

PROLOGUE

A drought in North Florida is an alien thing. In a land of hot blanket mist that drapes old boards in mildew and houses herds of frogs, the dryness encroaches like a desert sidewinder, turning puddles into black cracked earth where mosquito eggs die before they hatch. Green grass sticks up brown shoots that crack underfoot. Water edges back from the shores, and sandbars appear in the middle of a swamp lake. After tadpoles and minnows hatch, hundreds of white birds gather in the shallows to gulp down the next generation. When the water finally goes away, deep holes appear, sinkholes that until now were invisible to any human but a diver. The caves meander into the earth, most leading to dead ends. They form a maze that, if one could manage it, might, at the end, find the Gulf of Mexico. The cavers take hold now, vertically descending into spaces that house warm bacteria and rotting alligator hides. When the months bring no more rain, the foliage runs rampant, covering a lake bottom with oxygen-choking weeds, forming trap doors to the pits below where, the bodies of animals, including the human kind, dry in the heat.

CHAPTER 1

Alligators eat just about anything that comes from live flesh—birds, turtles, frogs, puppy dogs, humans. They lie on the banks of the Palmetto River during humid daytime to soak up the sun rays, warming their cold reptilian blood. But when the stomach growls, the gator prowls. Swishing his tail to propel his body along the shore line, just beneath the surface, he stops dead still and raises the nose and eyes just above the water level to catch a glimpse of the baby deer on the bank. Dropping down with the stealth of a silent missile, he rises suddenly and grabs the graceful neck, dragging his dinner to the depths to drown it, then depositing it in his territorial shallows to rot a little before gulping it whole—hooves, hide, and bones. The natural process here is the food chain. The deer won't, in turn, eat the gator, nor will the bird or the fish. But while a gator will devour the cutest of human children, humans will turn on the gator.

“You’ve been to this farm before?” I asked Pasquin, my ancient neighbor and swamp swami, who guided his motor boat on the third off-shoot watery lane from the main river. I had grown weary of the North Florida heat that pounded right through my

straw hat, a cast off from Pasquin's wardrobe. He kept three or four old hats in his boat, stashed alongside the cooler that sat in the middle. It was packed with only ice at the moment.

"More than once. Mama sends me down here every year to get her supply." He patted the edge of the boat as though encouraging it to keep on trucking through the thick hydrilla, an alien grass that threatened ecological balance in this part of the river system. "Rinks family has been raising gator meat about forty years now."

"It's my first time seeing it," I said and leaned back in the boat. I placed the hat over my face to block out the sun. My hair felt like the roots were burning away. "Can't you go a little faster to stir up a breeze?"

"Not here. Drought has lowered the banks and the grass is thicker than ticks on your doggie." He revved the motor slightly, but immediately slowed again. "Don't want you to have to go over the side and clear off a matt of the stuff?"

I had been on the last leg of teaching linguistics classes at the university when Vernon, my significant swamp diving companion or whatever one would call a lover who swam dangerous caves with you, asked if I'd like to work the sheriff's department booth at the fair this year. The fair, an institution in this part of the state, was half local produce and cattle show, half carnival rides and freak shows. It lasted a week and was popular with people from all the counties in north Florida.

Bizarre food items tended to appear at the fair, and booths often tried to outdo each other. Mama, from Mama's Table down on the river, had fed so many deputies over the years that she had taken over as cook and food organizer for the entire department. Besides the regular burgers with grilled onions, she dished up cheese grits, apple fritters, fried chicken legs—and alligator tail.

"Pasquin," I peeked from under the hat, "do you eat gator?"

“Have,” he nodded. “Tastes a little like chicken, little like pork without the fat.”

“I tasted it once. Wasn’t too bad, but I felt queasy knowing what it was.”

Pasquin chuckled. Reaction to gator meat couldn’t faze a man who had, for eighty years or more, eaten about anything the river had to offer. His preference for the hot cajun stuff of his ancestors appeared on his table in his swamp house, when he wasn’t sampling some delicacy from Mama’s Table in Fogarty Spring.

“Grass coming up in the water lane,” he said. The boat slowed to nearly a stop.

“It’s taken over everywhere!” I said as I sat up. Up until now, the center part of the river, the deepest part, had been clear, the grass approaching from both sides. Here it came together, bobbing up and down in front of us like some river monster just daring us to cross it.

“Not more than a few inches below the surface,” said Pasquin. “Be ready to swim.” He moved closer to the grass. The wake of the boat bounced the stuff harder, and fronds began to appear above the surface. “Grab the oars,” he said.

With the engine cut, Pasquin and I rowed over the grass. The motor rested out of the water, poking from the back of the boat like a useless barnacle. I pressed the oar into the water, pushing against heavy growth.

“Wonder why they don’t use the hydrilla puller down here,” I said. More than once we had watched the boat with paddle wheels lumber down the main river and yank the stuff from the bottom. It all got piled onto a metal conveyor belt and run up on shore to a dump truck. But plenty more grass refilled the river. It didn’t need deep roots and air and sun, not much anyway.

“Too many narrow lanes around here to pull it all up,” said

Pasquin. "Gator on the far side." He nodded to a bank where a bull gator nearly seven feet long rested. "Near the lily pads. Wonder what he's got there." Pasquin took off his hat and pointed it to an area just below the reptile.

"Could be a deer," I said, stretching my neck and shading my eyes with the hat. "Is he likely to sun next to his marinade?" I wondered about this, something no one ever brought up in all the years I had lived on this river. Would a gator rest near his captured prey? Could he smell the decay? I had no idea, but I was betting if anything got near that prey, the gator would be off the bank in a flash, jaws open and ready to fight.

"Pasquin," I said as I raised slightly out of my seat. "Does a deer wear a bra?"

"You're calling from where?" Detective Tony Amado sounded angry, like how dare I let him know that a human body lay in the shallows of a third off-shoot lane of Palmetto River.

"From Rinks' Alligator Farm," I yelled even though the line was clear. "Forgot to bring the cell phone with me. We'll meet you at the spot, okay?"

I replaced the phone on its cradle and brushed my hands on my pants leg. Something greasy and old had been on the receiver. The phone, an ancient black dial model, sat on the edge of a wide railing that fronted a lean-to. I glanced under the tin roof. Mounds of dirt barely hid pieces of alligator hide. A few flies clustered in spots, but most of the stuff was too old to be of any use to them. I figured Rinks killed the gators and used both the skin and the meat to make a living. But there had to be scraps. That's what he called this place, the scrap hut. "Go up to the scrap hut and use the phone there," he said when Pasquin and I finally pulled onto

shore.

Down the hill, on both sides of the landing, wire fences penned in what seemed like mounds of alligators. They rested in shallow pools of water or basked on muddy rims of earth. Most touched another gator in some fashion, a foot resting on a tail, a tail across a neck, an entire body crossing the mid section of another. These were bred gators, raised from birth in pools, fed chickens until they nearly burst. They had no need to hunt or fix territorial limits.

Rinks and Pasquin had gone inside the main storage building, a refrigerated area where the gator meat was chopped and placed in carrying containers. Rinks would pack nearly fifty pounds in the cooler today. Pasquin would return each day for a fresh supply.

“All chopped into cubes,” said Rinks as he closed the cooler. In spite of the strange smell of blood and swamp water, I felt relieved at the cold that surrounded me.

“This stuff will keep, won’t it?” I asked as I helped the two men lift the cooler onto a dolly. “We’ve got to meet Amado on the river. Looks like one of your friends caught him a human dinner.”

Rinks laughed. “Stupid tourists. They come out here and try to swim in bull gator territory. Some college boy again?” He hoisted his denim overalls in an attempt to scratch himself. Dark green debris, like the stuff on the phone, dotted the material. He wore no shirt. Flabby arms spotted with tufts of hair flew out from the sides. He wore a baseball cap on his head, the logo long since faded. A chewed toothpick stuck from a corner of his mouth. His bulk and loose-flesh arms belied a man who could still get into a gator pen and hold the animal’s mouth shut with one hand, while tying a rope around it with the other.

“Maybe some college girl,” I said. I shivered inside. What would a girl be doing in the water alone? But then I thought of myself. Swimming alone was therapy for me. I even put on the scuba tank at times and pulled a professional no-no by going to the cave entrance near my house. Going inside the cave would be really stupid, but I had my moments of insanity.

“Girl?” He pulled the toothpick from his mouth and used it to scratch under the hat brim. He frowned, and I expected the next sentence to be something about how ladies ought to stay home cooking and leave the river to the boys. Instead, he shrugged. “Well, ain’t no gator I’ve known to prefer male to female dinner.” He patted Pasquin on the shoulder. “I’ll get one of the boys to help you get the cooler into the boat.”

Amado and his river patrol were already at the spot when Pasquin and I returned. Vernon, in swim trunks but with no diving gear, stood up in a boat a few feet from the body. The gator was long gone.

“You going to track and shoot that bull?” asked Pasquin. We held his boat steady in the water with the two oars.

“Gator’s not guilty,” said Amado. He stood in the shallows, his pants legs rolled up to his knees. Anyone else would be mud covered and wet. From his waist up, he appeared freshly dressed, crisp white shirt, dark tie, smooth dark hair. “I’m not even sure the beast knew she was here.”

I pushed on the oar to get closer. We touched the yellow tape that had been tied to tree branches in an attempt to cordon off a scene.

“Drowning?” said Pasquin. He shot me a dirty look and held his oar steady.

“Could be,” said Tony, “but not an accidental one. Crime techs will be here shortly.”

We waited on the quiet river. Loman, Amado’s sergeant, stood barefoot in the water beside his boss. One pants leg came unrolled and floated in the cool water. He looked down, his heavy-lidded eyes covering the surprise, and cursed. He leaned over his ample belly and pulled at the pants but finally gave up and watched the other side unroll and fall into the water. “Might as well take them off,” he said.

“Got your hearts and flowers jockstrap on?” asked Vernon who now balanced against a cypress tree. He had climbed out of the boat and placed himself precariously on one of the knees that grew out of the water. Every few minutes he would rock on the thin root and have to level himself with the other arm.

“I’ll knock your ass off backwards, you keep that up,” said Loman. He slapped at sweat and insects that hovered around his neck. He jerked at his tie and unbuttoned the top buttons of the shirt. “Hell, it’s hot!” He leaned over, grabbed a handful of water, and splashed it on his face.

“It is today, but not the first of the week,” said Tony. He glanced at the body that lay amid lily pads; the only indication that something was there was the pinkish outline. “The water is cold; so was the weather. She could have been in here for a while.”

“Maybe the gator doesn’t know about her now, but he would if she had been here a while,” I said. “How do you know it’s not an accident?”

“You have to come closer. Big gap between the chin and the collar bone.” Tony pointed downward.

A siren sounded down the river. The rest of Amado’s force would be here, dragging the crime scene techs with them. With solid shore nearly fifteen feet back into the forest, they would

work from boats and eventually crawl around in grass and lily pads.

“You fellows find these on purpose,” said Marshall Long. His enormous bulk sat like a stiff Buddha in the back of a patrol boat. He held on each side like a child on a terrifying carnival ride.

“Blame Luanne and Pasquin,” said Loman. “They found her.” He nodded towards the body.

The men sat quietly for a moment, all eyes on Marshall. “Her?” He asked. Amado nodded toward the victim. “Okay, you heroes get me out of here.” Marshall’s jowls shook as he tried to rise. The boat swayed back and forth, and he sat down again, creating a wave on both sides. “I can’t do this alone!” His big voice belled into the swamp; birds took flight.

“You’re not going to get into the water, are you?” Vernon said. He waded towards the boat; muscular arms that often held me in the comfort of a bed now reached toward the man who was known to devour an entire coconut custard pie after three helpings of raw oysters.

“No, but I got to get in a position to see the body!” Marshall struggled to bend forward over his front. It wasn’t going to happen alone.

Two uniformed deputies in the front of the boat and the assistant tech in the back finally managed to push and pull until Marshall went onto his knees inside the vessel. Water splashed, and the men let go to grab the evidence kits.

“That’s better,” said Marshall as he adjusted his elbows on the seat cushion in front of him. “Now get this boat as close as you can.”

I nodded to Pasquin, and we paddled behind the patrol boat until the edges touched. We each held a side, while the deputies steadied it with poles. Marshall leaned over the water, his side of

the boat slanting downward with his weight. The pilot rolled his eyes and leaned the other way.

“Looks kind of new,” said Marshall. He had gloved his hands and pushed one arm into the water. “Neck nearly severed.” He brushed aside some lily pads. Small catfish scattered. “That’s right, little fishies, no dinner for you tonight.” Marshall wiggled his butt backward in an effort to see the bottom part of the body. The boat rocked with him. “No clothes other than the bra.” He pulled on the garment. It came out of the water with a lily vine attached. “Not your normal bra, is it?”

I stretched my neck. “Bikini top,” I said. “She must have been in a bathing suit.”

Marshall leaned over once more, and the pilot’s face turned white. “Let us know when you’re going to do that!” He shouted.

Marshall used both arms to brush aside more river grass. “No bottoms anywhere that I can see.” He moved more grass. “Need to check around the area. You guys on shore or in the mud or wherever you are, look for clothing, maybe a towel.”

When there seemed nothing more to be found from looking at the body in the water, Marshall gave the order to call in the next boat that would deliver the body to the morgue in Tallahassee. It would be the divers’ turn now. They wouldn’t need tanks in these shallows, but they would know how to lift her out, to place her in a plastic bag that would conceal her indignity and hang onto any water-logged evidence.

“Looks like another one,” said Marshall as he created a monster wake when he turned upright in the boat.