

An excerpt from *Dodging the Buzzsaw*, a novel-in-progress by Blas Padrino

DODGING THE BUZZSAW

CHAPTER ONE

Lindy wasn't sure how many of the Buzzsaw's thugs had joined the chase; it was so dark in the frigging swamp. Out of breath, he squatted for a moment behind a clump of mangroves and listened. Judging by the sounds of their footsteps, he figured there must be at least four. Closing in.

He looked behind him. *Shit*. He was backed up against the edge of a lagoon. A sliver of moon peeked from behind the clouds and shone above the open water, giving him a clearer view of his surroundings. Ten yards in was a hummock overgrown with pines, circled by a narrow strip of muck. If he took a chance and hid there, would the Shylock's muscle wade into the scum looking for him? He wished he wasn't wearing the one good pair of Bally shoes he had left, the ones Tanya had sent him just before his release, along with his one pair of Hugo Boss threads.

Lindy focused on the hummock's edge and quickly realized that getting swamp slime on him wasn't the worst of his problems. Several dark mounds, long and scaly, stuck out of the muck. Alligators. Asleep like dogs on the porch.

His eyes swiveled back to his pursuers. One of them shouted "Over there!" and bullets started flying all over the place. That was all the encouragement he needed. It wouldn't be the first time he tiptoed his way around alligators, anyway. He hoped they wouldn't make it his last. "You don't mess with them, they won't mess with you," the old fart from the swamp had told him some eight years ago, but it had never been clear to him as to how come the man's trigger finger was missing.

Never mind that now, Lindy thought. He covered the distance to the hummock doing a fast-forward version of the Kung Fu walk, slipped past the big gators and huddled behind a tree. The guns kept blasting away, but the goons' aim was directed off to his left, away from his hideout, on the other side of the water. He made a quick count of the muzzle flashes. Three, maybe four shooters, but they were going to town after a fat shadow that charged through the brush. Cut down by the gunfire, the dying critter let out a loud grunt, made an awkward somersault in the air and plopped to the ground.

It was a wild hog.

"Hey, Frank, look at the son of a bitch," shouted the first gunman to reach the corpse, his flashlight shining over the animal's head.

"That don't look like Lindy." Frank turned away and wrinkled his nose. "Stinks like it came out of a sewer. What the hell is it?"

"Some kind of pig. Check out the tusks on that sucker."

“A wild boar’s what they’re called,” said a third man. “Used to hunt them back in Alabama.” He looked at his companions. “Anyone’s got a knife? I’ll field dress it right here and we can have us a hell of a barbecue.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Frank growled. “We didn’t come here for a barbecue. We’ve been running around this goddamn swamp half the night chasing that deadbeat and we let a fucking pig take us off his track. What do you think Mr. Buzzsaw’s going to say when I tell him?”

“Simmer down, man,” the Alabama hunter said. “I was just joshing.”

“Do me a fucking favor. Don’t make no more jokes, okay? Mr. Buzzsaw’s paying us to find Lindy and collect what he owes. He don’t give a rat’s ass about pig jokes.”

The men stood around the dead hog, shifting their weight from one foot to the other, in the casual manner of folks unsure of their next move. Those holding flashlights swept the surrounding area making lazy arcs with the light beams, but without showing an earnest effort to find anyone or anything in particular.

During one of the sweeps, Frank noticed a gliding movement in the hummock. “Shine the light over there,” he pointed in its direction.

Lindy swallowed hard and ducked behind the tree trunk. A couple of the gators on the muck shook themselves awake and, head raised, ambled toward the water.

“What’s up with them?” one of the men asked.

“Holy shit,” Frank cursed. “They’re coming at us.”

“I think they caught a whiff of the pig’s blood,” said the Alabama hunter. “It’s like their supper bell.”

Frank gave a forward wave of his hand. “Let’s get out of here. They can keep the stinking pig.” He turned away from the carcass. “Which way’s the road?”

Lindy watched the men walk back the way they came. He sighed with relief. It was the first break he got since his release from prison. In the months before he finished his time, all the talk in his cellblock was about Y2K and how it was going to bring bad luck and all kinds of problems. He hadn’t paid it any attention. Just crazy jail talk, he thought. But from the moment he hit the street, everything had gone downhill. Well, maybe not everything – Tanya had kept his Hugo Boss slacks and Bally shoes – but mostly the business with Buzzsaw the Shylock, wanting back his million dollars, plus seven years worth of interest, at loan shark rates.

Talk about classless. The son of a bitch knew his deal went sour and the coke – the collateral – went up in flames; the heartless skinflint also knew Lindy’d done eight years to the day of State time – hard time; and still, he had his collectors waiting for him outside the prison gates demanding payment. They even took the \$20.00 bus fare the Warden gave him.

Lindy stood, slapped the muck off the seat of his pants and waded across the water. He reached the high ground, keeping his distance from the big lizards that busied themselves biting off chunks from the pig’s carcass. He couldn’t help but feel a touch of sympathy for the dead hog, riddled with bullets and turned into a feast for the hungry gators. Lindy made the sign of the cross, a childhood habit that he’d picked back up after he landed in jail. A saying his father often muttered came to him. He repeated it in a whisper. “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

CHAPTER TWO

The thump-thump of footfalls on the narrow dock woke Hummingbird up. He opened his eyes to the dim flickers of sunlight that made it through the morning haze, pulled aside the mosquito net, and tumbled out of the hammock. It better not be the Federals coming to harass him again. He'd had enough of those fools. If they tried to make him move out of this place, he wouldn't be accountable for what he might do.

He was a Chitimacha and the tribe had ancient rights to hunt and fish in the state lands. But the EPA men ran him off his camp under the big oak tree. They said he couldn't live there on account of some environmental regulations and other mumbo-jumbo about public health and building illegal fires. Men who wore starched shirts and polished shoes, who'd never spent a day in the swamp, lecturing him – who'd lived here all his life – about respect for the land and the critters in it.

They were lucky that Sheriff Picard had come along; otherwise he might have dumped them in the creek. But Picard's granddaddy owned a fishing cabin, set on pontoons on a bend of the bayou, not far from his campsite under the tree, and the sheriff said Hummingbird could stay in it. *Long as I please*. Picard said it had all the permits and they couldn't run him off of it. But Hummingbird didn't trust those EPA folks. He wouldn't put it past them to try to sneak up on him carrying some piece of paper from some judge ordering him to move to the reservation.

Hummingbird snatched the long pole that rested against the wall with one hand and unsheathed his Bowie knife with the other, then went out the door and onto the dock that served as a bridge between the edge of the water and the cabin. What he saw out there threw him for a loop. It was a city fellow. Definitely a city fellow, wearing city fellow clothes; dirty and ragged, but still city fellow clothes. Not one of them EPA pollution control boys, though. This man looked like he'd spent the night inside a tar pit.

When Hummingbird came out, the stranger stopped – startled – and did a funny wiggle with his hips, as if he wanted to break and run, but thought the better of it and froze, undecided. His mouth twisted, like he wanted to say something, but wasn't sure what to say.

"Come closer," Hummingbird said to the stranger. He lowered the pole and leaned against it a bit, the way he did when he pushed off on his pirogue. "I'm not going to whoop you. Unless you give me good reason."

The man did the funny wiggle again, but this time made up his mind to come forward and, with head down and eyes fixed on the planks of the dock, took short, halting steps toward Hummingbird. The swamp man watched him with curiosity. There was something familiar about the muck-caked figure that approached him. He searched his memory, but couldn't place him.

"Look up at me," Hummingbird said. "Let me see your eyes."

The stranger stopped and raised his head. "We - we've met before," he said. The ligaments on his neck tightened and flared out on each side when he spoke.

Hummingbird looked the man up and down; thinner than he remembered, almost gaunt, and the pony tail was gone, along with most of the rest of his hair. The eyes were different, too. They had lost their cold, cocky stare and now looked soft, almost timid. "Lindy?" It had been seven, no, eight years since the last time he'd seen him.

"Afraid so," Lindy said, sounding embarrassed.

"You on the lam? Running from the chain gang?"

"No, sir. Out on parole. Did my time."

He called me 'sir'? Hummingbird shook his head. *That's what the stir does to some folks.* "What are you doing in the swamp?"

"Trying to stay alive."

"How? Angling for catfish? You ain't dressed for that." Hummingbird scratched an itch on his chin with the sharp edge of his knife. "Last time we met, you was running drugs. Is that what you're doing now?"

"I'm trying to hide. Thought the shack might be empty."

"Somebody after you?"

Lindy nodded.

"Who's chasing you, if not the law?"

"It's about a debt. Money I owe. From before. I thought my going to jail settled it. But I guess not."

"How'd you get here?"

"I got released yesterday morning. Soon as I walked out, the loan shark's muscle was waiting outside the gate. A whole bunch of them. They stuck a gun in my gut and shoved me in their van. Said they were taking me to Mr. Buzzsaw down in Miami to settle the account. I told them I was supposed to report to my parole officer first, or I'd get in trouble." Lindy looked down at his shirt sleeve and, with thumb and forefinger, pinched little clods of dry muck off it. "They didn't give a shit about my parole."

"How'd you get away?"

"They headed south, on the State Road, looking for I-10. I told them I had to piss and could we stop at McDonald's or some place like that. They said 'fuck that,' but I said 'you want me to piss in my one good pair of pants? They're Giorgio Armanis.' They aren't really Armanis. They're Hugo Boss, but I thought they'd respect Armani more." Lindy sighed. "They laughed. But then I told them if I pissed in my pants it'd get all over the seat and put yellow stains on the upholstery. You know what they did?"

Hummingbird shook his head. "Can't wait to hear."

"One of them guzzled down a Pepsi, drained it in one gulp. Then he gave me the empty can and told me to piss in there."

"Did you?"

Lindy became animated. "Are you kidding? How was I going to get my dick in the can through a small hole like that? I gave it back to him and told him for a big guy he must have a shrimp of a pecker if he could manage that trick."

Hummingbird raised an eyebrow. "How'd that sit with him?"

"He cocked his fist, but I told him if he smacked me I'd lose control of my bladder and piss right then and there, all over the van, so he just crushed the can in his hand and tossed it at me. Not hard, or nothing, but it got Pepsi spots on my clothes. Then

he told the driver to pull over and we stopped by the side of the road. The man picked me up by the shirt collar and dragged me out of the van. Walked me behind some trees a distance from the blacktop and told me to take care of business. I guess the Pepsi must have worked on him, because he got the urge, too. Soon as he unzipped and started peeing, I took off into the woods. It was getting dark by then, and I was able to lose them. But look at my clothes. Ruined. I look like a bum. Worse than a bum. I'm starting to stink, too."

Hummingbird wrinkled his nose. "You're right about that." He put the knife back in its sheath. "I'll give you a bar of soap. You can wash in the creek. I'll see if I can find you some clean clothes. You hungry?"

Lindy's face lit up. "Starving."

"Get yourself cleaned up. I'll make us something to eat."

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