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Saturday, July 4, 2026

It was cold in Famous Sam's. Everyone here liked it that way. It was still happy hour, and in the town of Tortolita it was still well over a hundred degrees outside. Some came here for the drinks, and, some came for the sandwiches. Everyone came for the air conditioning. Murf came just to be somewhere.

One of the giant flat screens was blaring FOX news. A Breaking News Alert. "Give me a break." Murf said to the guy on his right. "Breaking news my ass. The only way you could have breaking news every hour all day long is if some guy was falling down the stairs of some building a thousand stories high – and breaking something on every step."

His neighbor was not amused. "It's freaking North Korea, man. Don't you know anything?"

"Yeah." Murf said. "I know where Korea is. What about it?"

His neighbor shifted his mass to turn toward Murf, and glowered at him. "They freaking attacked us today. That's all." He sighed a huge beery breath and continued, "They tried to take out the whole west coast. San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle. That's all."

"My God," Murf said. "Are you messing with me?"

"Don't believe me. Listen to Blondie on the TV," the big man replied.

Just then, the big screen TV played a warning tone and switched to another announcer. He hurriedly intoned, "This just in. The military confirmed that ballistic missiles targeting San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco were successfully intercepted and destroyed by a volley of American missile defense system interceptor missiles. We repeat that they were successfully intercepted." The next few things he said were drowned out by shouting and cheering celebrating Raytheon, the missile manufacturer in nearby Tucson. No employee of Raytheon was going to have to pay for his or her own drinks tonight.

Just then, the television switched to images of terrible devastation. The commotion died down and Murf was able to hear the announcer again. "... impacted Vancouver, British Columbia." The camera played back and forth over street scenes that looked like Syria from the ISIS Caliphate wars. An overhead view from a satellite showed huge billowing black and grey clouds. You could imagine screams, but it was silent. It seemed like everyone was dead.

Murf looked over to his new acquaintance. "They attacked Canada, too?"

“You don’t listen?” The big man replied. “One of our missiles knocked the Korean’s Seattle missile off track and over to Vancouver.”

Just then the volume came up on the television, “. . . deflected a hundred miles off target from Seattle by the near miss from one of our defense missiles. There is no reliable estimate of the number killed, but we can see from the space view that the city center and the ports have been devastated. At least a hundred thousand are likely to be dead from this cowardly attack.” All over the room, Murf could hear people speaking with one voice saying, “Oh my God. Oh, my God.” Over and over. Looking around, Tina caught his eye. She was crying. He knew that he shouldn’t let it show that they’re together when she’s working, but he wanted to comfort her. Murf went over and put his hand on her shoulder. She jerked as though she had been shocked, then turned to see him and instantly threw her arms around him like a tree hugger saving a tree growing by a logging camp. At length, she eased off and said, “I’ve got to serve these guys their drinks or we’re going to have a riot on our hands.” Murf rumbled deep in his throat, but Tina stilled him. “Be nice, everyone is afraid, and they just need for things to seem normal. I’ve got to get my smile back on.”

Slowly, it came out through the constant news reviews that this had been going on for a couple of hours. The warning that missiles had been launched. The radar tracking. The optimistic predictions that our untried missile shield would protect the millions of lives at stake. The misses. The hits. The final successes. The “Oops” with the missile targeting Seattle. *Thank God, we still have Boeing.* But no one told Vancouver. Now no one needs to tell Vancouver. The Korean missiles did not have the range to accurately target the Tucson area, or else Raytheon would be gone. No one told Tucson either. *No one told the Canadians. They just had to be surprised.*

“The Canadians didn’t ask for this.” Murf said.

“Who said we asked for it?” said a newcomer on Murf’s other side. Murf turned to look at him. He leaned into Murf’s face and screamed, “We didn’t ask for it! We ain’t never done nothing to Korea. Nothing. Not a goddam thing! And those stinking bastards nuke us. They nuked us! Do you get it? Don’t you get it? We’re just sitting here and they nuke us.”

Murf got up and walked to another part of the bar where there was only one table. The little guy followed him – like a baby duck. This was getting irritating. Murf was no giant, but he was big enough to twist this little guy’s head off. Although, if the truth were to be told, he agreed with what he was saying. Still, he couldn’t get his head around it.

“They nuked us. What did we ever do to them? Just out of nowhere, they nuked us.” The little guy was still ranting.

Murf wanted to just go home, but his TV was sitting in the back of his Jeep Cherokee waiting to be repaired, returned or trashed. He needed to hear the outcomes on the news. He

wondered if the Koreans had given up or if they were bringing up more missiles. *How many do they have, anyway?*

He had walked in already out of sorts because he had just lost his paycheck for the next month. Last week, he had been the Director of Emergency Service Programs, but he had made a fatal mistake. He had pressured too many influential people to allocate funds in preparation for an imminent North Korean attack on the United States which almost no one believed would really happen, but he had been wrong in his prediction. He had told too many people that it would almost certainly be a cyberattack against our power grid. It was rash to be that specific. He had known that an attack was possible, even likely, even very likely, even rushing down the tracks like a freight train, but he had no way of knowing that it was going to happen now, today. He had told too many fat cats to spend too much money preparing for a power grid crash that everyone believed would probably never happen. Even knowing that people thought he was Chicken Little saying that the sky is falling, he had not believed that it could or would bite him in the ass this way.

Now look at this. Conventional nuclear war! And our missile shield stopped it. I was such an idiot. I didn't save anybody. I just wasted resources pointing in the wrong direction. Just then, the bar went silent again. The blonde head was talking excitedly. "This just in." *Oh sure. "The New Jersey power grid is crashing. All the lights are out in Trenton. I repeat"* The big flat screen suddenly went dark, then to grey static. *Where is FOX news located? New York, of course,* he thought. *Right next to New Jersey, of course.*

He decided to order a sandwich. He wanted to hear more. Murf figured that the bar's DIRECTV system would soon be getting a signal from one of the big Midwestern cities, and he wanted to hear what was up. Sure enough, they soon had a Chicago news feed. No one knew what was going on. He heard two talking heads saying something about how we were going to launch on North Korea, and that in an hour it was going to be the world's biggest parking lot for China and South Korea. Murf wasn't sure he believed that. *Too many wimps running this country. No one will make that call,* he thought.

Murf carefully and quietly ate his sandwich. It was good. *Nothing like fast food,* he thought.

Then, in a moment and without preamble, the lights went out. All of them. The lights inside, and the lights which should have been visible outside. It was quiet. Then it got noisy.

Oh, fuck me. Murf thought.

Two Months Ago

Murf was happy, really happy, for the first time in a long time. For the first time since his divorce and losing Louise (his ex-wife, who he didn't miss at all) and losing touch with Dani, Daniella, (his daughter, who he missed like crazy), he was feeling successful, good about things, and in control of his life.

He pulled his new Jeep Cherokee into the parking lot of Tortolita's only Denny's 24-hour restaurant, his new favorite place. He coasted to the rear of the parking area, then backed into a space. His friends used to tease him about this habit of parking facing outward. They would ask if he was planning to rob the place and make a quick getaway, but it was just a side effect of his job. As the town's Director of Emergency Service Programs, he had become accustomed to thinking of everything in terms of reacting to some unanticipated emergency. Being prepared to get out of a building and onto the road as quickly as possible was just a natural result of always looking at everything in those terms. Some of his one date or two date girlfriends had thought that this was a negative, even paranoid way of seeing life. Murf disagreed. He thought that it was an optimistic outlook. He hoped to save himself in an emergency, then get to his operations center and save as many other lives as possible. *Oh, well*, he philosophized, *this is probably why so many cops are single or divorced*. He had a lot of friends in the Sheriff's Office. Speaking of which, he was on his way to meet one of them right now. *Bruce Davidson is retiring today from his position as an auxiliary deputy with the county sheriff's department*. Bruce was a likeable and an interesting old bird. He had made a fortune years ago in natural gas investments and by building a multi-state business with millions invested in top of the line heavy equipment with a special interest in pipeline construction and large scale natural gas installations. He had enjoyed his business successes and, even more, he had enjoyed raising his family, but his children are now grown and his wife encouraged him to follow his dreams. So, Bruce had thrown himself into his long-suppressed fantasy of being a hero. He became certified as an Arizona state law enforcement officer and enlisted as a volunteer with the sheriff's auxiliary. Now it was all ending. Yesterday had marked his tenth year with the department, and today Bruce would be turning in his badge and resigning from the volunteer duty he so loved.

As he entered Denny's, the hostess greeted him by name and asked Murf where he would like to sit. "I'm meeting a friend," he said.

Just then, he spotted Bruce in a booth where his back would be to the wall. *Typical cop*, he thought. When he made eye contact, the old man gently raised his right hand and moved it slightly from side to side, taking care not to call attention to himself. "There he is," Murf said and made his way through the maze of tables toward the back.

"Yo," said Murf.

'Yo, yourself," Bruce replied as he gestured grandly toward the other side of the booth.

Murf had barely scooted into the booth when the waitress materialized with a menu in hand. "The usual, Mr. Murphy?"

"Yes, to the usual, and 'no' to Mr. Murphy. I've told you, it's Murf." He said. She leaned over, far, far over. So far that he had to turn his head to avoid being a sexual predator. Then she whispered into his ear. He could just feel her breath. He thought he could feel her lips, but maybe that was just wishful thinking. "You know that we get into trouble for being too familiar with the customers." A pause, then, "Murf." And she was gone.

Murf looked up and saw Bruce fighting a huge grin.

"So, Davidson," Murf said because in police culture you always address each other by last names. "Are you really going to pull the pin? You know there's a lot of good police work left in you. Besides, the rookies need you. They all talk about things that you've taught them."

"Murf. You don't think I haven't told myself all of that? Listen, in my long life, damn near twice as long as yours, I have learned a few things. One of them is to quit while you are still ahead. One of the other things is how to know when you're ahead."

Why are you so sure that it's now?" Murf said.

"Do you remember the story about some old coot like me who shot some guy when he thought that he was going to Taser him? Bruce said.

"I had heard it, but I was never sure that it was true." Murf replied.

"I don't know either, but a long time ago, I made up my mind that I'm never going to be that guy." Bruce went on.

"You're not that guy," Murf said.

"You're right. I'm not that guy, and I'm damn sure not going to be that guy." Bruce said.

Murf started to answer, but Bruce stopped him with a raised hand. "Look, Murf." He said. "I know that you are my friend. One of my best friends. This is hard for me to accept, too. I'm getting old. Damn it! I'm not just getting old. I am old! I'm too weak to subdue these strong young thugs, especially when they're high. If I can't do that, my partner could be killed. How about if I lose control in a high-speed pursuit? What if I shoot some innocent suspect? What if I back my patrol unit over someone? And besides there's that other reason."

Murf leaned forward and said *soto voce*, "Fort Apache?"

Bruce slammed his fist down on the table, "Damn it. Don't call it that. Do you have any idea how much trouble you can cause?"

Murf started to laugh, a low rumbling cough almost a snort, as close as he usually came to laughing. "You know I only say that to you, Davidson."

Again, Bruce waved his hand gently from side to side as if erasing his annoyance. "Yeah. Yeah. But you know as well as I do, that if you get comfortable saying something, then someday it is just going to jump out of your mouth before you can stop it."

Murf raised both hands a few inches off or the table top to show his palms. "OK. OK. Don't shoot, deputy."

"You know, if you weren't twice my size and half my age, I'd kick your ass around this table." Bruce said.

"Be that as it may. I'm not going to take the chance," Murf replied with a small smile, which was about as big as his smiles got. "You know, Davidson, twenty-eight million dollars is a lot of money."

"Even more when it is matching funds," Bruce said.

"What the hell are you doing with that much money, anyway?" Murf asked rhetorically because he already knew the answer.

"Well," Bruce said, "I saved my auxiliary deputy salary for the past ten years."

"You know as well as I do that volunteer auxiliary deputies don't get any salary."

"Well then, it must be from all the money I cheated my customers out of over the years."

"Like Hell," Murf said. "You're the most honest man I know. You may be the only honest man I know. If you find a dime on the sidewalk, you report it on your income taxes."

"And you will never know how much trouble that has caused me." Bruce smirked, enjoying Murf's flattery.

"Seriously though." Murf said. "Have you found out how the kids are going to take your giving away twenty-eight million dollars to build the new substation for the county sheriff's department? Wait! I know that it is matching another twenty-eight million from other sources, but still . . ."

Again, Bruce raised his right hand slightly off the table to silence Murf. "First of all, everything is set up through the Davidson Family Trust. The kids are taken care of. Simon, Greg and Susie each get several million dollars up front and then a little more doled out every five years. The grandkids get less than that starting when they graduate from college with a grade average of 'B' or better."

“Yes,” Murf said, “but I asked how they are taking it that you are giving so much of their inheritance away?”

“Murf,” Bruce said, “now you are talking like them. Look at me.” He glared into Murf’s eyes. “Do I look like somebody’s demented grandmother? I’ll answer that. No, I don’t. I have all my faculties, and it’s my damn money! It’s not their inheritance unless and until I say so. I don’t intend to ruin those kids by spoiling them with an extravagant life style. With this, they have enough to live well. Each of them will have a very nice house, fine cars and reserve cash in the bank. But if they want servants, if they want their own private jet or their own damn island, they’ll goddamn well have to work hard enough to earn it like me and everyone else on the planet.” His face was getting red.

“So, you haven’t told them.” Murf said.

Bruce sat back with a satisfied expression. “Nope. And I don’t intend to. They can find out at the reading of the trust.” He paused. “Then they can surprise me.”

Murf said, “Don’t you mean that you will surprise them?”

Hopefully, I will be somewhere watching them.” Bruce replied.

Murf glanced at his watch and made to get up. “Gotta go.” He said. “I’ve got my rounds to make, chores to do, horses to shoe, bad guys to smoke, women to kiss. All the usual.”

“Like hell,” Bruce said. You’ve never shot any one and you never will. And I haven’t seen you kiss a woman since I don’t know when.”

A long buried part of Murf bristled at that comment but then subdued. Murf had never talked about his experiences as a Ranger, not even to Bruce. Murf opened his mouth to give a deflecting answer, but before he could speak, Bruce went on, “I know it’s none of my business, but you’ve got to give up on Louise. She’s gone. Gone! It’s over.”

You’re right about it being none of your business,” Murf responded, “but I’ll overlook that being as you are old and also about my only friend. However, while you are right about Louise, you are wrong about me. I was over her before the divorce. She’s a drunk and a mean drunk, and she’s probably worse now. It’s Dani I’m worried about. She won’t tell me, but I’m sure that she is on the edge. If I take up with another girlfriend, she’s going to think that I’m abandoning her – that I’m looking to start a new family and forget she was ever even born. She needs to know that I’m always there for her.”

Bruce said, “She’s not going to think that. From what you’ve told me, I feel like I know her too, and she’s got too much sense. I’m sure she wants you to be happy.”

“Be that as it may. She’s just too fragile and precious for me to take that chance.”
Murf glanced at his watch again. “We can talk more later. Right now, I’ve really got to go. See you at the ceremony.”

Murf threaded his way through the crowded eatery, trying to get his emotions stuffed back into their box. One of the waitresses jostled against him and he thought about his waitress this morning. What was her name? *Tina? Dina? Something like that. Forget about it!*

He got to the pay station and fished the breakfast check out of his pocket while waiting for someone to tend the register. He liked to pay for their coffee when he met Bruce, even though any check was small change to Bruce. He mused for the hundredth time that this is why he and the sheriff and the county supervisors had agreed to keep Bruce’s contribution anonymous. If the other deputies knew that he was so well heeled, they could never really be friends on an even footing again. They all believed Bruce to be just another retired old fart, and that’s the way he liked it. Besides, all deputies have money troubles and, if they didn’t, their parents, siblings, and children all have their own financial crises. They would have to come to him humbly or arrogantly and beg or demand the necessary funds. Murf understood that Bruce would then have to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, and either way he would lose his money, his friend, or both. Murf had never been rich himself, but he understood the millionaire’s dilemma.

Just then his regular waitress showed up to open the register. He looked at her name tag. *Tina. So, Tina. Not Dina.* He mused. *I don’t remember knowing any Dina’s. I should have known it would be Tina.* She moved, and he realized that he had been staring at her left breast – apparently the one named ‘Tina’.

“Murf,” she said.

“Oh, sorry. Lost in thought.” Murf responded. “Here’s . . . Oh wait! There it is. The check.”

“Don’t worry about it. It happens all the time.” Tina looked at him with her eyes sparkling. Then she added, “The check. I mean.”

Murf had the sense to know that anything else he said at this point would only sink him deeper in quicksand. He fished a twenty out of his pocket and dropped it on the counter for the ten dollar check. “Thanks,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Right back at you.” She said cheerily.

Oh, God. Murf thought. *I feel like I’m back in middle school, sneaking looks at the girls. God kill me now.*

He had no idea what was rushing up on him.

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Flagstaff: Canyon High School

Dani slipped through the main entrance door and went left to avoid the school's attendance office. She couldn't help seeing the large clock high on the wall by the display case. It was 7:55. Classes started at 7:45. Dani muttered to herself. She hated being late. As she came to the intersection with the next hallway, she glanced furtively left and right before going around the corner. If one of the hall monitors caught her, they would take her to the office and make her miss the whole first period social studies class.

Dani had worked until 2:00 am last night preparing her presentation on the causes of the War of 1812. She was scheduled to present it to the class and Mrs. Hawkins (of course) this morning, but if she did not show up for class, Mrs. Hawkins always assumed that you were not prepared. This was an automatic failing grade. Dani was sure that she had an 'A' in the bag if she could just get to class.

There! Dani had Mrs. Hawkins' classroom door in sight. *Quick. Quick.* She thought. Then she heard footfalls echoing on the hallway walls behind her. "Stop!" An authoritarian voice commanded. She went for it and dashed for the door. "Dani Murphy! I know who you are," the voice commanded. Dani stopped with her hand on the door just as a heavy hand fell on her shoulder and spun her around. It was Deryl the Dog, the hall monitor everyone despised. "Where do you think you're going, Missy?" Deryl said in a low, but harsh, voice.

"Mrs. Hawkins' class," Dani managed to say. Inside, she was shaking. She hated this because she knew that Deryl the Dog enjoyed scaring girls.

"Oh, no you're not," Deryl the Dog said smiling broadly. "You're going to detention like all of the other bad kids."

Dani still had her hand behind her on the doorknob, and she turned it to pull open the door behind her. "What did I just tell you?" Deryl the Dog roared, slamming her back against the door so that it was forced shut. "I just have to show her my presentation so that she will know that I was here to give it," Dani choked out.

"But you're not here, Missy."

"Yes, I am," Dani spat back. "I'm just late, but I'm here. If I don't show her that I'm here, she'll fail me."

“If you cared about that shit, you would get your lazy butt out of bed and get here on time.”

“It’s not me. It’s my mom. After I make her breakfast, I have to wake her up and wait for her to eat and get ready to drive me.”

“Oh, mommy made me late. I stopped believing that after the first million times I heard it. You ungrateful little brat.”

Dani started crying, “But it’s true. When she’s hung over, no one can wake her right up.”

Deryl the Dog was getting excited while enjoying the little bit of power his job gave him over this sweet little girl. “Miz Hawkins don’t want late students disturbing her classes, especially ones with bogus excuses like you.” He jerked her arm hard, so that she winced. “Come on. You’re going to detention. Now!

