

A late evening rain patters against the picture window, but the sounds are uneven, like some rain god spitting against the glass, then gathering momentum and spitting again. When the spatters stop altogether, the silence wakes me and I realize there has been no rain at all. On a humid night, the haze dances among the cypress knees. Swamp fauna arise in warm wetness. Moths and night gnats aim for light, beating their minute bodies against window glass that blocks them from fiery ruin. That's when frogs take over the food chain. Tiny, black-green pieces of jellied flesh with sucker feet fly to the window, hitting it like rubber darts, then pulling free and hopping to the next insect. Had I a magnifying glass, I would surely see a sticky tongue dart and grab.

I live in this swamp, alongside the frogs and their more lethal neighbors of the reptilian world. We get along with the help of instinct, a bit of knowledge, and a large dose of fear. But Darwin was right. The fittest survive here. And cunning is decidedly an advantage in ultimate survival.

CHAPTER ONE

Funny how creatures grow dead quiet when someone screams in the forest. Heeding the approach of the Angel of Death, their silence serves them like the blood of the first-born over the doorway. I am one of the swamp creatures. I know because I stopped in my tracks, dead still and silent as a tomb, just like the others. I heard the screams, a wrenching struggle to deal with pain, a long stretch of high-pitched sound, then silence, followed by shorter screeches. I heard them in the distance, ahead of me through the dense cypress growth across one end of Lake Palmetto. The sound came from one of my own species. I didn't stay still for long.

I thought I knew all who lived inside my swamp. My cottage, renovated from a falling-down family home, gave me as much solace and protection as did the aninga bird's aerie atop a dead cypress tree. Right now, that bird had taken to the air in alarm. I wasn't in my sanctuary, either. I stood in a heavy swamp area next to a river-lake formed from an offshoot of Palmetto Springs, where underwater caverns run so deep and winding no one has ever discovered where they came from or where they went.

Until now. With my former lover, Harry MacAllister, I was attempting to map these offshoot spring caves. I had joined him when I couldn't face returning to teaching college classes in Talla-

hassee. We had finished the area on state-owned land. Now we had to have permission from private land owners to set up diving equipment and mapping camps along their shores. My search for an operating site had taken me deep into the swamp that day, and the screaming guided me to one stretch of water we wanted to map.

“Stop!” The voice rose to decibel heights. As I approached a wood-frame cabin, muffled voices in the background joined the scream.

“Watch her,” was all I could make out.

In the distance, a muscular, male figure in a boat rowed around the river bend.

I stood outside a window that had no screen. The front porch and roof sagged in parallel dips. Two frayed reed chairs sat like aging sentinels on the gray boards. Molded black wicker had rotted through the seats. I hesitated to go inside. The porch might not hold my weight. When I heard the last cry, one that began at top pitch and suddenly lowered to a choking baritone, I risked the rotting boards.

There was no front door, not even rusted hinges. This was a cabin used years ago, probably by some swamp hermit who bathed in the same water where he fished for his supper. Unfit for human inhabitants now, it would house colonies of wasps on the ceilings and swamp spiders in the floor corners. I followed the voices, the muffled ones. The screaming had stopped.

“She’s quiet at last.” The voice was female and elderly.

“And this one...” A similar voice drifted away.

This was a shotgun house, one where you could stand at the front door, look directly down the hall and out the back door. Rooms ran along either side. I followed the voices to a middle room on the right. The door here was missing, too. As soon as I

stepped under its jamb, the smell of warm blood flooded my nostrils, and I felt my stomach leap. Backing out, I took a whiff of fresh air, then turned around and faced two women. Dressed in flower-print house dresses with blood-splashed plastic aprons, they busied themselves at the far wall. On a rusted iron bedstead, double size, lay a single dingy and torn mattress—and a woman drenched in sweat. She wore no clothes, but clasped a stained towel between her legs.

“What the hell?” I said, and the two aproned women, startled, turned toward me.

“You can’t come in here,” said one and rushed me, hands outstretched with palms open. “This is a private place.”

“I heard someone screaming. What happened in here?”

The other woman stared like a frightened doe in headlights at me a moment, then turned her back. “Leave her, Sadie.”

Sadie was the one coming toward me I presumed. She stopped, dropped her arms to her sides, turned around and picked up bloody rags from the floor.

“Who is she?” I pointed to the woman on the bed, who opened her eyes, looked my way, then shut them again.

The second woman stopped. Her cropped gray hair lay in humid tendrils around her hawk-nosed face. She turned her eyes upward towards me and I had the sudden thought of Medusa about to turn me to stone. “She just gave birth. That was the screaming you heard. It’s all over now.”

“Well, shouldn’t I call someone? I mean she doesn’t look so good.” I reached for the cellular phone in my backpack.

“Don’t think she wants any help, other than us,” said the woman.

Sadie glanced at me when she took hold of some towels, pressed them into a pan of bloody water and headed for a win-

dow. One hand grabbed the rags as she leaned the pan on the sill. She tossed the water on the ground outside with the other hand. She wiped the pan with one of the bloody rags, then bundled them all together. She looked a lot like her companion, but meeker. When she finished with the rags, she folded and unfolded her hands, finally removing the plastic apron. Her eyes darted from me to the other woman.

“Where’s the baby?” I moved further into the room and pretended to search the corners. The only other piece of furniture was a folding plastic beach chair. It looked new; I assumed one of the women brought it. Upturned crates served as a table.

Both women stood still. The Medusa woman turned round to face me. Her large face sat neckless on heavy shoulders. She had about her a grayness that matched the gray cabin down to its aged boards. She cradled a bundle of white cloths in one arm.

“Who are you?” she demanded, adjusting the top of the cloth bundle. Her frightened stare belied the snake woman image.

“Luanne Fogarty. And you?”

“What is your business here?”

“I’m a diver and I need to locate the owner of this place.” I looked around, realizing no owner had lived in this house for years. “What is your business here?” I refused to back down.

“Midwife. She,” the woman nodded toward the bed, “called me when she felt the kid coming. I birth lots of babies in these parts.” She walked to the bed, and with one hand removed the bloody towel from between the woman’s legs, and tossed it onto the pile in the pan. She nodded toward Sadie who handed over a clean cloth; her companion tucked it between the woman’s legs. Blood soaked through and saturated the mattress.

“That woman is hemorrhaging. I’m not going to let her die here.” I pulled off my backpack, jerked out the phone, and dialed 911. The women suddenly burst into energy; Sadie grabbed the bloody cloths, the pan and the chair, and ran for the back door. The bundle in the other woman’s arm whimpered slightly as she held it close to her chest and hurried after her partner.

“Wait!” I yelled after them. “Who is this woman?”

“Theresa Grassfield,” said the Medusa who didn’t look back.

I watched them make quick time through mud and marsh grass. They headed for a turn in the river where a thicket of oaks bent toward the water. The boat must have waited for them there, and I started to run after them, maybe to grab the child, when I heard a pitiful groan from inside the cabin.

I returned to Theresa.

“Please,” she said, and reached out a hand across the bed. She held it in the air a few seconds, then let it drop to the bloody mattress. She began to rock her head back and forth, her eyes closed. I could tell from the sweat pouring off her face that she was feverish. The cloth between her legs neared the solid red state. If the paramedics didn’t make it into the swamp in time, she would bleed to death.

“Why would they do this and run?” I said to myself. But I had no time to think about them now. I needed to stop the bleeding, and since it was internal, I didn’t know how I was going to do that. The women left no other rags or towels in the room, and I saw no sign of Theresa’s clothes. I stepped into the open-ended hall, then darted in and out of the other rooms. The place was a ghost house, nothing remaining from its occupants but the crude boards that defied swamp humidity. The open windows assured the place of a breeze every afternoon; there was little dust. In its place, mildew, sometimes solid black, grew around the base boards.

The only thing to do was to go back and hold the woman's hand. If she died, at least she wouldn't be alone. Taking a look out the window, I thought I heard a scream from around the bend in the river, but decided it must have been the boat siren coming across the lake. I patted Theresa's limp hand and slid my fingers from hers. She didn't respond.

Traipsing through muddy grass, I ended up ankle deep at the shore where I waved both arms in the air. The paramedics steered as close as possible, then waded knee deep toward me, their medical gear held above their heads.

"We'll have to get the raft out if somebody needs to go to the hospital," said the lead medic. "Helicopter can't land around here, and the sea plane is on another job." He turned to aid his two colleagues on shore.

"Well you better start blowing it up because this lady needs a hospital bad," I said as I led the way inside the house.

We stood around the bed, our feet making mud prints on the old boards. Blood dripped from the edge of the mattress now and mixed with the river dirt from outside. Theresa lay still, her face no longer sweating.

"She's gone into shock," said one medic as he pulled out a hypodermic. "We've got to get her out of here quick."

One of the medics ran outside. In a few seconds we heard the air raft filling its innards, then a voice, "Ready!"

From one end of the room I watched the two medics lift the woman onto a fold-up stretcher, an intravenous bottle hanging on the side. They had placed cold packs between her legs and on her stomach. I wondered if this had stopped the bleeding or maybe there was just no more blood in her. The saturated mat-

tress and floor seemed to have taken all of it.

“Get hold of the sheriff, Luanne,” said the lead medic as they pushed the woman to the back door. “This may be a criminal case.”

I followed and watched them stand in the mud, pass the woman onto the raft, then pull it over the grass and into the shallow water. One man climbed into the boat and pulled while the other two pushed the raft. They lifted her into the boat, shoved the raft away, then climbed aboard. In five minutes, they headed full speed, with siren blasting, toward Palmetto Springs. If Theresa were lucky, the clinic there would stabilize her until she could reach the hospital in Tallahassee. As they moved out of sight, I stood next to the stretcher they left behind and watched the stained raft, red on yellow, bob against tall river reeds.

In the silent, ruined cabin, its drama out of the way now, I could still smell the blood as it aged rapidly in the humidity. I pulled out the cellular and phoned the sheriff’s office in Tallahassee.

It would take the officers a while to reach this place. They probably wouldn’t come by boat, and the only other way was to walk through the swamp from a rutted dirt road off the Palmetto Springs paved road. I leaned against the rough, gray boards of the hallway and suddenly remembered my earlier question.

Where is the baby?

I plodded through the marshy reeds. The path the women had taken had all but folded over on itself. The swamp does not love a road. I slogged around in ankle-deep water, skirting the edge of the river, my eyes surveying every marsh hen nest, every cluster of rotting limbs, even a slithering water snake. When I hit a thick grove of oaks, I climbed into the low branches of one and gazed around like radar trying to latch onto something valuable. I

was sure the women ran this way, but when I spied not even a piece of a bloody towel, I headed for the side of the shack. It was full of eel grass, shallow water, and a tall white crane. I returned to the house and sat on the muddy back step. The swamp had swallowed the whole business, women, baby, all.

“Tony, they took the kid with them,” I said as I stood in the hallway to feel the breezes against my soaked skin. Clouds had begun to gather in the afternoon heat, forcing the humidity even higher. I could feel the flush in my face. Sheriff’s Detective Tony Amado had rolled up his white shirt sleeves, his wing tip shoes ruined from soaking up mud on the walk through the swamp. His sergeant, Loman, managed to keep on his jacket, but his thin blond hair stuck to his head like a marooned octopus.

“Did they say the kid was stillborn?” Tony’s irritation came through and landed right on me.

“No, and I’m sure I heard it whimper.” I tried to stare down this man who questioned every statement ever made by anyone. I suddenly shivered. A baby, dead or not, would be gator meat in seconds if it landed in this part of the lake. The cold spring water was deep in the middle, but along the shore line, there were breeding grounds for alligators. Water moccasins had their place here, too.

“I’m going to call the crime scene boys out here to get some blood samples. If this woman dies, two midwives are in deep shit.” Tony moved back into the birth room. I followed and immediately backed out again. The odor was sickening now, the stench of blood powerful enough to draw swarms of flies. I nearly retched when I saw a host of them on top of a red puddle.

“Place will be crawling with maggots tomorrow,” said Loman

as he looked over my shoulder, his heavy lidded eyes showing no revulsion. “Mosquitoes moving in, too.” He pointed to a few buzzers near one window.

“Funny how something foul smelling attracts so many creatures,” I said.

“How old do you think the mother is?” Loman pulled out a small notebook when he asked the question.

“Old enough to be called a woman and not a girl,” I said. I felt a small surprise inside. Why hadn’t I noticed from the beginning that she was older than her teens, even twenties? Maybe because I was in my forties and saw anyone giving birth as younger?

“She was old enough to know better than to give birth out here in a shack.” Tony turned away from the room, then gulped a deep breath in the hall.

“That woman said Theresa had called her to deliver this baby. There’s no phone anywhere. Not a cell phone or a line in this place.” I gave the room another search with my eyes.

“Probably the delivery had been arranged with the midwife months ago. Why they’d do it here, I can’t imagine.”

“Maybe it came before the due time,” I said. Being the only female in the room, I felt I should know about these things. But I had never given birth, never even been pregnant. I probably knew less than the men who had training for emergency deliveries.

“Anyone here?” We turned to the voice shouting from the front of the cabin. “Scene tech has arrived!”