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GIGI

By

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M.A. English, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, 2020

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Chapter 1

I don't remember the first time Grandpa told me the stories of the ghosts of the swamp. All I know is that the stories became ingrained in me, and I learned the tales by heart.

Grandpa saw his first ghost around the same time my mom gave birth to me. Not that I think there was a correlation. It just turned out that way. Mom and Dad were sixteen when they had me, still in high school, and my grandpa agreed to help raise me. Grandma had already left by then.

Grandpa wrestled alligators for the Department of Natural Resources, and that's how he killed his first gator. The next day, the ghost of the alligator came back to haunt him.

At this point in the story, Grandpa would stretch his arms out wide and curve his fingers like hooked claws, and he'd lunge for me. After a few laps around the house with him chasing me, after I collapsed on the ground in breathless laughter, Grandpa would stand with his arms crossed, rock back on his heels, and grow serious.

"The thing about ghosts, especially the ghosts of wild animals, is that you should never entirely trust them. I'm not saying they'll harm you, but a predator will always be a predator, and it's important to remember that."

Despite his advice, I took myself on several ghost hunting escapades in the swamp. I was old enough to play outside by myself, but maybe not old enough to be wandering around the woods alone. My dad died when I was two, so in those days, it would've been me and Mom and Grandpa, but mostly just me and Grandpa. Mom went to college and worked in Charleston, an hour away, and she stayed there more and more. I guess the two-hour commute on top of full-

time work, classes, and homework, was just too much for her. She stayed at my grandma's house in Charleston, but me staying there was out of the question. Grandma wanted nothing to do with me. Maybe that's why my mom didn't seem to either.

So, there I was, growing up on Ashepoo Island in the swamp, watching Grandpa wrestle gators. By the time I was ten years old, I'd officially reached assistant status—handing Grandpa bait or holding onto whatever items he brought along just in case, whether it was a blindfold, rope, or the like. He didn't allow me to hold the dangerous items like the handgun or bangstick until I was twelve and had taken a hunter's safety course. By the time I was fourteen, I'd wrestled alligators on my own, but only the ones Grandpa selected—the ones he thought I could handle without getting hurt. They were usually small gators that I didn't even have to touch with my bare hands. I could hook them with a pole without much trouble.

Eventually, Grandpa stopped telling me stories—or maybe I stopped asking. I stopped looking for ghosts, but I still thought about them every now and then. I wondered if Grandpa really saw them or if he'd made those stories up to entertain me. There's something about standing in a swamp by yourself, though, that makes you wonder. The familiar birdsongs fade, a cloud covers the sun, and the woods turn to shadow, leaves flutter in the breeze, and still water ripples. In that moment, I know that all that I can see can't be all that there is.

#

We lived an hour away from real civilization and thirty minutes to the nearest grocery store. Ashepoo Island had a small local population, but in the summers, the island filled up with tourists and family vacationers hoping to escape the fast-paced city life. The bridge was the only thing that connected the island to the mainland. The locals swore the tourists left their brains at the top of the bridge when they arrived.

While the summer visitors sat on the beach, I helped Grandpa wrestle alligators. The year I turned sixteen, I had grand plans of doing absolutely nothing productive, aside from whatever Grandpa made me do, of course.

My best friend, Cecelia Russel, had different ideas. She pounded on our screen door at 7am the first official day of summer. Naturally, she caught me sleeping.

Grandpa had already left. He often woke before sunrise and went on a walkabout through the swamp. He always took binoculars, a small sketchbook, and a graphite pencil. He mostly looked for birds and drew little sketches of whatever he found. When I was younger, I'd wake up before sunrise and enjoy the quiet of the mornings with him. As I got older, I preferred staying in my bed.

I stumbled to the porch, still wiping sleep from my eyes. "What in God's name?"

Cecelia grinned and shoved me back inside the house. "Francis Marion. We got a job. Go get dressed."

I was named Francis Marion Dupre after Grandpa, who was named Francis Marion Walker in honor of the Swamp Fox, a revolutionary war hero. I'd always felt wary of my name—I wasn't sure I was made for greatness like that. Although, I had to admit that swamps were kind of my thing.

"I don't want a job," I said. I tried to plant my feet firmly on the floor.

Cecelia shoved me down the hallway. "Of course you do. Your grandpa just retired. You can't be mooching off him all the time."

"What kind of job?"

"We're gonna work in a vegetable market," she said.

I shrugged, already half convinced. There were enough roadside stands and markets around the island that I could picture what working in one would be like. We'd sit in the shade, sell fruit and vegetables and boiled peanuts, and chat with customers. It didn't sound too bad as far as jobs went. "How'd you get me a job? Do they even know me?"

"Don't worry about it," Cecelia said. "Brush your teeth. Your breath stinks. I'll whip up some breakfast." She pushed me into the bathroom.

If there was one thing I knew after ten years of friendship with Cecelia Russel, it was that resistance to her schemes was futile unless I wanted an all-out war. I had to pick my fights carefully.

After I'd put myself together—and by that, I mean threw on a clean tee shirt and shorts and took care of my breath situation—I met Cecelia back in the kitchen. She was in the process of frying eggs.

I tossed my chestnut hair back in a thick braid and stretched my legs. I was tall like Grandpa and had always towered over everyone since elementary school. I slouched a lot, which my mother berated me for every time she saw me. Luckily, I mostly lived with my grandpa, so I didn't have to hear Mom nagging me all the time.

I threw some bread in the toaster and set the kitchen table. Cecelia dumped the fried eggs on the plates and rummaged through the refrigerator. She let out a huff of frustration.

"What are you looking for?"

Cecelia's head popped up over the fridge door. "Got any cooked bacon or sausage in here?"

I shrugged. "I think there's some ham in the drawer."

Cecelia's head disappeared. A moment later her hand rose over the door, holding the bag of ham in her fist, triumphantly. "Fried ham!"

"What time are we supposed to be there?"

"Not until 8:30," Cecelia said.

I checked the clock on the wall: 7:25. "Look at you, on time for once."

Cecelia set a few slices of ham into the frying pan, and they sizzled upon contact. Little specks of grease popped into the air and fizzled out as they dropped back on the pan. "I'm telling you, this job will be perfect," she said. "We get the first look at everyone coming on the island for the summer. Automatic party invite."

The toaster popped, and I busied myself with the task of buttering the bread. "Well, that should be fun for you."

Cecelia flipped the ham. She glanced at me over her shoulder and frowned. "It wouldn't hurt for you to come to a few parties."

"You know I'm not interested in that," I said.

"I know, I know. You don't drink."

"I just don't want to be part of the problem."

Cecelia focused her attention on the skillet. She ran the spatula beneath the ham to keep it from sticking. "Is that what you think I am? Part of the problem?"

"I never said that. I never judge you for doing what you do, so don't judge me for doing things the way I want."

"Fine," Cecelia said.

She scooped the meat up and dropped it on top of the plates. We ate in silence. I could tell I'd hit a nerve with Cecelia, but she never stayed mad at me for long.

After we finished, I washed the dishes while Cecelia waited for me on the porch. I found her sitting on a rocking chair, gazing out at the swamp. The still water, peppered with lily pads, had long stretches covered in a light film of green algae. The sun slanted through trees, glinting off the spattered lichen along the bark. The glittering moss gave the illusion of snow, providing an ethereal contrast to the thick summer air.

Grandpa's cabin sat on the edge of the water. One story, four rooms, small, but well-built and well-kept over the years. A large screened-in porch lined the front of the house. The green tin roof made the rainstorms sound like magic.

"It's always so peaceful here," Cecelia said. It was rare to see her so still. With her blond hair swept back in a ponytail, and the summer freckles already speckled across her face, she looked young for once. Cecelia was seventeen, only a year older than me, but she always acted older—mostly because she was forced to be. Having a baby at fifteen would do that to someone, even though her mom took on the brunt of the caregiving. I wondered if she'd roped me in on this job because it was more important than she let on. She probably needed the money, and I had a good reputation. She tore her eyes away from the swamp and glanced at me. "You ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," I said.

We hopped in Cecelia's truck, which was really her daddy's truck, but he was too drunk to drive most of the time. We headed down the road to the vegetable market.

We'd driven by the building almost every day, but Grandpa had his own garden, so I'd never had a need to shop there. The natural wood siding on the building was old and warped, but the inside seemed nice. The market was really more of roadside shack with one room, dirt floors,

and garage doors that remained open during the day. The fruit and vegetables displayed in baskets were fresh and glistening after a night spent in the walk-in freezer. The humid warmth of the summer day formed dew on the veggies, and I already knew I'd be thankful for the fan blades that spun on the open ceiling beams above, especially when the July heat settled in.

A woman stood next to a bin of cucumbers. She sorted through them with her hands, every now and then setting aside the vegetables that had become wilted and wrinkled. I followed behind Cecelia, who confidently approached the woman and tapped her on the back.

The owner of the vegetable stand turned to face us. She wore her wavy dark hair in a bun and seemed to be in her mid-forties. When her gaze flicked from Cecelia to me, a resigned look crossed her face, like she already knew what Cecelia was going to say.

“Did you bring a friend for your first day?”

“I brought you another worker,” Cecelia said. “Didn't you say you needed one more person?”

The owner looked at me again. “I did say that, but I usually prefer to handle the hiring myself.”

Cecelia waved her hand. “Don't worry. This is Francis Marion Dupre. She comes pre-vetted and adored by everyone.”

“Hey Francis, I'm Jordan Lafayette. I reckon you're looking for a job?”

I hesitated, but Cecelia elbowed me in the ribs with enough force to make me gasp. “Not exactly, but I can try it for the day.”

Jordan gave us one last skeptical glance before shrugging. “I'm probably going to regret this, but sure. I'll take you through the training today, and we can reassess at the end of the day.”

She walked down the small aisle and motioned for us to follow her. “Come along. I’ll show you the morning routine.”

Jordan walked us through market, showing us where things were kept at night, how and where to set up the baskets, and the basics of the cash register. After that, she took us to the back, where they had a giant pot that they used to make boiled peanuts. The pot had a lever that turned the whole thing over and dumped the peanuts onto a large screen to drain and cool them before bagging.

The day went by quickly, and the market had a steady stream of visitors. I caught on quick and was feeling proud of myself, despite my hesitancy to get a job in the first place. I liked the feeling of accomplishment. At last, Jordan walked us through the closing routine. Cecelia had been on her best behavior the entire day, but I couldn’t help but wonder how long that would last. After we’d finished everything, Jordan took money out of the register and counted out two piles before handing a pile each to Cecelia and me.

“Good work today,” Jordan said. “I’ll hire you both, but on the condition that you always work together. I’ll be in and out, and I prefer having two people in the market at all times for safety reasons.”

I sighed. I felt conflicted. I didn’t mind the work, but I’d also still been half hoping I could bail once Jordan decided to hire Cecelia. I glanced at Cecelia, who grabbed my arm and gave me a pleading look. I wanted to shake her off. She probably only wanted me to work with her so Jordan didn’t hire someone else who would tattle when Cecelia didn’t do her job.

“I’ll need y’all Thursday through Monday each week. Do you think you can handle that? I’ll be around most days, but I’ll be in and out more once you get settled in.”

“Sounds great,” Cecelia said, nudging me.

Like always, I caved with the least amount of pressure. “OK, fine. Works for me.”

“See y’all tomorrow then,” Jordan said.

#

Cecelia only lasted two weeks.

Her downfall was brought about by a cute boy from Charleston named Bryson. He was the type of guy who seemed like he was no good, but who was also so good-looking that he was hard to ignore. He came into the market looking for boiled peanuts. I stood at the register, and Cecelia restocked the tomatoes. Bryson stepped out of his car without shoes. He dressed preppy—shorts and a collared shirt—so I figured he forewent the shoes to try to get in touch with his island side or something along those lines. City people were always doing weird things when they came to the swamp.

He took one glance at me and veered straight to Cecelia—I’d be lying if I said that my pride wasn’t a little wounded at that, but I was also used to it—and he rested his arm casually next to the basket that Cecelia filled and leaned in close to her. They spoke low, and I couldn’t hear what they said over the whir of the fan blowing on the counter.

They talked like that for a while, Cecelia holding the basket of tomatoes—restocking long forgotten—and Bryson leaning against the table. Cecelia laughed a lot, and I could tell she genuinely liked him. She hadn’t really dated anyone since she’d broken up with her ex, her daughter Davenport’s dad, so I was surprised to see her act like she was into someone. An odd mix of jealousy of her ease with boys and happiness that she met someone she liked whirled within me.

After a good twenty minutes, with me handling all the other customers who came in, Cecelia led Bryson to the back. She paused as she passed the counter. "I'm gonna take him to get some boiled peanuts. They should be cool enough by now."

"Maybe he should stay up here."

Jordan had been explicit about not hanging out with our friends out back. She wasn't here, but I still felt nervous about getting in trouble.

"We'll be quick," Cecelia said.

They weren't quick. A slew of customers came in, and I didn't even notice that Jordan had arrived until she came up from the back with Bryson and Cecelia in tow. Bryson walked directly to his car, flushed and embarrassed.

"It's not a big deal," Cecelia said.

"You broke my rules," Jordan said.

"I was on break," Cecelia said. "What I do on my break isn't any concern of yours."

"It is when you invite strangers into the back of my market without my permission."

"It's not like we did anything wrong," Cecelia said.

"It's a matter of respect," Jordan said. "I trusted you. I only asked you to follow a simple set of rules, and you broke my trust."

"You need to get over yourself," Cecelia said. "I quit. Let's go, Francis."

Cecelia grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the parking lot. I stumbled along a few steps before yanking my arm from her grasp. I'd always gone along with Cecelia's whims, and I suddenly felt tired. I'd taken this job for her, and just as I'd gotten used to it, maybe even started to like it, she demanded that I quit. "Wait. Don't you think you're overreacting a little bit?"

“What?”

“Jordan has a point. You broke a rule. Just apologize.”

“Seriously?”

“I thought you needed this job,” I said.

“No. I’m not taking this from you too,” Cecelia said. “Everyone tries to control me. They all treat me like a kid, but then tell me I need to take responsibility. I’m so sick of this.”

“You quit every time things get hard, or someone tells you to do something you don’t like. That’s not how the world works.”

“Like your sheltered butt knows anything,” Cecelia said. “It’s not like you really like the job, you’re just afraid of what others will think if you quit. Have a good summer without me.”

She climbed into Bryson’s car, and they peeled out of the parking lot without looking back. I stood at the edge of the garage door, my toes on the line in the dirt created by the roof’s shadow. Cecelia’s words stung because I knew she was right. Everything I did, everything I avoided, was because I was afraid of what people would think.

I tested my toe against the line drawn in the dirt before me. I could cross it. I could follow after Cecelia and prove that I wasn’t afraid. But all I’d be proving then was that I was afraid of what Cecelia thought more than anything else.

“I could use a hand,” Jordan said.

I twisted around to find her lugging a bin of tomatoes from the back. I hesitated for another second before moving to join her. Maybe stepping away from Cecelia’s shadow should be my first step.

#

Two weeks passed by without a word. I caved on the second week and called Cecelia's house, but her mom told me Cecelia was out. She never called me back. The next day, Bryson sauntered into the market. He glanced around furtively before approaching me, and I knew he was looking for Jordan.

"She's out," I said.

His shoulders hunched in relief. "Great. That woman is kinda scary."

I shook my head. I'd been spending more time with her since Cecelia quit, and I'd found that Jordan was pretty cool. She grew everything that she sold. "She's really not that bad. Cecelia just broke like one of the only rules she asked us to keep. I don't blame her for being upset."

Bryson folded his arms and surveyed me. "So, I guess y'all really haven't made up yet."

"No," I said. "I tried calling her."

"I think she misses you," Bryson said. "I mean, I've only known her for two weeks, but she gets all sad and quiet anytime someone mentions you. Then, it's like she remembers she supposed to be pissed off at you, and she yells and throws something."

"Sounds about right," I said. "So, are y'all like an item now or something?"

Bryson's expression clouded. His blue eyes narrowed. "Or something. I really like her, but she's been pretty upfront the whole time about keeping things casual. She says she doesn't wanna date someone in Charleston."

I shrugged. "I can't say I blame her with Davenport."

"Who is Davenport?"

I turned away from Bryson, and I made a show of fixing the bags. I should've known that Cecelia wouldn't want to tell someone she'd just met about Davenport. Being a mom at seventeen was hard enough, and she didn't need the extra judgement of people she'd just met. If

Cecelia didn't hate me before, she'd definitely hate me if Bryson found out about Davenport. I turned back around and plastered a smile on my face. "Don't worry about it."

Bryson looked at me skeptically, but he shrugged after a moment. "Yeah, whatever. Keeping things casual, right?"

He picked up two bags of boiled peanuts and set them on the counter. "I'm headed back to Charleston. If you do see Cecelia, tell her it's not over for me."

I met his eyes. He seemed so serious, but I couldn't help but giggle at his cheesy line. Bryson scowled for a moment and then gave in and laughed along with me.

"Do you really want me to say that?"

Bryson grinned. "Yeah. She'll pretend to throw up, but she'll really love it deep down."

"Would you really try to make it work? Swamp to Charleston?" I gestured to his outfit—a blue button-down collared shirt and khakis. "You're different than us."

Bryson shrugged. "I've never met anyone like her."

"You and me both."

Chapter 2

I worked at the vegetable stand until the end of the summer. Cecelia still refused to speak with me, no matter how many times I called her house. Without Cecelia inviting me out, I spent the evening and my days off in the swamp or helping Grandpa. Aside from working, this had been the summer I'd wanted—alone in the swamp—but Cecelia's silence made it bitter. I dreaded going back to school. I couldn't imagine being there without my only friend. And the truth was, I was still afraid.

The fateful day that changed everything started out as a warm and sunny morning in August. Grandpa was still gone when I woke up at ten. I fried an egg and bacon and sipped on some hot tea. Grandpa returned shortly and mumbled something about good ideas while he fixed himself a cup of tea and joined me at the kitchen table.

"Morning Francis," Grandpa said. "I know this might be a sore subject, but have you talked to Cecilia Russel recently?"

I shook my head. "I haven't seen her in a while. Last I heard she was bagging groceries at the Pig."

"That girl needs to get off this island."

“Why’s that?”

“She’s just a stick-in-the-mud here.”

I’d told Grandpa about our falling out, and he hadn’t mentioned her since then, probably realizing that I needed some space. The fact that he brought her up now had me worried. I wondered if something bad had happened to her.

Before I could question him, the phone rang. Grandpa lifted it off the wall hook with a gruff “Hello.”

Debbie Langley had a seven-foot alligator in her yard who seemed to be waiting patiently to eat her little chihuahua as a snack.

“We’ll be there in thirty minutes,” Grandpa said.

He hung up the phone and pointed at me.

“Get the gear. We got a big ‘un.”

Grandpa had worked with DNR for the past thirty years, and he was the only person on the island who was skilled at wild animal removal. He’d retired last year, but that didn’t stop people from calling him whenever a big gator wandered into their yard. I knew the routine at this point.

The gear didn’t take too long to gather—frozen chicken necks, a pole with a looped wire at the end, duct tape, blindfold, a handgun, and a bangstick. The bangstick and handgun were only for emergency situations or especially nasty gators that we knew had gone after one too many dogs or children. I loaded up Grandpa’s truck, and we were off in five minutes.

“I got a bad feeling about this one,” Grandpa said.

I gripped my seatbelt. Grandpa's feelings were usually spot on. Years ago, when I asked him how he always knew, he'd said, "If you listen hard enough, the ghosts of the swamp will let you in on their secrets."

Then he'd tell me the stories about the ghosts. When I was eight years old, I became so obsessed with the ghosts that I spent everyday walking around the woods and listening for them. All I heard were birds. The birds never spoke to me, and I figured I just wasn't gifted like Grandpa.

"Francis, you need to call your mother back," Grandpa said.

This was the one topic I'd been trying to avoid for weeks. Mom calling was never good. "I called her last week—or maybe it was the week before."

Don't get me wrong, I loved my mom, but we were also exact opposites in every way. She loved living in Charleston and working admin at some swanky private school—Charleston Prep. I loved living in the swamp.

"You two have some important things to talk about," Grandpa said.

That was exactly why I was avoiding her. "I know what she's going to say, Grandpa. I don't want to move in with her."

Grandpa drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, catching the half beat of the song droning softly on the radio.

"Your mom misses you, and now that your grandma has passed—"

"I love it here. I'm used to it."

"There's more for you in Charleston. You can get a good education and get into a good college."

"My school is fine."

“Your school is falling apart and on the brink of shutting down. There aren’t enough kids living around here anymore,” Grandpa said. “Anyways, you qualified for a scholarship. You can’t pass that up.”

“I didn’t ask for a scholarship. She did that without me knowing.”

“Just do me a favor and talk to her about it.”

The truck slowed to a stop outside of a pretty, two-story house that overlooked a sizeable pond. I leapt out of the truck before Grandpa shut it off, so I didn’t have to answer. I’d lived here all my life, and I wasn’t about to move to Charleston just because my mom suddenly decided she wanted to be a mother after sixteen years.

I opened the tail of the truck and pulled out the bag of chicken necks. Grandpa came up next to me and gave me a good long stare that said the conversation wasn’t over, but he’d let it go for now. Grandpa was always like that, speaking without saying anything out loud.

Debbie Langley floated down the steps of her house. A silk floral bathrobe fluttered behind her, and she wore a white and rather revealing nightgown underneath. Curlers looped through her dyed blond hair. A black chihuahua quivered in her arms. Debbie was in her early sixties, maybe five years younger than my grandpa, and her carefully set makeup told me that she had more than gator wrestling in mind for Grandpa. Debbie smiled when her eyes lit on him. Red lipstick was smeared on her white teeth. The smile quickly turned down when she saw me with my arms full of chicken necks.

“Why, Francis Marion Dupre, don’t you just get prettier every day,” Debbie said.

“You’ve grown even taller since the last time I saw you.”

I looked down at my dirty cut-off jean shorts and grimy tee-shirt that I was wearing for the second day in a row. Not to mention the smelly and quickly melting chicken necks in my arms. Pretty was one way to put it.

“Francis Marion Senior, I can’t thank you enough for coming on such a short notice,” Debbie said. “I really thought I’d lost dear little Jeffery today when that mean ole alligator chased after him. Luckily, little Jeffery is smart and knew to run for his life.”

Grandpa grunted in response. Jeffery immediately peed on Debbie’s robe. Grandpa turned away and made a fuss about tying his long grey hair back in a ponytail, but I knew from the shake of his shoulders that he was trying not to let Debbie see him laugh. I watched Grandpa’s tanned, leathery hands smooth back his hair. He took an awful long time, but his expression was blank when he turned around again. “Any idea where that mean ole gator is now?”

Debbie pointed to the pond.

“Stands to reason,” Grandpa said.

He pointed at me and then to the right of the swamp. I nodded and set off in that direction. Time to track an alligator. I glanced over my shoulder to see Grandpa setting off in the opposite direction. Debbie sat on the steps and pulled something out of her bra that looked suspiciously like a mini bottle of vodka. It was before noon, but I didn’t blame her. Sweet little Jeffery had just peed all over her, after all.

My eyes flicked back and forth between the pond and the dirt below my feet. I looked alternately for signs of the gator in the pond or tracks in the earth. The day was hot and humid already, and my shirt stuck to my back. Mosquitos swarmed and buzzed over the water, and I wished vainly for a breeze.

I found the tracks about a quarter of the way around the pond. Four paw prints spread out far apart with an ‘S’ curve snaking through the middle. The prints were about two feet apart, confirming what Debbie had told Grandpa earlier: that gator was big.

The tracks led into the pond, so I gazed out over the water to see if I could spot her. Alligators were hard to find in the water. I found several branches floating by before I spotted her. I kept my eyes locked on the sight as she bobbed up and down. The gator faced me. Her whole body stretched out on the surface, from the snout to the tail. Then, her whole body sank under the water except for her eyes—two black beads floating just above the surface. The wide snout popped up for a second and sank back down. Her ridged back popped up next, only to sink down into the water again too. I felt as if she was playing with me. The gator’s entire head disappeared and emerged a few feet away, closer to me. She moved slowly, slinking through the water with hardly a ripple left behind.

I cupped my hands around my mouth to shout for Grandpa, but his hand suddenly wrapped around my wrist before I could get a sound out. It was uncanny how he always knew when to show up at just the right time.

“I see her,” he said. “Go ahead and drop those chicken necks right on the edge here and run and get the handgun just in case.”

Grandpa already had the pole in his hand and the roll of duct tape around his elbow. I dumped the chicken necks and sprinted to the truck.

Just as I reached the truck, a startled shout sounded from where I’d left Grandpa. The shouting wasn’t that unusual, but I sped up the process all the same, loading the handgun as fast as my trembling hands would let me. No matter how many times I helped Grandpa, wrestling gators always made me nervous. The creatures were dangerous and unpredictable.

“Francis!” Grandpa’s voice cut through the silence of the pond. “We don’t have all day.”

I checked the safety and ran back to Grandpa as fast as my legs would take me.

Grandpa’s feet were planted wide. He crouched on his toes, ready to spring at any moment. The gator had the end of the pole in her mouth, and Grandpa held stubbornly onto the other end. Again, not unusual, but what was unusual was that Grandpa’s leg was covered in blood. Not a good sign.

I slowed my pace and inched my way forward. When Grandpa spoke, he kept his eyes fixed on the gator. “I’m going to hand you the duct tape, and I want you to wrap her jaws.”

I stuck the handgun in my back pocket and extended my hand out to Grandpa. He slipped the duct tape around my wrist. I tiptoed slowly around the alligator until I was directly behind her. Grandpa nodded. He was ready. I gently peeled the tape back and looped it, so it stuck to itself. I was ready to force it around the gator’s jaws. Grandpa pulled the blindfold from his pocket.

It’d been a while since I’d wrestled a gator, and my stomach clenched in anxious anticipation. Usually, I was the one watching while Grandpa jumped the gator. And if I was wrestling, Grandpa was usually available and ready to jump in if necessary. This time, he wouldn’t be able to help as easily. This gator was more aggressive than most, and she’d already ruined our normal rhythm.

I eased closer to the gator, scooting next to her webbed backfoot. I jumped. I landed right where I need to be—my hands strapped under the front legs. The gator’s mouth reared open. Instead of trying to twist around to get to me, the gator leapt straight towards my grandpa.

I tried to keep her pinned down, but she was too strong and too fast for me. Grandpa was a big man. He was at least six feet tall. Lean, but muscular enough that nobody would choose to

go up against him. But for the first time, I was afraid for him. If anything could split him in two, this gator could.

Grandpa stumbled back. The gator lunged again. My body weighing down on her back might as well have been an annoying mosquito, the way she ignored me. To make matters worse, I'd lost the duct tape in the tussle. I looped my arm around her front leg. I avoided her neck, not wanting to accidentally land my arm in her mouth. I tried to reach around her head to poke her eyes, but my body had slipped down when she'd lung forward. I couldn't reach her face.

I tightened my legs around her core and tried to inch up, but it was impossible with her lunging forward. This gator was too strong for me.

"Francis," Grandpa said. His voice was ragged. "We can't go on like this for much longer."

I knew what he meant, but I hated it. When it came down to me and Grandpa or the gator, though, obviously I'd pick us.

I tightened my grip on the gator and reached for the handgun. The gator leapt forward again. The handgun slipped from my grip as I pulled it from my back pocket. I almost lost everything—my hold on the gator and the gun. I secured the gun against my back and fumbled for it, finally getting the piece in firmly my clutches.

The alligator made one last leap towards Grandpa, and this time the gator was successful.

I fired. Once. Twice.

Chapter 3

A chuck-will's-widow called out nearby. I strained my eyes in a vain attempt to spot the fat, brown-and-grey-speckled bird in the trees above. They were strange looking, and their call, which sounded exactly like their name, was eerie and comforting all at once. They were a morph between a faery and a toad—perhaps a distant relative of both. The chuck-will's-widow always made me feel nostalgic, but I didn't know what for.

Chuck-will's-widows were normally evening birds, but the sun shone brightly in the sky. Something must have set the bird off for her to call in the middle of day.

Sharp ridges stabbed into my stomach. I didn't know why I had chosen such an uncomfortable place to lie down. Something groaned near by, and suddenly, everything came back. I'd just shot an alligator. I rubbed my face, and my hand came away red—blood must've splattered onto me since I'd shot the gator at such a close range.

I jolted up, searching for Grandpa. His body was stretched out above the gator's bloody head, and I had apparently been lying on the gator's back. Grandpa clutched a bloody arm to his chest, rising and falling with every breath. He was alive. An eye cracked open, and he looked me over.

“Cutting it a little close there, kid, but good job,” he said. “I'm sorry you had to do that.”

Tears filled my eyes. Grandpa busied himself with wrapping the blindfold around his injured arm. I decided that there were better things to do than crying while sitting on a dead gator. I wiped my face with the back of my hand and pulled myself up. I retrieved the handgun from where I'd dropped it earlier and put the safety on.

Grandpa's temporary bandage secured, he looked me over next. My body ached, and I knew I'd be plenty sore and bruised the next day, but I'd managed to come away relatively unscathed. Grandpa must have been satisfied too because he turned away from me and looked over the gator.

"Let's pay our respects," Grandpa said.

We closed our eyes and held a moment of silence for the animal. We usually didn't say a prayer out loud because Grandpa was more of a pray in your heart type person.

"I'm getting too slow for this. Making mistakes." Grandpa paused and looked at the pond. Mosquitos bounced across the water's surface. Grandpa didn't make mistakes when it came to gators, and I couldn't help but worry about him. Yet another reason why I didn't want to go to Charleston with my mom.

I looked at the giant gator on the ground. I was skeptical about the two of us getting the gator into the truck bed, but Grandpa did have a pulley system we could employ if necessary.

Debbie was nowhere in sight when we returned to the truck, so I guessed she'd decided to give up on her attempts to flirt with Grandpa. Really, I hoped she'd changed out of her pee-stained nightgown.

We brought the truck around to the alligator, and Grandpa measured it. The gator was about seven feet and five inches long, meaning that she most likely weighed somewhere around two-hundred pounds.

“I’m getting too old for this,” Grandpa said. “Let’s use the pulley system.”

My worry deepened. Grandpa was sixty-five, and he was strong and in shape for his age. I examined him closely. Blood seeped through the makeshift bandage on his arm.

“Maybe we should go to the doctor first,” I said. There wasn’t a doctor on the island, and the nearest hospital was forty-five minutes away. Ashepoo was not a conducive place for medical emergencies.

“Won’t take long to load her up,” Grandpa said. “I can go to the doc in Charleston after I drop the gator off.”

The pulley system was basic. I cranked down the chains until they rested right above the alligator. Grandpa unfurled the tarp, and I helped him spread it out next to the gator. I took the backend, and Grandpa took the head. We crouched on the side of the gator.

“On the count of three,” Grandpa said, “One, two, three!”

I pushed my hands forward with all my might, and the gator rolled on her side and over onto the tarp. I shuddered, suddenly thinking that it could have easily been me or Grandpa who had died.

We hooked the tarp to the chains, so the tarp formed a hammock around the gator’s body. Grandpa cranked the pulley back up while I guided the gator’s body towards the truck bed, making sure that it didn’t bang against the tail of the truck on the way up.

We secured the gator and set off.

With the windows rolled down in the truck, the warm breeze tickled my face and soothed me a little. We passed an expanse of marsh. A great blue heron stood on the edge of a small inlet, fishing. The grey-blue bird speared the water with its beak in a practiced movement.

Unsuccessful, the bird stalked a few steps forward and tried again. Before I could see if she caught something, I lost her to the passing trees.

“I’m going to drop you off at home first,” Grandpa said.

I looked at his arm again. The bandage seemed even bloodier than before.

“I don’t mind coming with you,” I said.

“I might be a while,” Grandpa said, tipping his head towards his arm. “And to be honest, kid, you look pretty rough yourself. Go home and rest.”

I caught myself in the side mirror. My face was stark white, smeared with dried blood, and my hair was disheveled. I looked as if I’d been scared out of mind—as if I’d just seen a ghost.

“I’ll be fine,” Grandpa said. “You did well today. Get cleaned up and get some rest. I’ll be back home before you know it. If I’m too late getting to the doctor, I’ll just stay the night with your mom.”

I nodded. I was once again on the brink of tears, as if Grandpa’s words of affirmation had given me the permission I needed to face everything that had happened in the last hour. I felt as if life and death were swirling around me—I’d saved Grandpa, but I’d killed something else to do it. I didn’t regret my choice, but it didn’t sit right with me either.

Grandpa dropped me off at the house, not even bothering to get out of the truck before heading to town.

The shower washed away the dirt and blood, but the death remained. I crawled into my bed and curled up under my covers.

In my dream, a Chuck-will’s-widow landed on my chest and ate a bat. The bird swallowed the bat whole. She pressed her bloodied beak against the underside of my chin—soft,

like I used to press the dandelions against my skin to see if they cast a yellow light there. I wondered if she saw light or shadow there, under my chin.

I woke up tangled and sweaty in my sheets. Out my window, I saw that Grandpa's truck hadn't returned. The house was quiet. I settled on the porch with a mason jar of ice water. I waited for Grandpa to come home.

#

He didn't come back that night. The phone rang at six in the morning. I ran to answer, still half asleep.

"Hello," I said.

"Francis," Grandpa said.

I sank to the floor, relieved to hear his voice.

"Hey, what happened?"

"Sorry I didn't call you last night," he said, "I had to get stitches, and it was late by the time I finished up, so I stayed at your mom's house. I'll be heading home soon."

"Glad you're OK," I said.

"Your mother will be coming as well," Grandpa said.

#

I searched for the camp chair Grandpa normally had set up by the swamp, but I couldn't find it anywhere. I settled on a tree stump in the yard and gazed at my hands. Mom coming to the swamp was a bad sign. I knew exactly how the visit would end: Mom would scoop me up and take me to Charleston, and there'd be nothing I could do to stop her. I contemplated slipping into the swamp and disappearing for a while. Unfortunately, with Grandpa's tracking skills, he'd probably find me in an hour.

“You didn’t hesitate so much when you shot me in cold blood yesterday,” a rumbling voice said next to me.

I glanced up to find a seven-foot alligator standing on her hind legs. Her long, fat tail rested on the ground behind her. The gator wore a black Stetson hat, and water dripped from her body, forming a puddle around her feet. She took off her hat and bowed, revealing the blood on the back of her head. “See? You shot me twice. No hesitation. I’d think you could handle a little chat with mommy.”

I screamed, throwing my arms in the air, which of course, led me to lose my balance on the tree stump. I faceplanted gracefully into the dirt. Seeing a ghost is cool in theory, but when its the ghost of the alligator you killed less than twenty-four-hours earlier, you’re bound to be a little scared. Logic, if there can be logic in this type of situation, would say that the alligator most likely had nefarious plans.

I spat out the dirt I’d eaten upon my fall and worked up the courage to look at the ghostly creature that was potentially going to kill me in the next several minutes. The alligator was slightly transparent. The parts of her in the shade were solid, but the places where the sun hit seemed to sparkle a little. In those places, she seemed to be formed of shadow, and I could see through her to trees beyond.

Goosebumps rose on my arms. I shuddered. When I was a child, I thought seeing a swamp ghost would be exciting, but finally faced with one, I just wanted to run. I felt around for a rock in the dirt, keeping my eyes set on the gator ghost. My hand closed around a decent sized rock, and I launched it at the gator. The rock passed right through her and landed with a plop in the swamp waters.

“Ouch,” she said.

Alligator ghosts seemed to be unbothered by physical attacks. I tried to remember what else Grandpa had told me about the ghosts of the swamp. I didn't know if it was better to engage with them or to pretend they weren't there.

The alligator set her Stetson hat back on her head with a flourish and plopped down to all fours. She curled around my stump. "So, what are you going to do?"

I decided to ignore her. I didn't see how I could get rid of her, and she at least didn't seem intent on hurting me—for now. I had too much to deal with, and I didn't need to add a talking ghost to my list. My hope was that if I didn't acknowledge her, maybe she'd just go away on her own.

Disappearing into the swamp for a few hours seemed like the best option for the present. I didn't want to be home when my mom showed up. As I looped through the familiar woods, I felt as if I were stepping back into my childhood. I used to imagine that I was my namesake, an explorer, a soldier of the resistance—Francis Marion, The Swamp Fox—turning the tides of the revolution with my guerilla warfare tactics.

I didn't wear shoes. When I was younger, I'd mastered the technique of stepping over leaves and brush in barefoot silence. Shoes ruined everything. It was impossible to be stealthy in shoes. I hoped to chance upon a few birds or maybe some turtles, or something along those lines. What I did not expect was to find Cecelia Russel squatting in our swamp.

She had quite the setup going, so she must have been living there for some time. A two-person tent rested off to the side, a campfire in the middle, and I swear she'd pilfered the camp chair I'd been looking for earlier, which was now sitting by the firepit. A clothesline with shorts and tee-shirts draped over it hung between two trees, and Cecelia herself napped on a hammock.

The gator ghost had unfortunately decided to stick close to me. “This isn’t a bad setup, you know?”

She was right. Cecelia was living the life. All my anger about Cecelia ignoring me all the summer welled up in my chest, but I couldn’t help but feel a little jealous too. Maybe Cecelia had the right idea. I could live in the swamp and avoid all responsibilities.

I tiptoed over to the hammock and tipped Cecelia right on over. She landed on the ground with a loud thump, and her tailbone hit a tree stump. Cecelia hollered and jumped up. She just about tackled me but stopped when she realized it was me.

“I can explain,” Cecelia said.

“Go ahead.”

“Well, there was this incident a few weeks ago,” Cecelia said, “and I’ve been trying to lay low since then. Since y’all have so much land, I figured you wouldn’t mind if I stayed here for a bit.”

“What’d you do this time?”

Cecelia at least had the wherewithal to look embarrassed. “I was short on money, and Mom had a birthday party for Davenport. She just turned two. Did you know you missed the party? My mom barely lets me around as it is, and I needed some cash to get her a present. I had to make it count. I’d lost my job at the Pig a few weeks before, so I was really strapped at the time.”

It wasn’t hard for me to put two and two together. “No, Cecelia,” I said, “don’t tell me you really were the one behind the money stolen from the Pig.”

“I’m not saying it was me, but I’m not saying it wasn’t me either,” Cecelia said.

“Dang, Cecelia,” I said, “so you’ve been hiding out here since then? And what do you mean your mom doesn’t let you see Davenport? Weren’t you living with them?”

Cecelia shuffled her bare feet in the dirt and ran her hand through her hair. She avoided eye contact. “Mom kicked me out when I lost my job at the store. I guess losing two jobs in one summer was too much for her. Don’t worry. I’ll get out of here soon. It’s about time I moved somewhere else anyways. It’s only a matter of time before the cops come ‘round, so it’s best for me to keep moving.”

“How can she keep you from seeing Davenport?”

“Underage parents don’t get custody until they turn eighteen, so Mom is technically Davenport’s legal guardian. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

Cecelia crossed her arms and turned her face away from me. I wanted to hug her and shake her shoulders at the same time. I couldn’t believe she was in this mess and not allowed to see Davenport on top of everything else. I’d never heard about the custody rule even though my mom had been the same age as Cecelia when she had me. I hated that Cecelia didn’t have control over what happened to her daughter. Although, my mom didn’t seem to mind that rule since she shoved me off on Grandpa as soon as she could anyways. “What are you going to do about school?”

Cecelia shrugged. “I’m an outlaw now, and I’m seventeen. It’s about time I dropped out of school. I need to work full time to help support Davenport anyways.”

The gator snapped her jaws. “Hard to support a child when you’re in the pen for robbing the grocery store.”

Cecelia pulled clothes from the line and stuffed them in her tent. I finally put two and two together. “I’m guessing my grandpa already knew you were here,” I said. “I’ll just pretend this never happened.”

Cecelia nodded. She stepped inside the tent and zipped up the flap. Her muffled voice called out a moment later. “Hey, Francis?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry for giving you such a hard time before,” Cecelia said. “You’re my best friend, you know that?”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I brushed them away with my fists. Everything felt too big and too frustrating. I didn’t know what to do or how I could help Cecelia. “Of course. Always.”

The shadow of her hand pressed against the tent and then disappeared. All was silent. I gave one last cursory glance at her campsite and continued my trek through the swamp. The gator kept pace behind me. She could apparently walk through trees, which was kind of jarring and kind of cool all at once.

“Why’d you let her go?” The gator said.

I didn’t answer. It seemed like things were changing whether I liked it or not. Regardless of where I went to school, I wouldn’t be going with Cecelia. I wondered if I should’ve told her that I might have to move, but I figured she had enough to deal with.

I assessed the alligator. Suddenly, she seemed like the least of my worries. I decided that I would call her G.G. Or perhaps, Gigi. a French alligator seemed like a fun idea. Too bad she wore a Stetson instead of a beret, but maybe I could convince her to switch hats. That is, if I ever decided to start talking to her.

#

I was six years old the first time I met Cecelia. Grandpa went over to the Russels' house quite often, always dropping off items or bringing them food. I didn't understand why until he took me over there. I'd be going to school in the fall, and I guess Grandpa decided I needed some socializing with kids my age before then. He found me looking through a picture book in my bedroom.

"Hey, Francis," Grandpa said. "Do you wanna come with me to visit the Russels?"

"Why?"

"They got a kid your age, Cecelia, so I figured it'd be fun for you two to play."

I shrugged. "Sure."

I followed Grandpa outside. He had a cooler loaded up in the truck bed and a slew of groceries in the backseat.

The drive to the Russels' house took about twenty minutes, even though we were on the highway for only three minutes. Most of the roads on Ashepoo were dirt, and the county didn't exactly do a great job of keeping them graded. Most of the time, driving over them felt like driving over an old washboard.

The Russels' house was a tiny cabin tucked in between a lot of overgrown brambles and bushes. I was surprised they could get in the front door with the Kudzu and ivy choking the house like that.

Grandpa pointed to the groceries in the back, and I looped my arm through as many as I could. He grabbed the cooler, and I followed him up to the house.

Grandpa rapped his knuckles on the screen door, and a girl with a dirty face opened the door a few moments later. The girl was smaller than me, but she looked strong. Blond curls circled her head, and her face broke into a wide grin when she saw Grandpa.

“Hey Cecelia,” Grandpa said. “Looks like you’ve been playing hard today. Just bringing a few things over.”

“Hey, Mr. Francis. Yes sir, pirates attacked.”

“Sounds like you’ve had quite the morning,” Grandpa said. “And this is my granddaughter, Francis. I thought you two might want to play together.”

Cecelia nodded and her ringlets bounced along her forehead. Cecelia took a few of the grocery bags off my arm and ran inside, yelling for her momma.

I’d expected the inside to be like the outside, but the house was clean, albeit rather sparse. A woman shelling beans sat at a kitchen table. When Cecelia ran up to her and set the bags on the table, the woman held a finger to her mouth and pointed over to the living area where a man I hadn’t noticed before napped in an easy chair.

“Papa is asleep,” Mrs. Russel said.

Cecelia placed the groceries softly on the table, and I followed suit. Mrs. Russel shook her head. “Thanks for helping us out, Francis.”

Grandpa carried the cooler to the fridge, opened it, and placed food inside. “I just bought extra by accident again. With little Francis here now, I never know how much to buy. You’re helping me out is all.”

Grandpa opened the freezer. “Oh, I see you got some venison. That’ll hold you over for a while.”

Mrs. Russel rubbed her arms. “I know it’s not the season, but we’re in a tight spot right now.”

Grandpa shrugged and pushed some venison aside to fit in a half-gallon of ice cream. “Every little bit helps,” was all he said.

Cecelia tugged on my arm. “Let me show you my tree house.”

I followed her outside, and she led me around to the back of the house. A massive oak rested on its side, the branches spreading wide into the air, along with its roots.

“Hurricane Hugo toppled this thing over a few years ago,” Cecelia explained, “but it’s still here, and it’s perfect for climbing.”

She led me the roots of the tree. They were so big that if I hugged them, I wouldn’t be able to reach all the way around. The roots laced together in a way that one root provided a ramp up the tree, and another provided a nice railing, so I could just walk up the tree on two feet. Cecelia plowed ahead without using her hands, and I was impressed by her balance. She didn’t have any fear. I held onto the branch railing.

There wasn’t a tree house, but I could see how Cecelia could imagine one at the top. There was lots of room to sit and enjoy at the fork of the tree where the branches spread out into the air above.

Cecelia seated herself and leaned back on another branch. She looked like a king surveying his land.

“Should we play pirate ship, house, or explorer?”

Thus started our friendship.

Chapter 4

I ended up returning to the house soon after finding Cecelia. I was hot, sweaty, and tired of being followed around by an alligator ghost who would not shut up. I sat in a rocking chair on the porch, and Gigi curled around my feet.

“I could live like Cecelia Russel,” I said. I’d always admired the way she went full steam ahead, without thinking about the consequences. Obviously, it got her in trouble most of the time, but she had a knack for gaining experiences that I’d never even dreamed of having. Sometimes, I really did feel like a kid next to her.

Gigi gazed up at me expectantly. The gator clearly hadn’t given up on following me around, and I was beginning to wonder if I needed to change tactics. I didn’t exactly want her to follow me around the rest of my life. Maybe if I accepted her presence, then she’d go away.

“Cecelia Russel doesn’t have a choice,” Gigi said.

“Well, she didn’t have steal a thousand dollars,” I said. There’d been a lot of crazy rumors floating around the island about the store thief, but it seemed that the amount stolen always seemed to come out about the same. Cecelia’s family must’ve been more pressed for cash than she’d let on. “I mean, really, who tries to steal cash right in front of a security camera?”

“True, but she also doesn’t have a well-off mom living in Charleston offering her a scholarship to a private school that would get her into any decent college in the nation.”

I hated to admit that Gigi was right. I didn’t know how she knew so much about colleges. I took it as a bad sign that a wild animal knew more about going to college than I did. Maybe I did need to make some changes. If I’d told Cecelia my predicament, she would’ve looked at me all skeptical-like and shook her head in disappointment. The answer was obvious. I was being given an opportunity that most swamp kids never got: a chance to get off the island. The problem was that I seemed to be the only one who didn’t want to leave.

The prospect of moving made me nervous. All the kids I knew up to this point were from Ashepoo or other small communities in the area. Swamp, creek, and beach kids. We understood each other. Charleston was another story. Not to mention, Ashepoo Island was small and mostly consisted of people Grandpa’s age. I could talk to a sixty-year-old any day but throw me in the mix of a bunch of rich private school kids, and I’d panic for sure. Bryson hadn’t seemed that bad, but I’d also encountered him on my turf.

There was the matter of my mom too. We’d spent plenty of time together. She visited the swamp on weekends and holidays, and I visited her for long chunks over the summer, at least for those years when Grandma wasn’t living with her. Since I’d gotten the job this summer, my visits had occurred less often.

Hot and tired from the August afternoon, I headed inside, resigning myself to what seemed like an inevitable move. I decided that all I could do was nap.

#

In that place between dreaming and waking, the alligator came to me. Gigi, but not the Gigi I’d spent the day with. This Gigi was a wild animal—the true beast beneath the surface of

the ghost—not Gigi as I’d come to know her that day. Not-Gigi’s toes circled my neck, and her claws pressed into my skin. The pressure on my neck prevented me from moving. Not-Gigi’s warm, rotten breath curled around the back of my neck, fluttering my hair and sending shivers down my body. I tried to speak, to form a name, a word, but my voice wouldn’t work. There was no one to help me anyways. I was alone.

#

I threw a few clothes into a bag, grabbed a loaf of bread, peanut butter, jelly, and a few bottles of water and embarked into the swamp. A pop sounded in the air, and Gigi appeared next to me. I flinched as my strange dream came back to me, but this Gigi was decidedly less feral than the one I’d encountered between dreaming and waking earlier. She walked on all fours, keeping a swaying pace with me.

“I thought you were going to Charleston,” Gigi said.

“I’d rather be a fugitive.”

“Your grandpa will find you in point-two seconds.”

“Shut up.”

I made my way back to Cecelia’s camp sight, dropped my bag on the ground, and plopped down on a log. Cecelia poked her head out of the tent and stared at me. When I didn’t offer an explanation, she climbed out of the tent and sat in the camp chair.

“What’s got you all worked up?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Obviously something.”

“Grandpa is making me move in with my mom,” I said. “She got me a scholarship at the school she works at.”

Cecelia didn't respond right away. I glanced over, avoiding eye contact. She held a stick in her hand and drew shapes in the dirt. "And the problem is?"

"I like the swamp," I said. "I like Ashepoo. I don't want to start over. I don't want to leave Grandpa."

"Have you ever thought maybe your mom doesn't want to leave you either?"

"Why now? She hasn't exactly wanted to be involved up to this point."

I finally worked up the courage to meet Cecelia's gaze. She gestured to herself and tossed the stick into the woods. "Maybe she's messed up a lot, like me. I'd hope Davenport would give me a second choice."

I should've gone into the woods by myself. Coming to talk to Cecelia was a mistake. Of course, she'd choose this moment—the one time I wanted to willingly take part in her hairbrained schemes—to be logical for the first time in her life. I decided to try a different tactic. "Charleston Prep, though? Look at me. I'll never fit in."

Cecelia glanced at my grubby attire and shrugged. "You could try for once. I'm sure with a little work, you'd do just fine. And sure, they're rich, but I doubt they're that bad. I mean, Bryson was rich, and he turned out fine."

Maybe going to Charleston really was the only choice I had, but I didn't want to admit it. I remembered Cecelia's words when I quit the vegetable market. It was time for me to stop being afraid. I stood, picked up the bag at my feet, and threw it at Cecelia with a huff of frustration. She caught the bag and peered into it curiously. "What's this?"

"Some clothes and food," I said.

I stormed away, heading back to the house and my inescapable fate.

“Make good choices,” Cecelia shouted after me. “Remember who you are. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

#

I stood on the porch and braced myself. The clatter of dishes in the kitchen alerted me to the fact that Mom and Grandpa had arrived while I’d been out. They always acted slightly on edge around each other, like one was waiting for the other to erupt, and I already felt tense enough. I steeled myself and entered the house.

Grandpa stirred something in a pot on the stove. His left arm was wrapped in a bandage, and I saw another bandage around his leg. Mom leaned against the sink. Her arms were folded. She smiled when she saw me.

“Francis,” she said.

Mom reached for me, and I hugged her after a moment’s hesitation. She held me tightly. She smelled of soap and powder, and I felt comforted despite myself. I had missed her after all.

I turned to Grandpa next. “Are you OK?”

Grandpa held up his bandaged arm. “Good as new! Doc ordered me to stay away from alligators for the time being, which suits me fine.”

Mom grabbed my shoulders. “What about you? Are you sure you’re OK?”

I spread my arms wide. “Not a scratch.”

Mom’s hands clenched in fists. “I don’t want you wrestling alligators anymore.”

“I think moving to Charleston will take care of that,” I said.

“This is why I want you with me. You could have been seriously injured. You could have died. I will not stand for the reckless behavior anymore.”

I didn't know if she was talking to me or Grandpa, but I figured the lecture was probably for us both.

"Margaret Cordelia Walker. She's been coming with me on these trips her entire life, and you've never taken issue with it until now."

"I've never liked it," Mom said. "I told you that. Let me be clear: I forbid you to take my daughter alligator wrestling. You shouldn't even be going, Dad. You're too old, and what happened yesterday proves it. You need to stop. After everything with Mom, I can't lose you too."

Mom's voice choked on those last words. Grandma had died of cancer the year before, and Mom had been the one who took care of her during the whole three years she was sick. Grandpa and Grandma had stopped talking long before then.

Grandpa set the spoon on the counter. He opened the door and walked onto the porch. He'd always tried to keep his temper in check, but sometimes, to do that, he had to remove himself from the situation. I knew he'd come back and finish the conversation when he was ready.

The air popped, and Gigi appeared next to me.

"Your mom is kinda angry," Gigi said.

I ignored her. I checked the contents of the pot on the stove: soup. I gave it a little stir and turned the burner to a simmer. Mom stood still with her eyes set on the porch.

Mom and Grandpa had always disagreed on the topic of alligator wrestling, but Mom had let it slide until now. I'm not sure she'd known the extent to which Grandpa let me get involved. If she had, I doubt she would've let me stay with Grandpa as long as she did. The thought made me angry. She was taking away everything that was important to me.

“I guess you won’t be wrestling alligators anytime soon,” Gigi said. “I wish your mom had come two days earlier.”

The door banged shut behind me, and I turned to see Grandpa standing there. His arms were crossed, and it seemed as if he were staring at me, but I could tell his eyes weren’t really on me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear he was staring at Gigi.

Then, his eyes met mine and understanding registered there. He looked at my mom.

“I agree,” he said. “No more alligator wrestling.”

Mom’s mouth fell open in surprise, and for once, she was shocked into silence. I dropped the spoon onto the counter. It was my turn to cool down outside.

#

Grandpa found me at the edge of the water. Gigi swam in the swamp, floating atop the surface on her back. Seeing an alligator belly-up in the water was an unnatural sight. She looked like a dead animal.

“Hey, Francis,” Grandpa said.

“I think I should have a say in whether or not I keep wrestling alligators.” I kept my eyes locked on Gigi.

“Maybe we can reevaluate at some point,” Grandpa said. “Once you start school, you’ll be too busy anyhow. And, you know the wrestling slows down in the winter months.”

He was right. Gigi floated in a slow circle and waved whenever her head pointed in our direction. A short laugh escaped me before I could stop myself. Gigi looked so strange.

“What do you find funny in this situation?”

I glanced at Grandpa. His arms were folded, and he watched me skeptically.

“I guess it’s funny how quickly things can take a turn,” I said. I’d learned that gator wrestling, but that didn’t mean it was a lesson I took to easily.

Grandpa looked at the swamp waters, and again, I swore he looked right at Gigi. I didn’t have the guts to ask if he saw her or to face the questions if he didn’t. The ghosts of the swamps could have just been a story he told to entertain me when I was little. I didn’t know anymore. All I knew was that I had my very ghost, and I hoped I’d leave her behind when I left the swamp.

“I think it will be good for you to live with your mom,” Grandpa said. “You’ll get to know different types of people and experience different ways of life.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“Be brave,” Grandpa said. “You’re one of the bravest kids I know.”

#

I packed grudgingly that night. I hadn’t even gotten to Charleston yet, and I already felt out of place. I remembered Bryson in his preppy clothes, and I knew I’d never fit in. I only had swamp clothes: tee shirts and shorts, leggings when it got cold, and a few sweatshirts. I had maybe two pairs of jeans that I hadn’t worn in forever. I doubted they even fit anymore.

A popping noise sounded behind me. Gigi peered over my shoulder and glanced through the contents of my suitcase.

“You’re going to get eaten alive,” Gigi said.

“Well, Gigi. These are the only clothes I have, so I’m gonna have to make do.”

“You’re better off wrestling gators.”

“You were the one who said I should go.”

“I didn’t say it’d be easy.” The gator sank down to all fours. “What’s a Gigi anyways?”

“You are. A gator ghost. It’s an acronym—G.G.”

Gigi grinned a toothy smile, sending an involuntary shudder across my entire body.

“Gigi. I like it,” she said. “I’ve never had a name before.”

#

Grandpa didn’t say goodbye the next morning. I tried to stall, but we’d already eaten breakfast and cleaned up the kitchen. My suitcase sat next to the kitchen table, and Mom was getting antsy.

“It’s time to go, Francis,” Mom said.

“I’m worried about Grandpa,” I said.

“Your grandfather is fine. You know that he’s always done things his own way.”

“Still, I should say goodbye.”

Mom glanced around the room, and her eyes settled on my suitcase. She moved towards it. She wasn’t going to give me anymore time here. I should have known she’d want to rush away as soon as possible.

“What if he’s not OK? Shouldn’t we at least look for him?”

Mom pulled the suitcase towards her. “He’s a grown man, Francis. He’s on his walkabout, probably drawing birds. He’s never been big on goodbyes.”

“He’s your father. How could you not feel concerned at all?”

“He’s my father, that’s why I’m not worried. I know his ways. So do you.”

“Can’t we wait a few hours?”

Mom let go of the suitcase handle and motioned for me to sit down at the kitchen table. She poured a glass of water and sat across from me.

“School starts in a few days,” Mom said. “We can’t stall anymore. I want you to settle in before it starts.”

“I don’t want to leave Grandpa all alone,” I said.

“Francis. Your Grandfather can handle it.” Mom’s voice was firm, and I could hear that same note in her voice that Grandpa used when the conversation was over. There was no point in arguing. Mom stood and grabbed my suitcase once again.

“How about this,” Mom said, “you live with me during the week, and you can come out to the swamp on the weekends whenever you want.”

I knew this was the best deal I was going to get. I’d also recently obtained my restricted driver’s license, so the plan was feasible if Mom let me borrow her car. I searched the kitchen, looking for some reason to stay longer. Everything was in order. There was nothing holding me here. Grandpa had his ways, but I still felt hurt. After all this time, Grandpa hadn’t bothered to say goodbye. I knew it was temporary, but I was frustrated with him all the same. Maybe he’d gotten sick of caring for me. Maybe I’d been too slow with the gator, and he’d decided it was dangerous to keep me around. I looked at my mom.

She wore black slacks and a white cotton shirt. Pearl studs shone in her ears, and her dyed black hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail. She looked elegant and refined. I imagined Grandpa standing next to her in his worn-out jeans, stained plaid shirt, and work boots. I glanced down at myself—tee shirt, leggings, and flip-flops.

Grandpa told me that Mom had been known to wrestle a gator or two when she was around my age, but she’d left it all behind shortly after—probably because I came along. I’d always sworn that I would never be like her. I’d never abandon the swamp. I’d never abandon Grandpa. I just didn’t expect that he’d be the one to push me away first. It seemed like nobody wanted me around. First Mom, then Cecelia, and now Grandpa. I wished that my mother hadn’t suddenly decided we should be a real family. Somehow, this all felt like her fault.

I'd like to say I didn't look back once, but I did. I glanced in the mirror to see Gigi standing on her hind legs on the brick walk that led up to steps to the screened-in porch. She stood there, motionless, watching me as I left the ghosts of the swamp behind.

Chapter 5

Mom's house was a small cottage on Charleston's peninsula, near The Citadel College. The house was one story with a little yard. Azalea and camelia bushes lined the front of the house, and a tall magnolia tree stood in the backyard. The property was small, and houses crowded up on either side of the house. Neighbors weren't really a thing on Ashepoo, and I'd always found it strange that you could look out of the window of Mom's house and see another house. I could even see into the neighbor's window if I tried hard enough.

Mom had kept a room for me at her house for a long time, but I'd barely used it. She led me to my room once we arrived, as if I might've forgotten where it was. The room contained a bed, desk, dresser, and a bedside table. She'd hung a few paintings on the wall, but the room was sparsely decorated. Mom opened the closet.

"I got your sizes from Grandpa and bought you some new clothes," she said. "This is your school uniform. Try it on tonight to make sure it fits. That way, we can get a different size before school starts if we need to."

The uniform consisted of a white button-down shirt with long sleeves, a pleated green and white plaid skirt, and a grey blazer. A few pairs of shoes lined the bottom of the closet too—a pair of black loafers that I hoped to never wear, a pair of black chucks that I would actually

wear, and black Vans, which I also approved of. At least my mother knew not to push me too much.

Mom gestured to the shoes. “You can wear any of these shoes with the uniform. I bought the other clothes because the school lets you dress casually every other Friday, but there’s still a dress code. You can’t wear leggings or tee shirts.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said.

Mom picked up a bag from the desk chair. It was made of canvas and was a dusty pink color. The bag seemed chic and expensive. “This is a little gift. These are very stylish right now,” Mom said. “You’ll notice that some of the students at Charleston Prep are more into upscale fashion that the kids at Ashepoo High probably were. There’s some makeup you can try in the bathroom, but obviously don’t feel pressured to wear it.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I tried not to be annoyed by her little dig at Ashepoo High. Sure, most of the students weren’t as rich or classy as I imagined the Charleston Prep kids to be, but Ashepoo kids were still normal kids who were into the current fads just like anyone else. Although, I had to admit I appreciated the bag. The truth was that I was still very much overwhelmed by the thought of attending Charleston Prep. My mom might not have understood me, but I knew she understood the kids at her school. I also trusted her fashion sense over mine because, frankly, I didn’t have any.

“Mom, do you mind if we don’t tell the other students we’re related, at least not at first?”

A frown crossed her face, and I could tell the request made her sad. She gazed at me for a moment before answering. “Most of the teachers and admin already know, but I’m fine not sharing it directly with the students if that’s what you want.”

Guilt tugged at me, but I didn't cave. Mom and Dad had never married, so she still had her maiden name, Walker, while I was given Dad's last name, Dupre, when I was born. The kids at my new school would never think to connect us.

Mom and I stared at each other. I felt like she was waiting for me to say something else, but my mind when it came to words to say to her. It wasn't that I was embarrassed of her, exactly—I just wanted to figure out who I was outside of the swamp and outside of my mom. I'd always lived in my grandpa's shadow—he'd always been part of my identity—or in Cecelia's shadow—Cecelia's best friend who does almost everything Cecelia wants. Who I was had always been wrapped up in others. I wasn't sure who I was without them. I didn't want to be looped to another person before I figured that out. For the first time in my life, I had a fresh slate, and I wanted to make it count. I lifted my suitcase onto my bed. "I guess I'll unpack."

Mom watched me unzip the suitcase. She nodded. "I'll leave you to it. I need do a few things at the school. Will you be OK by yourself until dinner?"

"No problem," I said. "I can unpack and then reacquaint myself with the neighborhood or something."

Mom nodded. "OK. See you in a bit."

Unpacking my meagre belongings took less time than I anticipated. I stuffed my empty suitcase under the bed. It'd been a few months since I'd been to the house, but everything was pretty much the same. A twinge of guilt hit me as I realized that it'd been so long since I'd stayed with my mom. I'd been doing a lot of avoiding recently.

The older that I got, the more I felt a distance form between us. I didn't know if she really knew who I was anymore. The past couple years, Mom had been completely absorbed with being my grandmother's caregiver while she was sick. Mom didn't have free time to spare to

spend with me, and before that, she'd been too busy trying to survive. I wandered down the hall to the guest room—the only other bedroom aside from Mom's room and mine—and peaked in. My grandmother had stayed in this room. Mom had gotten rid of the hospital bed, but she'd left Grandma's possessions and pictures scattered throughout the room. I lifted the small silver hand mirror off the dresser. The mirror had intricate designs etched on the back, and a flower rested in the middle. I returned the mirror to its place and examined a picture resting in a silver frame of the same design. In the picture, my grandma and grandpa stood arm in arm with big smiles. My grandma wore a simple white skirt suit and a veiled hat, and my grandpa wore a suit and jacket. I wondered how two people who seemed so happy together could end up never talking to each other again.

I'd only met my grandmother once, and that was two years ago, right before she'd died. I never understood why she didn't want to know me, but I just figured it was because she and Grandpa couldn't stand to be in the same room, and since I lived with Grandpa, that was that. I'd basically been outlawed from Mom's house during those years Mom took care of Grandma. That exclusion still stung, even though I'd been back since then. I left the room, closing the door shut softly behind me.

I thought about watching TV, but we never watched TV in the swamp—mostly because the antenna only picked up one or two channels on a good day—and I felt restless. I need to do something active.

I retrieved my running shoes from my room and changed into a pair of shorts. Running was something I didn't do often, but it was one of those activities that helped me clear my head. Mom said that my dad was going to be a long-distance runner in college, but he passed away before he got the chance. She claimed that was why it came so naturally to me. I didn't

remember my dad—he died after being hit by a drunk driver when I was two years old—but I liked the idea of having some sort of connection with him, however small.

I looped through the neighborhood, running aimlessly, and I was soon lost in the maze of streets. The homes varied in size and upkeep. Most were like my mom's house—small cottages with tiny yards and lots of trees and greenery. There were also several duplexes and small apartment complexes, and a smattering of what appeared to be low-income housing units. The houses near the river were larger and had bigger yards, and they often were guarded with iron-wrought gates and fences. Those homes seemed like they existed in a different world—adjacent to the rest of us but separated by climbing ivy and walls. Their houses unfolded beyond their large lawns into a new landscape of marsh and river and sunsets—something I could always grasp for free but that now seemed so out of reach.

After running through a maze of streets without really paying attention, I finally admitted to myself that I was completely lost. My knees hurt. I'd been running for about twenty minutes, and I'd usually run for about forty on Ashepoo, but never on pavement. On the island, the dirt roads were soft, and I didn't notice how worn out my shoes had become. Here, the balls of my feet ached with every step, and I felt as if my legs shook from the shock of the impact against the hard cement.

I slowed my pace as I approached a park. I decided to rest for a bit while I figured out where I was. The park had a large, square pond at its center, and paths wound around the pond and trailed off in different directions. Oaks spread their branches out over the paths, and an assortment of bushes scattered the path. Although they weren't in bloom, I recognized the thin green triangle leaves of azaleas and the waxy thick camelia leaves. There were also plenty of magnolia trees. Paths cut intricate designs into the flower beds covered in the blooms of snap

dragons rearing their white and yellow, pink and orange heads towards the sky; purple, blue, and white pansies; and plenty of other flowers I didn't know the names of.

For a moment, I felt like I was back home in the swamp. Everything here was groomed and set to a certain aesthetic, but I could almost trick myself into believing it was home. My swamp was wild and unruly. The camelia bushes there grew clumped close together and reached high above my head. Cecelia and I used to push through the crowded branches to find hidden hovels within the bushes—small carved out spaces perfect for children to hide. I wished I could find a hidden space in the park. If I did, I'd crawl in and curl up in my den, safe from the changing world around me.

I closed my eyes and listened to the various animal chatter of birds and squirrels and dogs. I imagined I was safe in the den of my swamp. I opened my eyes. A car sped by blaring music, something that was decidedly not an experience I'd have in the swamp. I sat down a bench with a dramatic sigh. I was lost in a park. How pathetic.

“Uh. You OK there?”

Apparently, I had chosen to sit on a bench that was already occupied. I jumped up. I'd managed not sit on the poor guy, but I had knocked over his stack of books. After straightening the books, I glanced at the person I'd interrupted. He seemed within the same age range as me, but he wore sunglasses and a baseball cap, so it was hard to say for certain. He had a notepad on his lap, with a pencil paused over it.

“Sorry to interrupt you,” I said.

“No problem,” he said.

The boy returned to his notepad, scribbling fiercely. It was official. I was lost forever. This park would be my new home. I wasn't going to make it back to my mom's house.

No. I wouldn't let that happen. I had to be brave.

"Excuse me." My voice was squeaky and too quiet. "Excuse me." Better.

The boy glanced up. "You're still here."

"Yes. You see, I'm new here, and I'm a bit lost."

The boy nodded, seemingly satisfied by my explanation. "Do you know where you need to go?"

He had the tone of someone speaking slowly and kindly to a six-year-old, but I figured a little condescension was better than living in the park for the rest of my life.

"My house is on Peachtree Street," I said.

The boy thought for a moment and then nodded. He pointed off to the left. "Get on this road and go up two blocks. That should get you to Rutledge. Turn left on Rutledge. Peachtree is a few blocks up."

"Oh. Thanks," I said.

Home was closer than I realized, and I was embarrassed that I'd gotten so turned around. I waved to the boy, who was already scribbling again on his notepad, and who, of course, had no idea that I was waving at him.

#

I watched Mom prepare dinner. Grandpa always required me to do something to help, so I felt strange just leaning against the counter. The kitchen was a narrow room attached to the dining room, and I wasn't even sure both of us could fit in there at the same time.

"Can I help, Mom?"

She tossed the salad with tongs. "Nope. I'm just heating up some meatballs and sauce that I had frozen, and then I just need to cook the noodles."

I nodded. For some reason, I suddenly felt out of place. I didn't know how I fit in Mom's life anymore. We didn't have any routines like I did with Grandpa, and I didn't know what she expected of me.

"You could heat up some of that French bread for us," she said.

The bread was already sliced, so my job was minimal, but I was glad to have something to do all the same.

"What did you do this afternoon?"

"I went on a run," I said. "I ended up at that park."

"Oh, that's a nice spot," Mom said. "I'm glad you're still running."

"Yeah," I said. "I like it."

"You could run track or cross country at school."

Running competitively had never been something I'd been interested in before, but it was starting to sound enticing now. I was already bored and had only lived here a few hours. There was less going on at the swamp, but somehow, I always felt like I had something to do—walking through the woods, exploring, canoeing, or helping Grandpa.

"That might be nice," I said.

Mom smiled as if I'd just told her something way more exciting than a wishy-washy maybe.

"Being on a team like that would look great on your college resume."

I bit back a retort, trying to remember that she was only trying to look out for me. But I couldn't help but wonder if she cared more about being able to say her daughter got into college than whether or not I wanted to go to college in the first place.

"Why is college so important to you?"

“I want you to have options, Francis,” Mom said. “I don’t want you to look back and regret that you didn’t give yourself the chance to go when you could have.”

“What do you regret?”

“Don’t try to put words in my mouth,” Mom said. “I wasn’t implying anything about how I feel about you. I just want you to have an easier time of it than I did.”

“I’ve been happy, Mom,” I said. “I was happy.”

The words I weren’t saying hung in the air. I was happy until now. I was happy until you uprooted me and forced me into this new life that I wasn’t ready for. I didn’t want this.

“The noodles are done,” Mom said.

We fixed our plates and sat at the dining room table. Mom sat across from me. Yet again, a familiar scene, one that Grandpa and I had repeated time and time again, but I felt out of place.

“School starts on Monday,” Mom said.

I took the olive branch. “What’s it like?”

“The school is really nice. You’ll have seasoned teachers, and there are a lot of extracurriculars to choose from. Many of the students are from affluent families, and they are very driven. It may feel more competitive than your old school at times, but I think you can catch up quickly. The students mean well, but they can be rather cliquy.”

I’d never had to try that hard to make good grades at school, but my old school was hardly what I’d call competitive. If anything, it was anti-competitive. Standards were low, and if you made it to school most of the time and somewhat paid attention, you could come out with a decent grade. It’s not that we weren’t smart, but swamp kids have different priorities. College was out of reach for most of us due to the cost, and a lot of kids wanted to do jobs that required trade school in the first place.

Mom continued, telling me about the state-of-the-art this and that. The school even had a pool that they used for P.E., not to mention a sailing team, which seemed wild to me. Anxiety gnawed at my stomach with every word, and I had a hard time eating my pasta.

#

I found myself running again the next day. It seemed like the only thing I could find that kept my mounting fear about school in check. I ran to the park and found a trail that took me in a big loop around the perimeter of the park, winding through flowers and trees.

The studying boy was at the park again as well. This time, he sat in a shady spot on the grass. He wore the same hat and sunglasses. His bookbag was propped up behind him as a makeshift pillow. His long legs stretched out in front of him, crossed causally. A pencil was tucked behind one ear, and he read a thick book propped up against his knees.

I approached him before I talked myself out of it. “Hey.”

He glanced up at me in surprise, shielding his eyes. “Oh. The lost girl.”

“Yes. It’s me. Just wanted to say thanks again for giving me directions yesterday.”

“I’m assuming you found your way home, then,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “You seem to study a lot.”

“You seem to run a lot.”

“Where do you go to school?”

Based on the look on his face, I was scared he was going to tell me off for asking such a private question, but he seemed to think better of it. “Charleston Prep.”

“What are the chances? Me too,” I said, “I mean, I’ll be starting there this year.”

“Really? What grade?”

“Tenth. What grade are you in?”

“Eleventh.” He considered me a moment. “I’m Jack.”

“Francis,” I said. “Can you tell me what it’s like there? Do you like it?”

It’s not that I didn’t trust my mom. I just figured insider information from an actual student would be better. I plopped down on the ground next to him before he could invite me. Jack glanced at his book, then to me, and back at his book. He finally shrugged and folded his page over before closing the book and setting it on the ground. “Your typical high school experience, I guess.”

He wasn’t super forthcoming. “And how would you define that?”

Jack shrugged. “It’s a private school, so most of the kids are from wealthy families. They do things like cotillions and spend their weekends at the yacht club. It can be cutthroat academically, so you’ll have to work hard to keep up if you want to get into a good college.”

I didn’t know what cotillion was, but I was afraid I’d sound ignorant if I asked. Suddenly, all I could think about was shoes. “Chucks, Vans, or loafers?”

Jack cocked his head. “All three could work. Vans or loafers are the safest bet. Throw in some pearls if you can swing it and that will really seal the deal.”

I waited for more, but Jack set his sunglasses back on his nose and picked up his book. I knew a dismissal when I saw one. I stood and brushed the grass off the back of my shorts.

“Thanks for the advice, Jack. I’ll see you around.”

“Good luck,” Jack said without looking up.

My body had almost completely cooled down after talking with Jack, so I ran home slowly, thinking through everything he’d told me. I was filled with a strange mix of anxiety and anticipation. I was faced with my first clean slate, and I was in control of how the students at Charleston Prep would perceive me. I had to make it count.

Chapter 6

Charleston Prep was located downtown, near the College of Charleston, close to the main drag of King Street. The gated school was contained within a city block and boasted a campus with several historic buildings and a green lawn swathed in live oaks.

I sat alone in my first period class, waiting for the bell to ring. I tried to push down the nervous energy bubbling in my stomach. Mom and I had arrived early, and she dumped me as soon as I'd gotten my schedule and a general understanding of the campus layout. The first day was a busy day for administration.

Students gathered around the lockers in the hallway—everyone had assigned locker. At my old school, you had to pay extra for a locker, but I guess when you paid enough in tuition, things like lockers came with the package.

A boy walked in the classroom and froze when he saw me. His shirt was tucked in halfway, and his tie was looped around his collar, untied. I offered a small wave and looked towards the front of the room, trying to pretend that I didn't know that he was still looking at me. I busied myself by setting my bookbag on the desk.

The desks were arranged in a giant circle around the edge of the room. The boy took a desk to my right, leaving an empty seat between us.

He held out his hand and flicked his head in a practiced move as his red curls fell into his green eyes. “Hey. You must be new here. I’m TJ.”

I shook the hand he offered and pretended not to notice that he clutched my hand for longer than necessary. “I’m Francis Marion. You can just call me Francis or Fran, though.”

He grinned. He smiled in a way that said he knew he was attractive and was used to girls swooning when he offered them his attention. I smiled politely.

“Swamp Fox?”

Like I’d never heard that one before. “The one and only.”

A group of students walked in all at once and crowded around TJ, and by proximity, me. They pestered TJ about skipping out on football practice, and I pinned them as the typical high school jocks.

“I don’t think he’s ever cut football in his entire life,” one guy said. He had tanned skin, hair bleached blond by the sun, and hazel eyes. He was the only one who didn’t seem like the typical jock. “What happened?”

TJ’s mouth formed a resolute line as he ignored the question. TJ clearly had no intention of answering. A few girls crowded in behind the group, but they stayed back, talking amongst themselves. The group around us dispersed as students filled the seats. The bleach blond guy took the seat next to TJ.

“Her name is Francis Marion,” TJ said, “like the Swamp Fox.”

“I’m Stephen,” he said, leaning over TJ’s desk. “So, you related to Francis Marion?”

I shrugged. “I doubt it. I think my family was just obsessed with him.”

“Are you from here?” TJ said.

“From South Carolina, but I just moved to Charleston. My mom lives here.”

“Guys,” A sharp voice said behind me, “give her some space before you drool all over her.”

The guys backed off. I twisted around to see one of the girls who’d come in with the group earlier. She took the seat behind me and examined her pink manicure.

“Sorry about them,” she said. “They’re desperate animals who get excited about any new meat.”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure about being called “new meat”, but this girl spoke with more confidence and authority than even TJ had. She had long, wavy black hair, and her makeup was immaculate. “I’m Beth.”

Beth’s posse filled the seats on either side of her. Beth gestured to the girl on her right, a petite blond with blue eyes. “This is Cynthia.”

The girl on Beth’s left, a tall brunette, introduced herself. “I’m Philippa. Nice bag, by the way.”

Philippa held up her bag, which seemed to be the same brand as mine but in a different color.

“Told you I had a good eye for it,” TJ said.

“It’s kind of a given if you go here, TJ,” Beth said. “I mean, Philippa’s family like owns Argentina.”

“Oh, no, no,” Phillipa said, “not the whole country. Just my grandparents’ ranch.”

“Are you from there?” I’d always thought Argentina would be a cool place to visit. I couldn’t believe I was talking to someone who’d actually been there.

“I grew up here, but we spend our summers there,” Phillipa said.

“So, Francis,” Beth said, “were you in boarding school until now or something?”

The final bell rang before I could respond. With that, my first day in AP European History started, and I forgot all about Beth's question. The group quieted around me and pulled notebooks and binders from their bags. I was surprised by the way they immediately turned their attention to the teacher.

The class was small, totaling about ten students. They all seemed to know each other already, which I figured was the reason why they treated me like such an oddity.

Aside from a few well-timed jokes, my new associates were shockingly studious. They took meticulous notes, answered questions when the teacher prompted, and seemed to take the class seriously. I did my best to keep up, but I'd missed the summer reading and already felt way out of depth. Mom had been insistent about me taking at least one AP class this year. I'd been hesitant, but now, I was downright afraid. I didn't know if I could keep up, or for that matter, catch up in the first place.

When the class ended, I hastily put my notes away and examined my schedule. We had five minutes between classes. In the meantime, I had to find a bathroom, and I had no idea where my next class or the bathrooms were located.

TJ snatched the schedule out of my hand.

"Let's see," he said, "Algebra 2 Honors. Girl, you must suck at math."

I shrugged. I probably sucked at all the subjects here. "More like suck at being motivated for school."

TJ grinned. "Oh, rebel. I like it. I'll see you third period."

Instead of giving me back my schedule, TJ winked at me and handed the paper to Stephen. "Follow me, Madame," Stephen said. "We can suck at math together."

I trailed through the halls behind Stephen, resigning myself to eventually wetting my pants and ruining my life. Instead of dwelling on my unavoidable downfall, I observed Stephen. He was several inches taller than me, and his hair shined almost white under the lights. He walked at a slow pace, and his general attitude was so laid back that I wondered if he moved beyond a relaxed state.

Stephen kept up the conversation with an easy stream of consciousness, and he seemed to tell me every thought that came to his mind. “Yeah, so I don’t play football like the other guys. I’m more into surfing. I’m also probably considered the dumb one in the group because I’m bad at math. But I’m actually in the top ten in our grade, so it’s not like I’m that dumb. I had a falling out with my math teacher in six grade, and it all went downhill from there. I’m still bitter, so don’t ask me for the details. I was essentially framed for cheating, but I never cheated. I’m glad to have a friend in math this year. It gets pretty boring without the others. Hey, our shoes match. Here’s our class.”

I almost cried to see that there was a bathroom right across the hall. I followed Stephen into the room and took the seat next him. I glanced at the clock. Two minutes.

“I’ll be right back,” I said.

The final bell rang as I washed my hands, so I took my time since I’d be late no matter what. I examined the prep schoolgirl in the mirror before me. She wore her long, wavy hair down. The uniform fit her well, and she wore light makeup—mascara and some tinted moisturizer. Her mother’s pearl studs glinted in her ears, and her new black vans gave her a playful vibe. She could have fooled herself. This girl hadn’t grown up in the swamp. She wasn’t that pretty, but she seemed compelling in some way. She looked like she belonged here, but I knew she was an imposter.

I turned on the sink as a popping noise sounded behind me. And in the mirror, I met Gigi's eyes. I screamed in shock, inciting a toothy grin from Gigi.

"You can take the girl out of the swamp," Gigi said, "but you can't take the swamp out of the girl."

Gigi spun in an excited circle—a disturbing move that was a cross between the death barrel role of an alligator and tap dancing. Then, three things happened at once:

One. A girl walked into the bathroom.

Two. Drops of water flew off Gigi—I guess she'd been swimming before finding me—and rained on the girl and me.

Three. I screamed as water peppered me. I didn't think I'd be able to feel the water flying off a ghost, but my clothes were soaking wet.

I froze. Gigi had managed to destroy any possibility of me fitting in at this school within ten seconds of her arrival. I'd been sure that I'd left Gigi behind with the swamp, and the fact that she had followed me to Charleston scared me. To make matters worse, we had a witness.

The girl rushed over from the doorway and gently pushed me aside. She turned off the faucet.

"Oh. My. Gosh," she said. "That was so weird."

I nodded. I didn't know what she had seen, but I was afraid of the answer. She pulled paper towels from the dispenser and handed them to me. I patted myself down while she got more.

"The sink went haywire for a second," she said. "That was the weirdest thing I've ever seen."

"Yeah," I said, "they should probably get that fixed."

“I’ll let the office know,” she said. “I’m Mary Jo, by the way. Friends call me MJ. What’s your name?”

“Francis Marion,” I said.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you before. What grade are you in?”

“Tenth grade. I’m new.”

MJ patted my arm. “And attacked by the sink on your first day. Legendary. I’ll see you around. I’m late for Calculus.”

MJ sauntered down the hallway, completely calm and collected. Gigi poked her head around the bathroom door, sheepishly. “Sorry. I didn’t know the water on me was real.”

“Me neither,” I said.

I entered my classroom, followed by a now thankfully dry Gigi, and took my seat. Stephen leaned over to whisper in my ear. “I covered for you.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Why are you soaked?”

“Fight with the sink.”

Stephen snorted. “You know, you kind of look like this awesome lady surfer with your hair messed up like that.”

I didn’t know my hair was messed up. I tried to flatten it out. “Who, Grace Valentina?”

Stephen gasped. “Shut up! You know Grace Valentina! She’s only my favorite surfer ever.”

“Thank you for sharing that with the class, Stephen,” the teacher said. “As much as we enjoyed that outburst, I’d like to continue, if you don’t mind, of course.”

“Yes, of course,” Stephen said.

The teacher continued with a shake of her head. Gigi sat at my feet, and I pulled out my notebook and a pencil, trying not to laugh at Stephen's audacity. He wrote on his paper and shoved it towards me:

Seriously, so cool!

I glanced towards the teacher to make sure she wasn't watching me, and I scrawled out a quick response:

My Grandpa loves her. He always said I looked just like her.

Stephen wrote back:

Coolest woman ever!

Gigi surprised me by staying quiet the entire lesson. She seemed to absorb the information, and I wondered if gators had a secret knack for algebra.

"That was fascinating," she said after the bell rang.

Stephen pulled my schedule out of his pocket, and I realized that he'd never given it back to me. Good thing he'd decided to adopt me today.

"Looks like you're stuck with me, kid," he said. "Onto Honors English! So, what's your favorite thing about Grace Valentina?"

We talked more about surfing as we headed down the hallway. The conversation felt easy and empty—I didn't have to reveal anything real about myself—and I thought I might just survive Charleston Prep.

Chapter 7

Stephen invited me to join his friends for lunch. I said yes right away, glad that I didn't have to awkwardly sit by myself and pretend I was OK with it. I followed him through the cafeteria, but we didn't make it far before someone stopped Stephen.

A girl grabbed his arm. She was curvy with dyed black hair, and despite the fact that she dressed in the same uniform as everyone else, something about her makeup and jewelry gave off a kind of punk or skater vibe.

"Hey! We're checking out the new skate park this weekend if you want to come," she said.

Stephen grinned. "I'm down."

He seamlessly stepped around her, and we continued to make our way to the food line. It wasn't long before someone else flagged Stephen down. This time, it was a girl and a guy sitting at a table. The guy flagged Stephen down. I stood in the aisle watching as they discussed sailing.

The pattern continued all the way to the lunch line. Each time, someone from a different crowd would call out to Stephen and invite him to do something or talk to him about the latest trend in whatever they were interested in—video games, sports, and other random activities.

Each time, Stephen engaged with the person, and he always responded with a yes if he was invited to do something. He was popular, and he could relate to anyone. I wondered if he'd always been that way or if that was the way he'd chosen to act in order to survive high school.

After we finally made it through the line, we found Stephen's friends from first period sitting outside. They ate at a round wooden table in the courtyard. Cynthia, Beth, and Philippa sat on one end, hunched over a magazine. TJ and another football player filled the other seats, leaving only one spot available. A panicked expression crossed Stephen's face as he realized his error. Stephen scooted towards the middle of the bench, squeezing in close to TJ. He gestured for me to take the small space next to him. I sat on the edge, trying to give him as much room as possible. TJ moved over slightly. The others didn't even acknowledge me.

Gigi sprawled out on the cement behind me.

"Nice and warm," she said.

I picked at my food and watched Gigi's tail flick back and forth. She seemed comfortable wherever she went, and I was envious of her. I'd been on edge all day, analyzing my every word. I wondered what it would be like to be so carefree—invisible and free to do whatever you wanted without fear.

The sound of laughter brought me back to the table and the conversation at hand.

"No, listen," TJ said, "I heard my dad talking about it on the phone. He's got a grocery store on Ashepoo Island. Apparently, some chick got fired and came back and stole a thousand bucks a few weeks ago."

I froze. Of all the things they could talk about, of all the grocery stores that existed in the world, the Pig Cecelia stole from just had to be connected to TJ.

"Shut up," Beth said. "Did they catch her?"

“She didn’t even try to block the security camera. It’s a small store, so she got the safe code from the manager somehow and just waltzed in the office and took it. She’s some high school kid, and get this, now she’s hiding out in the swamp like some outlaw.”

“That’s like kind of awesome,” Cynthia said.

“She’s gonna get caught,” Stephen said. “Nobody in their right mind would try to steal that much and think they could get away with it.”

“I mean, she’s from the swamp,” Beth said. “What do you expect?”

“Dumb as rocks,” Stephen said.

“You’re the one to talk,” Beth said. “What do you think, Francis?”

“Yeah. Sounds crazy,” I said. I suddenly understood why Stephen tried to be friendly with everyone. It was easier to go along with what everyone said than to face the judgement that came with going against the flow. Still, I immediately felt guilty, even though I hadn’t really said anything bad about Cecelia. I wondered what they would think if they knew we were friends. I’d be an outcast before I’d even started.

“Yeah, Stephen,” Philippa said, “weren’t you the one with the genius idea to vandalize Pleasant Prep last year?”

The group laughed like they were all remembering some big inside joke. TJ elbowed Stephen with enough strength that Stephen knocked into me. Stephen didn’t seem to notice.

“Good think your mommy bailed you out,” TJ said.

Stephen’s cheeks went red. I wondered for a moment if he was embarrassed, but he played along with them. “My only mistake was getting caught.”

“Yeah, maybe you could learn a thing or two from this thief,” Philippa said.

“Nah,” TJ said, “that girl’s just gonna rot in jail.”

I couldn't take it anymore. I grabbed Stephen's sleeve, and I pointed at a shaded bench across the lawn. "I'm just going to sit there. I need to do some homework anyways."

"Are you sure?" Stephen said. "We can keep squeezing."

I shook my head and walked to the empty bench. My hands shook, but I didn't know if I was angry or scared. I tried to remind myself that they didn't know that Cecelia was my friend, but I still felt guilty. If Cecelia had heard people talk about me that way at my old school, she probably would've ended up in a fight. Nobody would've dared to talk about me like that around her in the first place. I hated the part of me that was always so afraid of what others thought.

Then, there was Stephen. He seemed like he was putting on an act with his friends, like he tried too hard to impress them—to impress everyone. His kindness made me think that he was different, but I wondered if it was all fake—just another front to protect himself. He knew how to present himself in a way that could make anyone like him, and I didn't know if I should trust him. After hearing their conversation, there was no way that I was going to tell these kids the truth about my life. They'd tear me down just like Cecelia if they knew I was from the swamp. And best friends with the Pig thief to boot.

The bench groaned under new weight, and Stephen sat beside me. I tried to act natural, but I felt as he would scrutinize every move and somehow figure out that I was from the swamp—like he'd find mud behind my ears or see the dirt that was usually under my nails.

"Why'd you leave?" My voice shook a little. I cleared my throat and chugged my water.

Stephen glanced at his friends' table and shrugged. "They were boring. They started talking about football and fashion."

I would've preferred that discussion over the one about Cecelia. "What do you like to talk about?"

Stephen took a bite of his pizza and frowned as he chewed. “I forgot how bad this stuff is,” he said. “I’m more of a surfing and sailing guy.”

“Sounds very Charleston of you,” I said.

“What about you?”

“I’ve never done either,” I said.

“We’ll have to change that,” Stephen said. “You know, we need some more crew members on the sailing team. Just saying.”

“That could actually be really cool,” I said. “What’s it like?”

Stephen launched into detailed explanation while I tried to calm myself down. I listened intently to distract myself. Sailing was something I knew about in theory, but I had only gone once or twice. The more he talked, the more I wanted to do it. Mom’s idea of running competitively didn’t sit right with me. Running was fun, and I was afraid it’d lose its thrill if I tried to turn it into more than a hobby.

I watched the lunchtime activities unfold on the lawn. Some students sat at tables on the concrete courtyard. Others sat in circles on the grass, and some filled the benches scattered under the oaks. A group of guys played a game with a frisbee, and another group of students played with a hack-e-sack. Most the students seemed to be white, a stark contrast to the diverse student body that we’d had at Ashepoo High.

After lunch, Stephen dropped me off at my next class, which was very kind of him considering that he took Spanish instead of French. I was on my own, and the nerves I’d felt at the beginning of the day came flooding back.

The bell rang and POP, Gigi appeared next to me. I glanced around, but no one else seemed to notice her presence. She curled around my feet.

“You should have beaten them up,” Gigi said. “You killed me for attacking your grandpa, didn’t you? Why didn’t you do the same for Cecelia?”

I was glad I was in a situation where I couldn’t answer Gigi. I didn’t know how to even begin to explain that I couldn’t kill other people. She’d want to know why I could kill her if I couldn’t kill them, and the whole conversation would probably end up just hurting her feelings—if she had feelings. I wasn’t sure the reasoning for why I could kill an alligator even made sense in the first place. Then there was the uncomfortable fact that her meat was probably in my grandpa’s freezer, which made me feel nauseous.

“Bonjour,” the teacher, a Madame Earling, said.

“Bonjour,” the class said.

The teacher explained that we would only speak in French during class, and she prompted us to pick out French names. I grinned when I saw the options on the board. I felt like this would make it up to Gigi somehow.

“Gígí,” I said.

The real Gigi hissed. “I love this class. Better than Algebra.”

#

Stephen waited for me outside of the classroom door. I felt a mixture of dread and relief when I saw him. Now that I knew how he and his friends saw swamp kids, I felt like I had to put on act, like I was going to be judged constantly for my actions. There was no way I could compete with them.

Stephen motioned for me to follow him down the hall. I hadn’t even realized that I’d been anxious about finding my next class. I felt a confusing mix of resentment and gratefulness towards Stephen. He didn’t say anything when I fell in pace next to him. I tugged on his sleeve.

“Hey,” I said.

He smiled. “Hey.”

“Thanks for looking out for me today. I appreciate it. Probably more than you know.”

“I’ve been there,” Stephen said. “I actually transferred here last year.”

“Whoa,” I said, “I’d just assumed you’d been here forever. Everyone seems so comfortable with each other.”

“There are usually only a handful of new students every year. Many of the students have been going here since first grade. You get to know everyone pretty quickly.”

“That’s nice,” I said.

“It’s nice, but it can also be annoying. Like, you get put in a box early on, and people assume stuff about you, and even if you’ve changed you can’t get away from your old label.”

Those words seemed familiar to me, and I remembered that Grandpa had called Cecelia a stuck-in-the-mud after the Pig incident. I’d think that rich kids would be less trapped than the island kids, but maybe everybody was trapped in different ways. “From what I can tell, you get along with everyone. What’s your label? Are you talking about that stuff from earlier?”

Gigi poked me in the back. “I think the words they used were *momma’s boy* and *vandal*.”

Stephen lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. I’m just saying.”

He seemed frustrated, but I could tell he didn’t want to talk about it. I also didn’t want to pry considering all I’d learn today. I’d play it safe with him and everyone else. The less they knew about me, the better off I’d be.

Gigi trailed behind us. “He looks like just another rich kid to me. Find out what kind of car he drives.”

“I think that’s the point. What do alligators know about cars anyways?”

“What?” Stephen said.

“What?”

“You said something about cars,” Stephen said.

“I did?”

“I’ve had quite the education today,” Gigi said. “Cars mean a lot to teenagers.”

“Yes, you did,” Stephen said.

“Sorry,” I said. “I guess I was thinking out loud.”

We had Chemistry with most of Stephen’s friends. They’d saved a seat for him, but not one for me, so I sat in the back by myself.

“You should all be familiar with the general topics of Chemistry, such as acids, bases, and atomic structure, because of your required summer reading,” the teacher said. “So, we will be jumping directly into Thermochemistry to start. Can anyone tell me the first law of Thermodynamics?”

Five hands shot up. I scribbled notes on my paper, trying to write down all the terms he’d said before I forgot them. The teacher called on Cynthia to answer. “The first law of thermodynamics is that energy can’t be created or destroyed, but only transformed or transferred.”

Day 1, and I was already behind. Again. I’d never catch up to these kids. I didn’t belong.

“Maybe that’s why I’m still here,” Gigi grumbled. She sounded half asleep, and I felt a little pang of jealousy. She already seemed to understand the concept better than me.

Luckily, I had a free period after Chemistry, so I had plenty of time to think about how I was a failure. Stephen led me to a shady spot on the lawn, placed his bookbag behind his head,

and promptly fell asleep. I watched him jealously for a moment before taking out my notes from the day.

Every single class had assigned reading and homework for the night, and I wondered how the students had time to do anything except schoolwork. I also had to catch up on the summer reading that I'd missed for English and history. Both classes had essays due on the readings the following week. School had never stressed me out like this before.

"Francis!" MJ walked towards me with another girl. MJ had pale white skin, and long wavy hair that was a distinct auburn color. I thought maybe she dyed it, but I couldn't tell. The girl with MJ was black, and she was about my height. She wore her hair in long braids. Both girls seemed to bear themselves with confidence, and their body language suggested a level of comfort around each other that reminded me of my friendship with Cecelia. I wondered how long they'd been friends.

I waved and invited them to sit when they reached me. They glanced at Stephen, who was still sleeping, before joining me.

"What are you up to?" MJ said.

"Just looking at my homework and wondering if I will ever have a life again," I said.

"You'll get used to it," said MJ's friend. "I'm Serena, by the way. I heard the sink exploded on you this morning."

I made sure not to glance at Gigi basking in the sun a few feet away. "Yeah, it was crazy."

"Anyways," Serena said, "welcome to Charleston Prep."

"Thanks," I said.

“It’s cool that we have free period together,” MJ said. “We can hang out, and we can help you out if you need it.”

“Y’all are so nice,” I said.

“We’ve bonded through our mutual sink explosion experience,” MJ said. “And you seem cool. Different from most of the kids here, for some reason. More real or something? Anyways, I’ve got your back.”

I laughed. “Thanks! Well, it’s not worth much, but I’ll try to look out for you too.”

“Thanks,” MJ said. “It’s the first day, so people are on their best behavior, but things can get ugly here. It’s always good to have another friend.”

“So, what’s your last class of the day?” Serena said.

“Art,” I said.

“Us too,” Serena said. “How fun!”

We exchanged a few more pleasantries, but MJ and Serena left soon after to buy snacks before art class. Stephen cracked an eye open as soon as they left.

“You make friends fast,” he said.

“They’re really nice,” I said.

Stephen sat up and stretched his long arms into the air. “Serena and MJ are good people to have in your corner.”

I nodded. “They seem like it.”

“Just don’t get on MJ’s bad side.” Stephen stood and pulled me to my feet. We gathered our things. I looked over at Gigi, but she waved me away. I figured she’d rather sunbathe than go to art, but I didn’t know if alligator ghosts could feel the sun. Either way, she seemed to be enjoying herself. Stephen led me in the opposite direction, towards the art studio.

“I’ve got weightlifting last period, so I might not see you after,” Stephen said.

“Thanks again for all of your help today,” I said.

“I had fun,” Stephen said with a shrug of his shoulders.

We waved goodbye, and I headed into my last class of the day, alone. MJ and Serena were already seated at desks, and they pointed to an empty desk next to Serena. I took the seat and turned to see that Jack was occupying the desk on the other side of me. He looked surprised to see me.

“Hey,” I said.

Jack glanced at Serena and MJ before responding. He seemed uncomfortable.

“Hey,” he said.

“Thanks again for your advice,” I said.

“You seem like you’re doing well,” Jack said.

Serena tapped on my desk. “How do you know Jack?”

“It’s kind of embarrassing, but he helped me find my way home the other day when I got lost in the park,” I said.

“That’s cool,” MJ said.

Jack shrugged. He seemed nervous, but I couldn’t figure out why. I obviously couldn’t pester him about it with MJ and Serena right next to us, so I resolved to interrogate him later.

Art was by far my best class of the day. We sketched a still life of a bowl of fruit, and I almost felt like I was back in the swamp. Grandpa and I were always sketching. He encouraged me to draw with him every day. I wasn’t as good as him, but I felt like art was something I was actually decent at, and it was nice to do something I felt like I could handle after a long day of being overwhelmed.

The art teacher didn't say anything when he saw my drawing, but he grunted with what I thought was a growl of approval. He also might have just had something stuck in his throat.

#

The rest of week passed by in a blur. I'd like to say that I was settled in by Friday, but the truth was, I was floundering. It's hard to catch up when you start out a lap behind everyone else.

I stood at my locker at the end of the day, staring blankly at the contents. Books. Lots and lots of books. I didn't know if I could carry everything home for my weekend of studying. Somehow, I also had to squeeze in the entire summer reading list and write two essays. To make matters worse, the teachers were already pummeling us with quizzes. I had a quiz in Algebra 2, French, and Chemistry later in the day.

The air popped and Gigi appeared next to me.

"I learned a new trick today," she said.

I leaned my head against the door of the locker and tried to find a small morsel of enthusiasm somewhere in the dark recesses of my heart. I came up empty.

"Hey," someone said behind me.

I straightened up and tried to pretend that I wasn't five seconds from crying. Beth stood next to me. Her lip was curled, and it was obvious that she was not excited to be talking to me. I wondered why she bothered.

"Hey," I said.

"So, there's not a football game tonight, and the group's coming over to hang out later," Beth said. "I didn't originally plan on having you come, so I'd have to move some things around, and we might not be able to eat as much. But. You can totally come if you want."

Gigi let out a low rumble. "That's the most enthusiastic invitation I've ever heard."

“Right?”

Beth pursed her lips. “What?”

“I mean, thank you so much for the invitation, but, honestly, I have so much homework to do this weekend, and I need to catch up on summer reading.”

“Right,” Beth said, “So, I clearly invited you, and you declined. If Stephen asks, make sure you tell him.”

“Yes,” I said. “Thanks again.”

“Bye, good luck,” Beth said. She hastened down the hall.

“Bye,” I said to her retreating back.

“That was weird,” Gigi said, “so want to see my new trick?”

“Have at it, kid,” I said.

Gigi gestured for me to move aside, so I took a step away from my locker. Then, she reached into the locker, placed her hand—claws—on a textbook, and successfully grabbed the book and pulled it out.

I glanced around furtively for witnesses, but the halls were empty. No one was lingering at school on a Friday afternoon.

“How’d you do that?”

Gigi bared her teeth. “I just have to focus really hard and think about grabbing onto something and then I can do it.”

“I guess to others it would look like this book was just floating in the air,” I said.

Gigi’s grin grew wider. “Want to test it?”

The responsible thing would be to gather my books, go home, and study for the rest of my life. However, the week had been exhausting, and I wasn't ready to face reality yet. I stuffed the rest of my books into my bag and shut the locker with a clang. "Let's go."

"What's the plan?" Gigi said.

I glanced around the hallway. Ideally, I'd be hiding, and Gigi would be in the middle of the hallway with a book. A person would walk up, and BAM! We'd see what happened. The silence of the halls told me that today wouldn't be our lucky day.

"I think everyone has left already," I said. "I'm sorry. Maybe we should try it on Monday."

Gigi hunched in disappointment, and the textbook dropped to her side. I took a few more steps forward, so I was ahead of Gigi, and that's when I heard someone call my name.

I spun around to see Jack walk around the corner. I froze. Gigi stood between us; the textbook still gripped in her paw. She glanced at me, then at Jack, and then, she ran towards him.

Alligators aren't meant to run on their hind legs. Their legs are short, and their bodies are wide, like barrels. Their tails are long and thick, making balance tricky on those little legs. When she was a few steps away from Jack, Gigi stumbled.

I screamed at the sight of the giant alligator hurtling in the air towards Jack. I forgot that he couldn't see the ghost. All he could see was a textbook flying in the air towards him.

The textbook slammed into Jack's gut, and Gigi passed through him, landed on her belly, and skidded across the floor until she came to a stop next to the lockers. I braced myself, waiting for the lockers to shake and clang from the impact of Gigi's body, but the halls stayed eerily silent. Well, except for the groans emitting from Jack as he clutched his stomach. "What—just—happened?"

Jack crouched down with his arms still wrapped around his middle. Gigi laid prostrate behind him, and I wondered if she had stunned herself—if ghosts could be stunned. I stood awkwardly next to Jack, not sure what to do or how to help him.

Jack reached for my arm, and I helped him stand back up. He turned my arm over and examined it.

“You look strong, but there’s no way you’re that strong,” he said.

“What?”

“But nothing else make sense. The textbook couldn’t have carried itself through the air.”

“Oh,” I said.

I waited to see if he would be able to come up with some logical explanation for what just happened.

“But your back was turned away from me. The book was in the air all by itself.”

I nodded.

“Why are you so calm?” Jack said.

“Shock, I guess,” I said.

“There’s got to be some logical explanation.”

“Maybe someone threw it and hid?”

“You’re right. Some silly prank.” Jack gripped my shoulders. I stiffened. Jack said, “More importantly, how do you know MJ?”

Relief flooded me at the sudden switch in topics. I allowed myself to relax.

“Why do you ask?” I said, trying to play it cool.

Jack picked up the textbook and handed it to me. I tucked the book under my arm. Gigi finally stirred. She stood—on all four legs this time—and shook herself out. She walked a few

steps towards us. Gigi wobbled a little with each step, but she seemed fine otherwise. “That was fun.”

“I just think she’s cool,” Jack said. “I’d like to get to know her.”

“Maybe we can both get to know her in art.”

“I hope so,” Jack said. He seemed a little flustered. “Anyways, how was your first week?”

“Honestly? Super rough. I think I’m way behind academically.”

He didn’t answer right away, and I was afraid that he was going to decide that I wasn’t smart enough to be his friend. Jack’s eyes narrowed, and he looked super focused, like was working out complex math equations in his head. That, or he was really constipated.

“I think you should get a tutor,” he said.

I looked him up and down. “Are you up for the job?”

Jack laughed. His expression grew serious as he realized that I wasn’t joking. He cocked his head and did what I assumed was more complex math problems.

“Yeah, I could help you out,” he said. “Meet me tomorrow morning at the park, and we’ll get you started.”

I nodded. He waved goodbye. I watched him walk down the hall. Most of the times I’d chanced upon Jack during the week, he’d been by himself, always studying or reading. He never seemed bothered by his lack of friends. Jack chose to isolate himself and focus on the things he was interested in, and he had the rare confidence not to worry about what others thought. I figured he did have friends, but he just didn’t feel the need to surround himself with them constantly. I hoped he considered me a friend because he was the only one I had here.

Chapter 8

8am on a Saturday was pushing it, but Jack wanted to meet outside before it got too hot. The library seemed like a better option if that was the case, but I didn't want to annoy him. He was doing me a big favor, so the least I could do was meet when and where he wanted.

I walked to the park, lugging my giant bookbag, and tried not to curse him under my breath. Next time, I'd just invite him over to the house.

Jack sat under the same tree I'd found him at before. As usual, he was reading a book with his pencil in hand and ready to underline. I still couldn't get over his focus. Grandpa had the same one-track mind when he was wrestling an alligator, but I don't know that I'd ever found something that I was that passionate about—where something drew every particle of my being towards it. Most things felt too shallow.

I dropped my bag on the ground and plopped down next to Jack. He carefully set his book down next to him.

“Next time, you're carrying my bag,” I said.

Jack shook his head. “Hopefully, we'll get you organized enough that you won't have to lug everything around all the time.”

“I'm not sure that will ever happen, but I like your optimism,” I said.

“I don’t think you fully grasp who you’re talking to,” Jack said. “I’m an organizational genius. That being said, let’s get out all your syllabi.”

I pulled out my notebooks, binders, and planner, and Jack proceeded to schedule every minute of my life. Panic must have been written across my face because Jack looked up at me halfway through and grinned.

“It’s OK!” He said. “This is only temporary until you get caught up and get the hang of things. Once you get used to the workload, you won’t have to be so intense about it.”

“Again, I think you might be over-estimating my abilities,” I said.

Jack shook his head and continued to plan out my life. I watched him scratch away in my planner and wondered if I’d ever make it back to the swamp.

Eventually, Jack passed the planner to me and stacked up my syllabi. For today, I was supposed to read two books and outline my summer reading essays. No big deal. “I’ve barely started reading.”

“Well, you better start,” he said. “The essays are easy. Mostly summary with a little bit of critical thinking at the end. If I were you, I’d just go through the essay checklist and answer each question one-by-one, then put it all together.”

“You make it sound easy,” I said.

“It seems daunting right now because you haven’t started,” Jack said. “Once you start chipping away at it, everything will seem easier to handle.”

“I guess I’ll find out soon enough,” I said. “I’m going to go work on this stuff, but before I go, I’m dying to know more about your thing with MJ. Do you like her?”

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know her very well, but I’d like to. Maybe you can help me figure out how to talk to her. I never know what to say when I’m around her.”

That was easy enough. “Sure,” I said. I looked down at my now full planner and tried not to freak out about how my life was devoted to studying now. “I miss the swamp.”

“What swamp?”

I didn’t mean to let that slip out. For some reason, Jack made me feel comfortable, like I could tell him anything, and he would just nod along like it wasn’t a big deal. I doubted Jack would ostracize me, but I wasn’t sure he’d understand the whole alligator wrestling thing. He’d find it weird. And the less people that knew about my past, the better. I gathered all my items and stuffed them into my bag, pretending that I didn’t hear his question. “Oh no, look at the time. I’ve got to go. Thanks again for all your help. I’llseeyouMonday.”

I ran away. I high tailed it out of there after all the help he gave me, and I didn’t even regret it. At least not that much.

#

Mom found me a few hours later, sitting on my bed, textbooks and notebooks strewn around me, and my head buried in a book. She pushed a book aside and sat on the edge of the bed.

“This looks like a lot,” Mom said.

“It is a lot,” I said.

“I’ve finished all my errands if you want to take the car to the swamp tomorrow,” Mom said.

I gestured to the pile on my bed. “Does it look like I have time to do anything except study?”

I couldn’t keep the bite out my voice, but Mom wasn’t phased. “Sounds like you have a bit to catch up on. Do you need any help?”

I shook my head. “I got a friend at school to help me get organized, so now I just have to do it.”

Mom reached over and patted my arm. “See? This is why I wanted you to transfer. It’s better for you to go through this now. Imagine trying to figure this out in college when you’re all alone in an unfamiliar place.”

“I am all alone in an unfamiliar place,” I said.

I knew it was mean and uncalled for, and I knew I’d hurt her, but I also didn’t really care. This mess was technically her fault.

“I’m just trying to look for the positives,” Mom said.

“Well, try a little harder,” I said.

“I know this is hard for you, Francis, but check your attitude,” Mom said. She walked away, turning at the door. “I’ll have dinner ready at 7.”

Maybe if I was a better person, and maybe if I had more time, I would have gone after her and apologized, but I didn’t have the energy to care.

#

By Monday, I still wasn’t caught up, but I’d found that Jack’s schedule was helping. I at least felt less overwhelmed because I had a plan laid out for me. Unfortunately, Jack’s plan involved absolutely zero free time, so I sat at a desk in a remote corner of the library during lunch to study. Gigi was sprawled out at my feet, napping. I didn’t know that ghosts napped, but she seemed to sleep a lot. Maybe it was the reptile in her. The library was rather chilly, after all.

I was in the middle of working through a math problem when a bottle of coke landed on my paper. Stephen stood in front of the desk. He pulled an empty chair from a nearby desk and sat across from me.

“What’s this?” I said, gesturing to the coke.

“It’s a coke,” Stephen said.

“Well, yes, but what’s it for,” I said.

“You, clearly.”

“That’s nice.”

I picked up the coke and opened it. The drink sizzled as the cap came loose, and a librarian poked her head around a shelf. “No soft drinks in the library,” she hissed.

“Sorry,” I said, but the librarian had already disappeared back in the stacks.

I narrowed my eyes at Stephen, who tried to conceal his laughter by covering his mouth with a hand.

“Thanks a lot,” I said.

I tightened the cap on the drink and set to the side of my desk. Stephen didn’t say anything, so I continued working on my homework. I could hear him rustling around, but I made myself finish a problem before I looked up.

Stephen leaned back in his chair with a leg crossed on his knee. The European history book rested on his lap, and a blue high-lighter dangled out of the side of his mouth. His hands were placed on either side of the textbook, and the thumb of his right hand strummed back and forth over the pages’ edges.

I felt suddenly curious about him. He’d latched himself onto me as soon as we’d met. He seemed different than his friends when he was with me, and I didn’t know which side of him was real and which one was a mask. I definitely didn’t know why he wanted to be friends with me. I mean, sure we’d bonded over our mutual respect of Grace Valentina but was that really enough to form a friendship?

Stephen glanced up and caught my stare. I shifted my focus back to my paper, but I felt as if his eyes stayed on me longer. I pretended not to notice. I worked through another problem and allowed myself to look at him then. His attention was focused on reading again.

Stephen kept the dress code, but he somehow managed to make the uniform look relaxed. His tie was just slightly loosened; his shirt sleeves rolled up on his forearms. Patterned socks peeked out between his Vans and pants. The overall impression that he gave was one of nonchalance—a laid back attitude that seemed in direct opposition to his actions and words. He'd been nothing but thoughtful and considerate to me, and I couldn't help but wonder if he made everyone feel like they were his best friend, or if he'd shown me a side that no one else witnessed.

Gigi let out a loud groan as she woke up, causing me to jump in my seat. Stephen glanced at me curiously. I blushed, feeling suddenly flustered. I felt as if he could somehow tell that I'd been thinking about him. I looked at the clock on the wall and made a show of packing my bag. "The bell's going to ring soon."

"We still have five minutes," Stephen said.

"I gotta run. See you later."

I rushed out of the library, kicking myself for having such a strange exit. The air popped, and Gigi appeared next to me.

"You like him," she said. "I think he's dangerous."

"I don't know him," I said. "I'm not planning on getting to know him that well either. He'd drop me as soon as he learned I was from the swamp. Wait. Why is he dangerous?"

"He smells like salt water," Gigi said. "I can't survive in salt water for long."

#

I allowed myself to take a break from studying during free period. Jack seemed to think that I was a homework machine who didn't need breaks, but I'd gotten to the point where my brain couldn't function properly. The words blurred on the page when I tried to read, so I decided that food and sunshine were the right remedy. Gigi flattened herself on the edge of a round goldfish pond in a shaded area on the side of a building.

I made a pillow out of my book bag and closed my eyes against the brightness of the sun. Birds chirped in a nearby tree, and it didn't take much for me to imagine I was back home in the swamp. I wondered where everyone from my old school had ended up. The rumor was that the school would shut down soon, and many students had already enrolled elsewhere. It was strange to imagine the islanders blending in at other places, with students who didn't understand where they came from. I felt sad and strangely empty.

A strange squawking noise caused me to sit up. My hands clamped over my mouth.

Gigi hovered in the air next to an oak tree. A pigeon was clamped between her jaws, flapping its wings helplessly and trying to get away from the invisible air prison it was locked in. Gigi's legs flapped in the air. She seemed panicked, but I couldn't figure out what was wrong.

Gigi plummeted to the ground. Her jaws released and the bird flapped in an awkward circle before landing on the ground a few feet away. The bird panted and stood frozen on the spot it had landed. Gigi stood on all four legs and shook herself out. "I can fly!"

"What happened?"

Gigi stomped over to me. "I can kind of fly. I didn't know what to do when I caught the bird. I couldn't eat it, but I couldn't get my jaw back open either. I got worried and then was just stuck hanging in the air."

"Who are you talking to?" A voice inquired behind me.

I gasped. I was going to get into trouble if I kept talking to Gigi in public. MJ sat next to me. I felt a mix of relief and despair, knowing that it was her.

I pointed at the bird. “Do you see that bird?”

The bird was breathing more evenly now, but it still seemed shocked.

“Why’s it like that?”

I shrugged. “It was flying weird, and then it just landed over there. I think it must have gotten stunned somehow.”

MJ leaned forward, examining the bird from a distance. “It seems OK now. Super weird, though.”

I looked around the lawn. I spotted Stephen snoozing under an oak on the other side of the goldfish pond. A twinge of guilt hit me at the way I’d left him in the library earlier. My eyes scanned the rest of the courtyard. Students were scattered in various spots, but no one noticed the strange bird on the ground.

A sense of relief filled me. It seemed that no one else had witnessed Gigi’s show.

#

Jack sat down next to me in art class and nudged me in the side with his elbow. When I met his eyes, he nodded in MJ’s direction. He didn’t waste any time. I didn’t know what he expected. It’s not like I could introduce him to someone he already knew. I glanced at Serena and MJ. They were both focused on getting their supplies out. I glanced back at Jack, and he nodded enthusiastically.

“So, MJ,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said as she straightened out her paper.

“Jack is tutoring me,” I said.

“OK,” MJ said. “That’s nice.”

“He’s super smart. I really appreciate the help.”

Jack elbowed me in the ribs again, this time with a little more gusto. His elbows were sharp. He whispered, “Seriously?”

I winced, feeling more awkward by the second. I didn’t know how to fix the situation. Jack seemed to have unrealistic expectations of my ability to talk with others. “Anyways,” I said, “we should all hang out sometime.”

MJ shrugged, seemingly unbothered by my extreme lack of social skills. “Sure thing,” she said.

Jack hastily wrote something on the corner of his paper before tearing it off and slipping it in front of me. I unfolded the tiny paper and read, “Remind me to never ask you for a favor again.”

“Swamp kids don’t have social skills,” I wrote back.

It was a joke, but it still felt like a risk to me, giving him an opening like that. I got the sense that Jack would understand my desire to hide who I was, and he wouldn’t judge me for it. After all, he seemed to be just as awkward as me.

Jack read the paper. He balled it up and tossed it in his bookbag.

I felt like I was in trouble.

#

Stephen waited for me outside of the classroom, so I had an excuse to run away from Jack before he could corner me with questions. I was already regretting my honesty.

“What’s up?” I said to Stephen.

Jack poked me in the arm as he walked by and pointed at me. “We’ll talk about this later.”

I waved him away and turned back to Stephen. He watched Jack walk away before turning back to me. Stephen nodded in Jack’s direction. “What was that about?”

“Art class stuff,” I said.

“Got it,” Stephen said. “So, I wanted to follow up about the sailing thing.”

“What about it?”

“We’ve still got a few spots open. Do you want to come to practice tomorrow and try it out?”

According to Jack’s schedule, I was supposed to be studying the entire weekend. But being on the river was an opportunity that I had to take. I missed the water. “That sounds amazing, but I’ve never been before, is that OK?”

Stephen grinned. “Yeah, totally. I’ve got an extra life jacket and gloves that you can borrow. I think you’re going to love it. You can swim, right?”

“Yeah. I can swim.”

“Where do you live? I can probably just pick you up on the way there.”

I looked around for Gigi, but she was nowhere in sight. She’d be excited to have the opportunity to check out Stephen’s car. “That’d be great if you don’t mind.”

I wrote down my address on a slip of paper and handed it to Stephen.

“Practice starts at one, so I’ll pick you up at 12 if that works,” Stephen said. “We have to get the boats setup before practice. Sailing is tricky at first, but I have a feeling you’ll catch on fast.”

I nodded, already feeling a sense of anticipation and nervous excitement. I wanted to get to know this boy, and sailing seemed like the perfect opportunity.