man's choice to earn a living.

The tree line stopped abruptly, revealing a tidy brick ranch home on a manicured lot. A sculptured shell path led to the steps of the front door. Two bikes lay haphazardly on the drive, no doubt dropped by offspring. Landscaping sparse but clean, big rocks planted in dark mulch, clumps of tickseed splashed yellow up the red brick, while saw palmettos anchored the corners. I crept past the house, keeping to the hard packed road knowing other defenses awaited the unwary. The lane curved deeper into the property and the manufactured forest thickened.

I reached a second clearing and snapped off the radio, killing Bob Segar midway through Katmandu. Three identical cypress-built sheds bordered the edge of the lot like squatty sentinels, boards silvery with age. A brick path connecting the grow houses had heaved with the passing years. I pulled the truck around, cracked the driver's window, shut down the engine, and lit a cigarette. Budgie was supposed to meet me here after he'd collected the tree. The engine ticked as it cooled in the early air, birds and bugs vied for my attention over the far-off drone of the highway.

Corrugated plastic in the window panels, frosted and yellowed with heat and age provided plenty of light, yet kept the plants from cooking in the summer sun. It also obscured the trees inside to impressionist blobs. How many bonsai could safely live in those huts? Consider spacing the trees with a margin of safety, approximately twenty-four inches apart dependent upon the size of the bonsai, ventilation, pesticide controls, and propensity of fungal infection. Three shelves per wall times four walls, times

three buildings, minus the area of the doors, average wall length eight by twelve so area of twelve walls...

The growl of a large animal, shockingly close, yanked me out of the pointless musing. I turned my head. A dog, a big dog, a big German Shepherd dog. Its paws rested against my window. Holy mother of God. The dog panted, her tongue dangling out, nostrils flaring at the scent of my fear wafting out of the crack in the window. I might have waxed eloquent at the dog's beauty if my death were not imminent. Tan underbelly and legs, black face, the demarcation between the two colors crisp, eyes healthy and shiny and inches from my face. I was without a raw steak to divert its attention away from eating me.

Oh Christ. Alternating volley of curses and prayers provided no comfort. My aunt, without whom I would be homeless, had long ago abandoned her benign lectures regarding my salty language. She claimed an officer should have a wider vocabulary. Unless someone claimed this beast, I would never again offend my dear aunt with my colorful language because I would be dinner for this stupid dog. I knew Budgie had a guard dog of some reputation, but I had never met the creature. Today was that day. And no one was calling the beast away.

No barking and no Budgie.

Sweat trickled down my back as the truck warmed in the sunny clearing. A finger of unease tickled the back of my neck. Having decided cowardice would be the better part of valor, at least on this occasion, it was time to turn around, haul ass out of here, and call the police when I was safely back at my own nursery. I started the truck and stared at the dog. A dog with no bark and no Budgie.

The finger of unease became a hand pounding on the back of my head. "He's not my problem, he's not my problem," I chanted and cranked the window down a half turn. "Here baby, who's a good doggie? Hmmm, who's gonna not eat the nice lady who is not cussing but might have wet her pants? Where's your master?"

What a stupid way to end my illustrious career, singing nonsense to a man-eating beast.

The dog ceased growling and twitched its large black tail once. I kept up the silliness and cranked the window down another inch. The dog's muzzle rested just short of the open window, nostrils flaring at the smell of a new meal. The tail twitched again. The damned dog wouldn't bark. Was that good or bad? I'd never lived anywhere long enough to own a fish, let alone a dog that needed to eat meat, needed to poop, and needed to run.

"Come on sweetie, you're not gonna eat me and I'm not gonna shoot you." I sang at the dog, lowering the window another inch. The animal dropped to all fours, wagged its hind quarter, and hopped up again, nails clicking on the glass. I lowered the window another inch, and gripped the glass, fingers vulnerable. The beast sniffed my hand and twitched its tail. I dropped the window another inch and it licked my hand. Two turns brought the glass completely down. The dog rested its paws on the edge of the jam. It could feasibly jump in and end me. The goofy thing stuck its head in the cab, tongue hanging out.

In a soft voice normally reserved for talking an insane person out of their firearm, I asked the dog if I could exit the vehicle. I killed the engine, left the window open, and pulled the door handle. The dog backed up and sat down, watching me. A glance confirmed the sex of the dog. Were girl dogs nicer? I slowly dropped my foot to the ground. The dog did not move. I slid my butt off the seat praying to God I was not wrong.

I held my left hand out to her, palm down, thinking happy thoughts, praying to God, softly repeating "good girl good girl." The dog approached, sniffed my knuckles, and licked the back of my hand. I held my breath, knowing she could eat me if she really wanted to eat me. The dog bumped her head into my hand, and I scratched behind an ear.

The growling started again, lower in pitch than two minutes ago when I was on the menu. The dog clamped her jaw on my

hand and backed up a step, tugging my hand. Her growl traveled the length of my arm. She dropped my hand, tore around the front of the truck, and jumped up in front of the door to the center shed, standing on her hind legs, clawing at the door. Trusting her instincts, I swung the door open and followed her through the shed. She raced down the center aisle and barreled through the back door. She alternately whined and growled, scratching at the door to another shed about twenty yards down a slim dirt path. Intact, but derelict compared to the bonsai huts.

A weathered boardwalk traversed a sluggish creek cutting across the path. A dark spot caught my eye. I rubbed a finger through the wetness and got a splinter for my troubles. Fuck, it was blood, primal copper smell filled my nose. The dog danced at the door waiting for the idiot human to let her in. I pulled my personal carry and thumbed the safety. I hope to hell I didn't have to shoot anyone because I really liked this new gun. Brazilian yes, but it had a dummy bar that warned of a round in the chamber. I thumbed the safety, crossed the bridge, and crouched to the side of the door. I pulled the handle and the dog bullied her way through the gap.

A bloody hand imprinted the doorframe, smudged during a hasty exit. I crept down an aisle toward the sound of the dog whimpering. Scattered droplets formed a bloody back trail, line of sight obscured by rows of cinder block shelving laden with assorted crap of the nursery trade.

The dog whimpered to my left, but her forward momentum had stopped. I crept to the aisle and peeked. A male, face down, right arm splayed above his head, left arm pinned underneath his body. This man died before he hit the ground. His blood pooled, but the dirt floor absorbed the bulk. No obvious exit wound.

I stuck my head farther around the endcap. Budgie lay sprawled on the ground, head propped against a shelf, legs spread, left hand gripping a pistol resting on his leg. His bloody right hand held his gut, shirt and pants dark and wet. Ratty leather vest tainted, even his Ranger patch had been splashed.

“Budge, Budgie, it’s Archer, don’t shoot,” I whispered. He opened his eyes, lifting the gun toward the sound of my voice. Christ Almighty, I was staring into the blackness of a fucking tunnel. Budgie’s eyes moved slowly in my direction, but a million years passed before he lowered the weapon.

“Budgie, it’s Archer. You have a tree for me. An olive tree. An old olive tree. Gotta remember, brother. I’m here for work. I didn’t shoot you.” I held my breath and held his gaze, but it was no longer on me. He stared into the big empty. He hadn’t reached for his dog. He wasn’t seeing her either. He closed his eyes. “Goddam it, Archer, this sure hurts.”

I stowed my weapon, and crawled toward Budgie, relieved he was alive, pausing to stick two fingers on the neck of his opponent. No movement. The dog sat next to her master and whimpered. I scooted past the dead man and knelt next to Budgie.

“Budge, I’ve got to see your wound. I don’t know how bad it is. It might be nothing.”

He opened his eyes and focused on me, seeing me. “Fuckin liar. I know it’s bad, I can feel my guts sliding around.”

“Shhhh, let me see what I can do.”

“You ain’t no fuckin doctor...”

“I’m all you have right now.” Keeping a weather eye on the upset dog, I carefully lifted Budgie’s hand to assess the damage. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. The entry wound was a small black maw, slightly ragged. Cripes almighty, a short-range duel. Clotting blood covered his lower abdomen to the top of his belt, pooling in his lap. Budgie held enough pressure to avoid bleeding out, but we were running out of time.

“Good news, you took out your opponent and the wound is clotting. Let me get it packed and I’ll call for an ambulance.” Budgie groaned. The dog stood, I stopped poking around the wound and looked into the black eyes of an eighty-pound killing machine.

“Budgie, call off your fucking dog. She’s scaring me to death.”

“I can’t believe she let you in. Sobi, come here girl, come on, there’s a girl, that’s my good girl.” He draped an arm around his dog, tilting dangerously until she plopped down and leaned into him. “How did you get past her?”

“First aid kit?”

“How dammit?”

“I gave her the steak I keep in my glovebox. Med kit, now.”

“Up to the house.”

Muttering about a lack of medical supplies, I rummaged through the closest shelf, shoving aside rare treasures like broken hammers, a rusty scythe blade, bags of expired fertilizer, finally latching onto a thick stack of towels. Thin red cotton, faded from repeated washing, folded neatly, and stacked on the shelf, probably right after the last war to end all wars. I pulled a thick wad from the middle of the stack. Budgie sucked air loudly when I lifted his hand to get at the wound. The dog didn’t growl this time.

“Hold this, right here, press hard as you can to hold the pressure.” I placed his hand over the make-shift pad. No way was I packing that ancient cloth into the wound. He’d be septic within minutes if he wasn’t already. Pale, but responsive, the flesh around the wound hadn’t yet stiffened, abdomen not distended beyond too much beer. The blood didn’t pour, and no violent odor assaulted me.

I shoved more shit off the shelf. My hand closed around a thick roll of packing tape. Even if the adhesive had died of old age, I could tie the pads to him. It wasn’t duct tape, but it was all I had.

The first three pulls of tape contained zero stick, but the fourth stretch of plastic clung to my fingers. I tore off the damaged tape, wadded it into a ball, and flicked it at the shelf. It

stuck to my fingers. Of course it stuck to my fingers. I rubbed the wad off on a pant leg, pulled a usable length of sticky tape, and moved his bloody hand above the wound. I stretched tape over the middle of the pad, reaching from one side of his belly to the other, softly smoothing it down over his furry skin, repeating until I'd created a checkerboard. That dirty cloth would not fall off due to my negligence.

Did I risk the man bleeding out on the dirt floor of the shed or risk further damage by pushing his knee up into his gut for pressure? There had to be internal damage. Only on television did the hero take a shot in the gut and walk off into the sunset. I wasn't a fucking doctor, so I flipped a mental coin.

"You gotta pull your leg up into your gut, Budge, you can't stretch out. You know that."

I crawled down his leg, straightened his foot, and pushed, his heel scraping the dirt floor. I did not stop when he screamed. Sobi stood at attention, a stripe of fur from center shoulder to rump rose straight up, her growl large in the quiet of the shed. Budgie snaked his arm around her neck whispering, "good girl, stand down, good girl."

Tears streamed down his grizzled face, and he panted like a dog, like his dog. "No cops, no ambulance, Archer, I mean it. Tell me you ain't called."

"I've called no one. I didn't know if I was walking into Dodge City at high noon. Now shut up, and wrap your arms around your knee, hold it in place, and control your damn dog. I am not going to be eaten while trying to patch you up. Is there an exit wound? I've got to see what we're working with." I had shifted into field mode. I had neither bedside manner nor time for one. Budgie was on borrowed time and so was his damned dog.

While Sobi held Budgie upright, I crawled around her to assess exit wound damage. The entry wound was ugly, but not terminal, unless it had bounced around inside of him. He'd already be dead if it had. The bullet's exit punched a chunk of my acquaintance into a rainwater trough. Last night's dinner crawled

up my throat forcefully. I pushed the pad against the wound with my knee, peeled a length of tape to anchor the cotton, and created a checkboard matching the entry wound.

“Five kids, Archer, at least five, I think maybe more. Sun hadn’t broken the horizon, too many shadows everywhere. Like little ghosties coming out of a rusty steel shipping box, at the port, you know the ones. They was small, like little ones, just outta diapers. Christ. There might a been more, but I heard…” he groaned, “Somebody seen me, I could hear feet hitting the ground, they were trying to flank me. I ran. I’m a fucking coward.” His breathing shallowed. He panted with the exertion of telling his tale.

I was in no position to judge whether his conduct was the act of an officer or the sin of a scoundrel. Budgie was at the port to pick up a tree. For me. A tree most likely stolen from its point of origin. He thinks he witnessed small children emerging from a shipping container. Why else would toddlers be at a shipping port before dawn, unless he was hallucinating. It didn’t matter. My immediate concern was getting the man to an actual medic.

I yanked the phone out of my pocket. Budgie grabbed my arm. “No fucking cops.”

“All right. No cops. Let go.” I scrolled until I found Margolis, Frank, and poked Send. As soon as the phone linked, I said, “Request CASEVAC, ONE ALPHA, BRAVO, LIMA ONE, CAT-PAPA, GSW abdomen. Peck’s. Immediate.” Funny how things stick in the meaty jello of the human brain. Without hesitation, I’d ordered Frank to commence an immediate evacuation using any means possible, single casualty, status urgent, and warned the old crank of potential enemies in the area.

Four seconds of dead air broken by Frank’s rasp, “Copy that. ETA seven possible ten.” Seven to ten long minutes. No way could I drag Budgie out of here alone, not without ripping him open mortally.

My patient drooped against his dog, shoving her. If he laid down, he'd bleed out. I grabbed a clay pot, crusty with salt, flipped it over, and shoved it into his shoulders, forcing him upright. I sat next to him, his gun in my hand. Sobi stuffed her nose in between us, her doggie snorts oddly comforting.

Retired Chief Petty Officer Frank Margolis used the knowledge gleaned in decades of naval tomfoolery to build a profitable excavation business next door to my own nursery. Next door, meaning over half a mile of brush, forest, and swamp filled with terrifying meat-eating creatures and giant spiders. Frank had introduced me to Budgie with a snide remark about "birds of a feather," but hadn't bothered explaining his cryptic comment. Perhaps he meant that Peckham and I shared a penchant for light larceny. Or maybe Frank was just a crabby old retired seaman with wire bristles for humor.

"Something bad going on out there, Archer. Somebody selling kids or buying them, I don't know, but they sent two to kill me. I got one, winged the other." He sucked in a hard breath. "Aw God that hurts."

"We have an evac in eight."

"No no no cops, no ambulance, you gotta get Donna outta work, get the kids. I got shit in my safe, get it, we get outta here." He closed his eyes and drifted away for a few seconds. Budgie opened his eyes and yelled, "They were fucking babies."

I draped an arm around his neck and wrapped the other around his knee, forcing him to remain upright. I closed my eyes and whispered reassuring nonsense to a dying man and his scary dog. Non forest sounds rose above the hush in the shed. The dog growled.

"Sobi, stand down," I ordered. She would either eat me or ignore me.

The sound of an engine moving slowly, low and powerful, its gearing sounded whiny as if it were in reverse. The whine stopped and the rpm stabilized. I waited. Budgie's gun aimed

down the only path through the shed to our location. Footsteps tapped softly over the boardwalk. The door hinges squealed.

“Archer, it’s Frank. I got a med kit and a litter.”

The dog stood at attention, fur up, ears forward until she got a whiff of a familiar human. Frank stepped into the aisle, popped the litter open, and tossed a duffel bag at me. He dropped to one knee next to his friend talking low, almost murmuring, rubbing the dog between her ears.

I unzipped the bag, peered inside, and pulled out a box of generic maxi-pads. “Really?”

“They’re sterile and cheap,” he said.

“He’s holding steady with towels and packing tape.”

Frank lifted Budgie’s shirt. “Christ almighty, he’s gonna die of infection.”

He knelt and whispered, “Hey Budge, we’re gonna get you outta here, it’s gonna hurt, but I’ll get you over to...” Frank paused, deciding where to take his friend. “We get you to that pretty gal up to Foley, she’ll patch you up or kill you. Gotta pick you up buddy, can’t roll you.” Frank pantomimed at me to lift. I slid my hands into Budgie’s armpits, and Frank wrapped his arms under his knees. On a short count of three, we lifted the injured man at the same time. Footsteps aligned, we dog walked him to the tarp and set him down gently.

“Dammit Sobi, get out of the way.” The dog complied, backing up two steps, and parked her butt on the ground. “Budgie, I talked to Donna, she’s getting the kids. And I emptied the safe on my way in.”

Frank tossed the rubber pillow at me. “Christ Archer, didn’t you train medic? Wound up, slow the blood.”

I kept my ego in check and pushed the rubber pillow into the wound. Budgie hugged the pillow into his gut and cursed as we eased him into a fetal position.

“On three. One, two, three.” We navigated in lock step to Frank’s van. I hoisted my end up, smashing five fingers while balancing the litter on the lip of the cargo bay. I stepped inside the van, lifted my end, and tugged the litter inside. Budgie reached out and grabbed my collar, pulling me into him. “You gotta get Donna, get my shit from the safe and get Donna. Those kids, that’s why they killed me, those little boys, I mean I think they was boys, looked like boys, getting hard to think. Shot one of the bastards. The other found me in the shed. Winged him. He ran.” Budgie’s native twang slurred into unconsciousness.

“He shot a kid? What the hell is he talking about?” Frank asked.

“Budgie was picking up a tree and says he saw kids this morning, little boys, at the port. The men moving the kids saw him. He ran. I found blood on the bridge. Two men chased him here. He shot one, the other damned near ran me off the road getting away.”

“How do you know only two men?”

“If there were three, Budgie and I would be dead.”

“What the hell did he stumble into? For Christ’s sake, I don’t wanna know. I’ll take care of Donna.”

“The widow will be pleased, I’m sure.”

Sobi hopped up in the van and curled next to her master, still whining, but no longer dangerous to me. I put my hand on her haunch and whispered baby words. Her tail did not move. I backed out, slammed the cargo doors, and followed Frank around the van. “Late model sedan, dark, possibly rental, nearly rammed me coming in.” I looked at my watch. “That was twenty some minutes ago. Single driver, white male. Safe to assume the driver is a partner. If Budgie saw what he thinks he saw, logic says there are more than just those two and they’ll return with reinforcements.”

“That’s gonna suck for you cause you gotta dump that body. You plug him down real good in the black water down one of the

finger creeks. Roll him out and weight him, tuck him up under a cypress knee. He'll be gone before the month's out. Circle a life right outside our door."

My mouth dropped open. "No fucking way."

"Yes fucking way. That body will sink us all, goddamit girl, you git that body gone." Before I could argue, Frank shifted into first, heavy duty transmission whining like a jet engine. The van disappeared into the darkness of the curved and canopied drive, leaving me alone with a body, incoming hostiles, Budgie's gun, and the birds.

The distant hum of the 173 underneath the chattering of local wildlife provided a soundtrack for the work ahead, droning and almost comforting. Not unlike the Gulf rolling in and out like a soft breath on a still day out on Lost Key. But I was not on the island. I was on a lonely two lane just south of Saufley Field. My orders were to transport the unknown dead man to my nursery, drag him down the creek, float him on into Tarklin Bayou, weight him down, and tuck him under a cypress. Why was this job mine? I came out to buy a fucking tree, but remembered that God's retribution for theft was death. With a heavy sigh, I began the task at hand. Railing at the heavens was not going to get the work done. Orders were orders. Someday I'd grow up enough to stop taking orders. The sonofabitch was a noncom to boot.

I backed my truck into the spot formerly occupied by Frank's van. Oiled with sweat from moving Budgie, I rolled the dead man onto his back and discovered he wasn't a Swede. Beyond that fact, his color might have been ethnicity or lividity. Dark hair, oily, thick, and cut badly. A heavy five o'clock shadow crawled up his cheeks. I patted him down for treasure. Cheap flip phone, imitation leather wallet with four hundred dollars in crisp new twenties, and a driver's license. Robert Dylan Smith, Pensacola, Florida, thirty-seven. It looked decently done, but the forger's technical skills outpaced his imagination. Bob Smith indeed.

When Budgie shot this moke, he'd died instantly, and pitched forward without attempt to break his fall, but where was the dead

man's weapon? I searched the surrounding area, poking under shelves looking for this man's firearm. Unless the damned thing bounced out the door, maybe the partner snagged it. Time slipped away at an alarming pace, forcing me to abandon the search. I stowed the phone and cash in my pocket, returned the wallet to his pocket, and snapped a picture of the dead man's face with my own phone.

I scrounged through the shed for a tarp, uncovering more rolls of dead packing tape, clay pots, bags of soil, rusty tools of questionable necessity. No tarp, sheet, travois, hoist, or golf cart. Uncomfortably aware of time flying away, I pushed through the back door and spotted yet another shed. Tacked to the door was a sign warning that only employees were welcome. To enforce the notion, the door was padlocked. I pushed the yellowed Plexiglas screwed into the window frame. Rain and heat had rusted the screws. I pushed harder and the whole piece fell in. The foul odor of cat whizz smacked me in the face, large, yellow, and sour. My eyes watered and morning coffee climbed up my throat. I shoved the Plexiglas aside and climbed through the hole.

Fans circulated the fetid air. Bundles of greenery hung from the rafters like deformed Christmas trees. It sure as hell wasn't Artemisia. There had to be forty or more fat dangling bouquets. The smell threatened my equilibrium. This place was neater than the shed Budgie tried to die in. Sealed five-gallon buckets lined one wall, neatly labelled with the names of chemicals, shelves full of oiled hand tools, shovels hung in brackets. Bingo. A stack of neatly folded tarps lay next to spooled twine. Tossing twine and tarp through the window, I turned and looked round for anything else of use. My eyes stopped at a wad of black plastic, out of place among the neatness. Without opening the bag, I softly closed a hand around the center, rustling the plastic. Holy shit, Budgie took receipt of the tree before anonymous men tried to kill him. I climbed out the window with my prize.

I laid a tarp next to the dead man, unfolded a flap, and rolled him onto it, pulled the flap over him, and tucked the edge under his body. I rolled, pushed, and wrapped the man until the tarp ran

out, creating a stinking blue burrito. I tied a length of twine over his head and cinched the tarp under his chin. Five more loops secured my boy inside his shroud.

Sweat rolled into my eyes and ran down the back of my jeans. I stood and stretched, muscles shaking with exertion. A cigarette would taste lovely when this dark work was finished. An ice cold beer as well. I glanced at my watch, surprised to see less than forty minutes had elapsed since my near miss at the drive entrance, providing no relief from the overwhelming urge to hurry.

I dragged the dead drug dealer over the boardwalk, plastic crinkling loud in the stifling August morning. The weight of my burden felt as though it had doubled in death. I dropped the rope and opened the tail gate, wondering how to get him into the bed without a winch. I dragged him parallel to the bumper and stared at him, waiting for inspiration or a giant to ease my burden.

I squatted down, bouncing a couple of times to stretch my thighs, wrapped my arms around his upper half, and pulled him upright. “May I have this dance, you dead bastard?” I dragged him two steps and shoved him face first into the bed. He dangled on the tailgate but did not fall. If the son of a bitch fell out, I would drag his dead ass into the woods and leave this mess where it belonged, with Budgie and Frank.

Several breathless moments later, I’d shoved enough of him inside the bed of the truck to balance the load safely. I sat on the gate next to my quarry catching my breath, desired cigarette forgotten. Realizing the dead man offered neither conversation nor complaint, I climbed into the bed and dragged him to the center. I hoped to God Budgie didn’t have security cameras immortalizing my epic struggles.

I returned to the storage shed, looting shovels, a pick, pots, and four bags of fertilizer in a valiant attempt to camouflage my cargo. Nope, the package looked exactly like what it was: a dead body rolled up inside a plastic tarp and trussed with bailing twine.

The singularity of transporting this dead body created a void into which space and time ceased to have any relevance. My fifteen-minute drive through town approached infinity. I felt delirious yet calm at the same time. The amount of sweat generated could not be blamed entirely on the summer heat. I waited for traffic to pass and turned into an empty parking lot. My nursery, Gardens on Sorrento, hadn't yet made the travel brochures. A fact for which I was grateful this particular morning. The dash clock read eight thirty. My morning shenanigan filled an hour and change of the young day.

I drove around the empty lot and parked at the creek's edge using the building to shield the truck. The bank was dry, the brackish water trickled low at slack tide. Inevitable that time began slipping past at a faster rate now that I was most exposed to discovery. Predators would smell the spoils of my work long before a suitable burial spot was located. It was not uncommon to see the big birds circling something tasty, and I didn't want to fight vultures and hawks disposing of my prize.

I grabbed a pair of waders hanging inside the west door, and scrounged in the bin for heavy canvas gloves. I found nothing with which to weight my friend. Chains? Fresh out. Rocks? I'd never get him down the creek. Cutting him up and tucking the pieces inside cypress knees made my stomach somersault. Seconds ticked away while I picked up and discarded ideas, each worse than the previous. Screw it. I'd be eaten by dinosaurs and spiders before I got far enough to tuck him. We both would become part of the circle of life. No monsoons on the horizon so neither of us would ride the rapids back into civilization this week.

Flexibility was key. The best laid plans crumble in the first light of engagement. When I got him into the big dark swamp, I would improvise. Without ceremony, I tugged my man over the edge of the tailgate, his body chunked solidly as it hit the ground. My lucky day, a fresh corpse meant he was still bendy. I rolled him over the creek bank. He slid into the water without a splash. I would be porting this bastard in water barely eight inches deep. I

followed him down into the shallow water, donned the gloves, grabbed a loop of rope, and began the lovely and arduous duty of dragging my body into the bayou. Dragging was easier in the sludge than on the gravel.

Normal sounds of the encroaching swamp seemed louder in the midst of a felony, or was it larceny? Most likely both. Step back, pull, step back, and tug. Screech, birrhh, slap of foot on water, rasp of plastic tarp over rocks. I fell into a rhythm of monotonous motion. At any given moment, in any given city, in any given state, any given law-abiding citizen stood in violation of numerous statutes while having no conscious knowledge of a crime. How many laws was I violating at this very moment? Desecration of a corpse, aiding and abetting criminal activities, unlawful disposal of a body. The list grew as I tugged and dragged.

An unnatural slap of water broke my reverie. A lone male stood ankle deep in the middle of the stream ten feet from the end of my bundle. We locked eyes for a long count. The man slowly raised his hands chest high, palms out, took a step forward, then another. Five steps brought him to the foot of my bundle, which in actuality was the head of my dead man. He was beyond feeling his head bounce over the rocks.

“May I see him? Please.”

The intruder’s voice, low and distinct, carried weight without volume, firmly annunciating five simple words. I assessed my situation in a split second: I was fucked. I dropped my end of the bundle into the shallow water and stepped backward without dropping my stare. I was alone and my firearm unreachable down inside the waders. My work was obvious. And this son of a bitch snuck up on me. I deserved my fate.

I nodded. The man’s mouth curved downward in a reasonable facsimile of sadness, and his thick dark eyebrows furrowed. He crouched next to the bundle, loosened the rope and untucked the tarp, revealing the face of my nameless man. He reverently touched the man’s cheek and began chanting, almost singing

quietly, in words I could not distinguish. The man closed his eyes and continued for several long seconds. He stood, rewrapped the tarp, and wrestled the rope in place.

“Thank you. I hope a blessing offered no offense.”

“No blessing is an offense. The man is a murderer and not worthy of a blessing.”

“Sacrifice of the wicked remains an abomination to the Lord.”

Sinking a body in a black water swamp and a complete stranger engages me in a biblical duel. What else would this day bring? “I did not sacrifice this man, but I have been charged with his return to the earth.”

The man nodded, accepting the mild rebuke with a smile which disappeared as quickly as it appeared. I looked away from those dark eyes, eerie in the shadow of the closing woods. Attractive but not remarkably so, close shaven, dark hair short against light skin, not quite European white, not quite Mediterranean. Five foot ten, around a hundred and sixty pounds, physically fit, but not scrawny. I committed these pointless details to memory as if I'd have a chance to describe the man to law enforcement or a priest.

“You've made your intercession, let me finish my work.”

“The water is too shallow here. Allow me to assist.”

Doubtful another stranger would pop up out of the big empty. I grabbed the binding and lifted my end, accepting his offer with a nod.

The water deepened enough to float the cargo, easing the strain in my back and shoulders. Trees closed in on the bank as the water deepened and the creek widened. We stepped carefully. The northern swamp gators were supposed to be afraid of humans. Possibly a myth perpetrated by the natives to repel tourists. I did not care to find out.

About a half mile into our journey I asked, “What was the blessing you offered our friend?”

“I asked God to deliver him proper rest.”

“What is the appropriate prayer for tucking a body in a swamp?”

“I do not know. I have never done this.”

In the perpetual twilight of the preserve, mangy scrub pine and maple held the sun at bay, its light penetrating only when directly overhead. Black cypress had adapted their way north providing several suitable places to lay our friend to rest, a bloody offering to the carnivores of the swamp. My new friend cleared his throat and pointed to a large cypress, old and strong, its knees rose above the waterline, and formed a protective ring. I nodded. He released his end of the burden to investigate. The dead man floated peacefully. My friend stepped around the tree as if stepping around a minefield. “If I can find an opening.” He turned toward the tree and dipped below the brackish water.

An eternity later, the man emerged on the far side of the ancient cypress. “A natural shelf is two feet below the waterline and currently uninhabited.” He climbed the bank, jumped up, and grabbed a branch, letting his weight snap the limb from a scrub pine. He slid his prize into the water and carefully followed.

“I do not have much experience disposing of bodies.”

I shrugged without reply. I had some experience, but now was not the time to share. I cut the bindings and we unrolled the body with care. My concern was less for the dignity of the dead man than my terror of Mr. Smith’s blood chumming the waters. My accomplice seemed unperturbed. Maybe he didn’t have prehistoric flesh-eating creatures lurking about his hometown.

We pushed down on the body, but he wasn’t going under.

“Have you the binding?” I pulled the coil of rope out of my waders and handed it to him. He wound three loops around the body, securing it with a knot. “This will be difficult.”

He twisted the end into a lead and moved forward, using the branch to locate an opening large enough to squeeze the body through. He dipped under the water again and pulled the leash through the roots. I pushed and shoved, my waders filling with swamp water, finally slipping our dead man through the breach. The stranger wedged his branch into the muck, fencing the body inside the root ring. My new friend whispered more words in his unfamiliar tongue, yet something struck a chord in the back of my brain. I closed my eyes and let the sounds flow over me.

Our return trip took far less time because we weren't dragging a body. Exhaustion kept all conversation at bay as did panting and tripping and scanning for predators. Water moccasins, copperheads, cottonmouths, alligators, hikers, God, spiders, alligators; we were so close to civilization, yet folks became part of the food chain every year in this black water. At the last bend, I held up my fist to wait. He stopped and nodded. I stepped into the sunlight where the creek led to my property. Nothing moved. My truck was still parked too close to the edge. I moved farther up the bed in a crouch, crawling along the bank. A blue Honda sedan was parked to the side of the building.

“How did you arrive?”

“A blue four door car, rented.”

“We're clear.” I climbed out of the creek savoring the sky, the birds, the bugs, grateful even for the humidity which was gaining ground in the brightening day. Soaked to the skin and covered in muck, my friend was a fine-looking man. I stopped that train of thought hard in its tracks and offered him use of the industrial shower.

I dug keys out of my pocket and unlocked the side door, motioning him to follow. I stripped off the waders and replaced them on the hook inside the door, writing a mental note to hose them out. Angela, my intrepid office manager, would skewer my head on a stick and display it on the sales floor for the crime of not returning a tool to its designated home, cleaned and ready for use. She was one of the few things on earth of which I harbored

an unnatural fear, like spiders and alligators. The woman left a promising career as a civil servant to work at my not-quite-profitable start-up. She'd never volunteered the reason and considering my own secrets, I thought it best not to ask.

The man with no name followed me down the hallway. I pointed him to the bathroom.

“Thank you. I have clothes in my car.”

I limped into the office and checked my weapon for moisture and gunk. Cheap, but reliable, the black polymer and steel untainted by muck or swamp water. I wiped off the sweat and laid it on the desk. When my new friend departed, the firearm would receive a proper cleaning. I peeled off my nasty socks, imagining a legion of cooties trapped within the sweaty fabric and clinging to my feet. I padded to the four-drawer filing cabinet Angela and I shared which contained various pieces of clothing in case of emergency. I stole her socks. Sweaty and in need of a shower, I was not as filthy as my nameless friend. The pressure shifted as my friend reentered the building. The bathroom door latched and half a minute later the water ran. I tried to remember the last time I'd heard the shower running for a man in my proximity.

I needed a drink. Badly. What protocol governed proper behavior in a body disposal situation wherein a friendly stranger offered badly needed assistance? Even Aunt Hannah might be stumped on that one, and legend has it she taught table etiquette in the Eisenhower White House.

A half empty bottle of Evan Williams sat amongst discarded cell phones in the bottom drawer of my desk. I wiped out a coffee mug, poured a double and shot it straight back, relishing the heat.

I wiped out another mug, filled both and waited. I had no data by which to analyze my new friend except he offered no name, and I couldn't place his accent. English grammatically perfect, he used few contractions, and spoke with an economy of words except for the prayers. Oh, and he was damn fine looking.

The pipes clanked when he shut off the water. I waited for the bathroom door to open and yelled, "Follow the hall to the office." The ancient window air conditioner roared to life, decibel level akin to dropping a Hornet on the Nimitz. The machine pumped out freezing cold air, effectively controlled the humidity, and foiled any attempt to record conversation. There had been more than a few illicit conversations in this office. I waved at the chair next to my desk and pushed the mug of bourbon toward him. He picked up the cup and sniffed at the dark liquid. He looked at me, half smile on his face, nodded, and sipped.

We sat companionably inside the roar of the air conditioner. He swiveled his chair and stood, making a circuit of the room, studying sticky notes and pictures of bonsai taped to the walls with equal interest. The office would never be mistaken for the den of a CEO piloting a billion-dollar corporation. My taste and budget ran to used but still functional. Battered office furniture, dented filing cabinets, and a three-quarter size refrigerator advertising America's oldest brewery.

Several minutes passed. The air conditioner cycled off. The man returned to his chair and held out his mug for a refill. "You are very good at quiet."

"And you have very good English."

He nodded, revealing nothing.

"The prayer, it was Hebrew?" I asked.

"Yes, but I am not sure if God listened as my heart was unsure of my actions."

"God invented optimistic cynicism. You get points for trying. Did you know the man?"

He shook his head without hesitation. "He was no one to me. Was he someone to you?"

"A stranger who tried to kill my friend." Budgie was not so much a friend as he was an acquaintance who secured interesting trees with varying degrees of larceny, but that fact was not relevant.

“Yet you do not call the police, you do not call for a medic, you dispose of a man in the darkness of the marsh. For what reason?”

“My friend witnessed something horrible and was chased by men involved in the crime. You’re not a partner or I’d be dead and tucked alongside the unknown scumbag.”

He stared into his drink parsing my response and determining his. “Your friend has something I would very much like to take home. I followed him to your shipping port and waited outside the gate for him. He sped past me in a van. I followed him. He is not running from me. I have no reason to kill him. I only want my property.”

I waited for an explanation of his property by staring at him, at the bridge of his nose. It rarely took long for the subject to break.

“A tree,” he admitted.

“You came all this way for a tree. I have several, take your pick. No charge. Consider it payment for your help.”

“I will return to your friend’s business. My tree must be there.”

“Cops are going to be all over the place.”

“I will be careful.” He finished his bourbon, stood, and extended his hand. “It was an interesting morning.”

I shook his hand. It was firm and warm. And clean. I did not have his name, but I had his picture from my security cameras, his rental car plate, and I had this man’s tree.

