

CHECKERED PAST

Robbie Dexter opened his eyes slowly, not knowing quite what to expect. Dusk? No, dawn—the sun was behind him, there was dew on the marsh grass, on the blanket tangled around his legs. He blinked, but the view didn't change.

Pieces of the night began drifting back to him like the lifting haze.

His usual dive, drinking 'til last call, a six-pack to go. Getting in his truck and not wanting to drive home. Home. A dilapidated apartment in an out-of-the-way part of Homestead, Florida. A place still devastated from hurricane Andrew over a decade ago. Nothing there but memories of what he'd lost. Was that why living there appealed to him? A reminder, a kind of metaphor for his life? How a community, like a person, never completely heals. It just learns to live without certain things. Did that include its soul?

And so he'd headed west, Route 41, The Tamiami Trail. One goal in mind. No, two. Get away from the glare of the city. Bright stars, black night. Like the desert. Things over there were never just black or white. Remembering, he looked down. More blackness. The forty caliber Beretta lay by his side, slick and shiny with a coating of morning mist.

Apparently he'd only accomplished one.

He took a deep breath and caught the dense smell of swamp, stretched his neck, his legs. No, his leg. Funny, the left one felt tight, too. But that wasn't unusual anymore, even though there was nothing below the knee but a prosthesis. Phantom pain, his doctors called it. Cramping, itching, the sensation of weight on the foot when he stood. Now just one more memory he couldn't avoid. All in his mind, they said, like the constant ringing in his ear. That too partly missing, he thought, like himself. Just bits and pieces remained. He was no longer whole. *How*

much of yourself can you lose before you're no longer you, he wondered, knowing he'd left more than pieces of his body on the dry, barren ground of the Iraqi desert.

Again he looked at the gun, hammer back, safety off. Like a snake coiled to strike. Cold sweat mingled with the dew on his face. Close, he thought. He'd come close last night. Close to ending it all. He remembered choking sobs, the stars blurring. Tears? No, not quite. After everything he was still incapable of shedding them.

Reaching down he picked the gun up and worked the decocker. Suddenly a gunshot rang out only a hundred feet from his truck. He flinched, the weapon almost falling from his grasp. Ducking below the bed rails, adrenalin surged. He started to hyperventilate, he started to shake. *Get hold of yourself*, he thought. *You're home, you're safe. The only thing you have to worry about now is yourself.* Just the same, he clicked the safety off the weapon as he peered out into the early morning haze.

A single discharge. To his left? Hard to tell with the tinnitus and hearing loss. He strained to sharpen his focus, finding it hard to differentiate sounds and feeling the damp air closing in all around him. Was there movement in the bushes near the water? A silhouette? Was he being stalked? *Stop it, you're hallucinating! Calm your breathing, clear your eyes!*

He willed himself to slide out toward the edge of the truck, pausing as he knocked empty beer cans over on the way. He remembered something he once read. Life was like running a gauntlet. It tried to strip away everything good as you passed thru. He smirked. As drunk as he got, he hadn't become so apathetic as to toss garbage out the back.

Apparently his experience overseas hadn't stripped him of everything from before.

Balancing on the edge of the lift gate, he lowered his legs. Two shoes, more irony. Why bother with a shoe for a missing foot? Vanity? The doctors said it would help. Allow him to feel more normal. After eighteen months in the desert, could he ever be normal again?

Now, slide down. Ease onto the sandy soil-right foot first, then left. Balance, lower your weight, settle to the uneven ground and catch your balance. The mantra of so many hours, weeks, months of physical therapy, and still that first step comes hard. Like a leap of faith.

And that leap brings it all rushing back. A single memory triggers a string of events. The convoy, the screams, the white hot flame, the red mist. He reached up and wiped the moisture off his face, knowing but unable to avoid looking at his sleeve to make sure it isn't blood. Swallowing hard, he can feel the grit in the back of his throat that no amount of alcohol seemed to relieve. The light, heat, pain, and merciful blackness threatened, and he stumbled again, reaching back to catch his balance.

That's enough, he decided, as he steadied himself against the truck and looked around to get his bearings. The Everglades, probably pretty far west. He remembered how bright the stars seemed late last night and knew you had to get pretty far from the lights of Miami to enjoy that view.

An engine started, off to his left, and seconds later a truck pulled out of the foliage, turning down the dirt lane a few yards away. The driver glanced over, looking startled, then turned and drove away, pushing down the overgrown grasses between the wheel ruts. What was he shooting at, and why? He realized he still had the gun in his hand.

A moment of truth. Mind your own business or see what's what? Another old habit, never being able to let sleeping dogs lie.

Hobbling down the lane he staggered forward as the marsh grasses tugged at his prosthesis. Palm fronds, saw palmetto, bromeliads; a spider web covered with dew. He remembered a time when such a sight would bring him joy. After stumbling for the third time he stopped. Frustrated, he turned around. *What the hell am I doing*, he thought. *It's getting warm; I'm sweating, tired, hung over*. He heard a noise to his left, a rustling in the bushes at the edge of a cypress hammock. A palm frond moved. He fought the urge to dive for cover.

Robbie picked up a stick and moved forward, cautiously parting the foliage. Two deep-set eyes stared back defiantly. A bird, a big one. Some kind of hawk, wing hanging loosely at its side. The victim of the gunshot? Crap. Now what?

He started to raise the Beretta, thinking to put it out of its misery. Better than let it starve to death, no longer able to fend for itself in the cruel world of nature. What else had he once read? Nowhere in nature will you find compassion? It occurred to him those same thoughts might apply to him. The bird didn't flinch, it just looked back resolutely. He saw his reflection in its eyes.

He stumbled back to the truck and grabbed the blanket. Minutes later he found himself driving down the highway back toward Miami as the sun burned its way through the low hanging mist.

Steven Twocups finished hosing off the airboats. He looked out at the swamp, noting how low the water level was, even now, at the onset of fall. They'd gotten their share of rain this summer, but then it wasn't nature that determined the flow of water anymore, it was the government.

Here, as in other parts of the state, the government considered it its business to control nature. What fell to the north got managed through an intricate system of dams and levees, often diverted east and west instead of running south as it always had.

He shook his head. His people believed that the earth was alive. Like with every other living organism, you cut off the flow of life-giving nutrients and the area died. As he walked back to the store he looked up toward the sky and caught sight of a v-shaped formation of migrating ducks. He wondered if the whites thought they could control that, too. Then again, if scientists were correct about the effects of global warming, maybe the not too distant future would answer his question.

As Robbie headed back east on The Trail he passed the small store offering airboat rides and souvenirs and another old memory came back. He knew where he was, partway into Collier County. This place had been around forever. He'd stopped here often as a kid when his family took trips across the Everglades to Fort Myers or Tampa.

He tried to clear those memories from his head as he exited the truck and entered the store.

Steven had just gotten back inside when the pickup pulled up out front. *A little too early for tourists*, he thought, as he watched the young man get out and slowly limp through the door. Steven served in Vietnam some forty years ago. He knew the look, recognized the scars. It occurred to him that war never changed, it just changed the people in it.

"Is there a veterinarian anywhere nearby?" Robbie asked, self-conscious as Steven studied him from across the counter.

"One in Everglades City. You hit a dog or somethin', boy?" People were always bringing in lizards, turtles, even baby alligators. They didn't know enough about nature to realize most were big enough to survive on their own.

“I found an injured bird just off the road,” Robbie replied, pointing back west.

Steven smirked. “Bird, huh. Might just as well let it be. Won’t last long out in the wild, and it ain’t likely gonna end up as somebody’s pet.”

Robbie knew he was right, but still, he’d gone to the trouble of dragging it this far. Steven studied the young man’s face, noting the burn scars, the damaged ear. He looked down at the leg, the one he favored, and took note of the plastic joint running into his shoe. Robbie caught him staring, but when their eyes met the big Seminole didn’t look away. For some reason the anger and resentment that usually surged up in him at these moments didn’t. Later he’d have time to wonder why.

Curious, Steven said, “Let’s have a look.”

The bird’s head was free and Steven recognized what the boy had as soon as he peered into the cab. He turned toward the rising sun and pointed.

“Keep goin’ east two miles and you’ll see a drive on the right with a fancy hand-carved mailbox looks like a fish. That’s Mary Sweetwater’s place. She’s the local medicine woman round here. Does right by most animals, too.”

Robbie thanked him and Steven watched as he backed out of the lot and headed down the highway. *An eagle, huh, and a damaged man.* He wondered which of these creatures was best equipped to survive their wounds. He smiled, thinking he would love to be there when they both met Mary Sweetwater.