

MARDI GRAS PUBLISHING PRESENTS...

# Swamp Baby



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By

Adra Steia



## *Prologue*

The baby weighed her down like a rock. His tiny blanket-bound body pressed the medallion deep into the skin of her chest, painfully pinching the sides of her breast.

She focused on her pain so she wouldn't think of the horrible thing she would have to do soon.

Laughing River's pace slowed. Behind her, she could still hear the shouts of the white men as they followed her obvious trail through the boggy swamp.

Silas whimpered. He was so tiny, so helpless. And he was her child! Her task came to mind and broke her heart once more.

The Spirit-mother was all around, suddenly. *Give him to me.*

Up ahead, Laughing River saw a huge old oak tree, rising out of the swamp like a god. She stumbled in a hole, clawed her way out, clutching Silas close.

*Give him to me.*

Spirit-mother's voice rustled through her head like poison, piercing and burning.

She reached the tree. The branches spread out like the petals of a flower, leaving a deep natural hollow.

"You have no choice, young one. You've betrayed me." Spirit-mother's sad voice rustled through the trees. "I demand a sacrifice. The power I gave you is no longer yours."

Laughing River no longer heard the men hunting her. Spirit-mother had led them away, but only long enough for her to accomplish what she must.

The medallion burned against her skin. She wanted to rip it off and cast it away, but Spirit-mother would be even more insulted. There had been rules, and Laughing River had broken them.

She wrapped her son snug in his blanket and kissed his forehead. He whimpered again, the soft sound of a newborn eager to nurse.

“My son, my son. Go to Spirit-mother, sweet one.”

Allowing her tears of grief to pour down her cheeks, Laughing River hugged the baby tight to her chest.

Too tight. She adjusted her arms and closed her eyes. Wailing, Laughing River dropped to her knees.

She bit back sobs as his tiny face wagged back and forth against her breast, desperately seeking air. She held him tighter still. His tiny body shuddered and tensed.

Deep inside her own heart, she felt his soul scream.

The tension eased from his little shoulders. After a moment, she shifted him into her arms once more. She kissed away the big tears dripping on to his still face.

On her cheek she felt no breath from his small mouth. For a long moment she held his body close and sobbed. When she was breathless and aching, she wiped her tears away with the corner of his blanket.

Laughing River kissed his hand and tucked it under the blanket. Flickers of light danced through the trees. Lanterns. Spirit-mother had led them in a circle. Ever so gently, she tucked the limp, still body into the hole in the tree. On the way out, her hand dislodged something in the tree. It clattered down the rough bark. She knelt and picked it up.

A bone.

Her throat clenched shut with emotion. Laughing River reached shoulder-deep into the hollow and drew out more bones. Three skulls.

One fell apart in her hands, so brittle from age and weathering.

Three babies at least. “Spirit-mother, you said Silas was special.”

“Do you think you were the only one to wear my medallion? To receive the gift of my ancestors?” The voice assaulted her ears, borne on the cacophony of frogs and insects. “You are not worthy, as they and their offspring were not worthy!”

“There she is! Get the witch!”

Laughing River shrank against the tree in fright. Adrenaline spurred her on. She had to get to the heart of the swamp. There, power stronger than Spirit-mother, would protect her. Her father’s power dwelt there.

The young woman turned and sprinted away from the tree. No one would ever find the babe. He was forever Spirit-mother’s.

\* \* \* \*

The morning sun rose over the tops of the pines, chasing away the shadows of the night. At the foot of a huge oak tree near the river, an old man knelt beneath the slowly spinning, circling body of his youngest daughter. The rope she hung from squeaked against the rough bark of the oak bough.

He worked his hands in the soil, weaving shadows that even the sun couldn’t chase away. Singing softly to himself, he dropped the cursed medallion into the hole and slowly pushed the sand back in. He had done this twice in his lifetime, and his father before him, many times. The next time the medallion was unearthed would be the last. The pulse of Spirit-mother’s curse still echoed in the forest, in the very breeze, in the gentle splash of the river.

Laughing River’s father worked his own medicine, his own magic, into that of Spirit-mother’s. Nature absorbed it and tucked it away into a special place, untouchable by the malevolent forces of Spirit-mother and her once-a-generation minions. In the secret place, his medicine would swell and grow until it would be powerful enough to defeat Spirit-mother and stop her terrible sacrifices.

Too many would die during the many decades until that time. The old man regretted it, but Spirit-mother was strong, and the magic of his generation was weak.

His fine-tuned ears caught a soft sound. He froze, listening. Was it the whisper of a padded paw on crisp leaves and pine needles? Even the birds had stopped singing. The rippling of the river sounded muted.

Tension wove hard lines in the air, steeling his nerves. The hair on the back of his arms stood. The scent of Spirit-mother's medicine shivered through the clearing.

A tawny flash in the woods drew his attention. Already, she had found another victim. Since his grandson had been this generation's sacrifice, this unfortunate soul would be her toy.

The panther stepped into view, head low, mouth open in a rumbling growl of warning. The old man saw the dark circular patch of fur on the beast's chest, Spirit-mother's mark.

This one had been Spirit-mother's for a long time. Long enough for his human heart to become a beast's. It lived only to do her bidding. When she grew weary of it, she would cast it aside.

As the panther stalked him openly, playing a cruel game that would end in bloodshed and death, the old man wondered who the panther had once been. Too many people had gone missing from his village and the Spanish settlement over the years. From the looks, this bedraggled creature had been in the swamp for many years.

The panther lunged forward, knocking him to the ground his powerful paws.

The river...If he could just get into the water, the current would carry him downstream.

Still playing, the panther stalked back and forth, growling, tossing its head.

The old man was just a few feet from the water's edge.

He got to his feet and the beast tensed, crouched. Ready to spring. The old man saw the killing light in its eyes.

This time, the pounce wouldn't be part of the game.

Laughing River's father flung himself backwards into the river. Strong after many summer rains, the current caught him immediately.



He paddled along with it. When a big log drifted past, he snagged it and wrapped his tired arms around it. As soon as he saw a clear spot on the bank, he'd swim for it.

He searched the banks, confused at what he saw.

Golden shadows flickered through the cypress knees and oak trunks, slinking through the gaps like phantoms.

Not phantoms. Not shadows.

Panthers. All with big dark patches on their chests, the mark of the Spirit-mother's medallion.

Laughing River's father knew one day his medicine would save his swamp. He held on to that hope, even as the first of the big cats edged nervously into the water and began to paddle toward him. Before long the water was a roiling mass of wet, brown fur.

The first set of razor sharp teeth clamped on to his arm, the golden eyes boring into him. Over the rush of the river and yowling and splashing of huge wet cats, he heard Spirit-mother laughing over the rustle of the wind in the trees.

Before he could voice his own curse, hungry jaws tore into his throat.

## *Chapter One*

Suwannee trudged through the thick underbrush, cold, wet and terrified. The bundle in her arms, unbearably heavy, made her arms shriek with fatigue. She tried to set it down, but her arms refused to cooperate. Tears of frustration and exhaustion poured down her cheeks.

The bundle squirmed. Suwannee tried in vain to shake it away. It stuck like superglued. *What is it?* She could move one hand enough to tug the edge of the blanket aside.

The sight of the dingy ivory skull tore a yelp from her throat. Muscles in her arms protested painfully when she tried to heave the burden away once more.

The skeleton in the blanket writhed in her arms. Suwannee sobbed aloud. The bundle melded to her chest. Her fingers and arms became one with the rough weave of the fabric.

“No, no, no!” she cried as the skeleton’s head and shoulders shrugged out of the blanket. Tiny sharp finger bones dug into her chest, her shoulders. The blanket fell off her arms, empty, as the fleshless form clambered up her body to leer into her face.

Suwannee screamed. Only the woods around her responded, with a violent whipping of the tall, thin pines and the slash of sharp palmettos against her bare legs. The sharp little phalanges dug into her cheeks and the infant skull pressed its face close.

“*Mama.*” Hot, fetid breath filled her nostrils, her lungs. Coughing and gagging, she tried once more to cast the skeleton child away.

This time, the bones flew away from her. The skeleton landed on the hard-packed ground and scattered. The rasping whisper floated on the night breeze to her once more.

*"Mama."*

*Bam Bam Bam Bam!*

Suwannee gasped and sat straight up in her bed. Her nightgown was soaked, the sheets around her cold and clammy with sweat. She kicked the heavy blanket off. Lank and stringy, her sweat-dampened hair framed her face and hung down her back. What had awakened her?

She strained to hear the night, all around her outside the thin wooden walls of the house. Nothing but the rustle of trees and the slap of the screen door Michael, her ex-husband, had broken earlier in the week.

Something was out there. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She felt watched.

Suwannee swung her legs out of the bed. The uneven floorboards chilled her bare feet. Padding over to the window, she brushed aside the sheer blue curtain.

Her breath caught in her throat. Halfway between her house and Mrs. McGee's, a pale figure stood wavering in the still field. A gibbering fear flooded through her body. The ghost was coming for her.

It had taken her daddy and her brother. Her grandpa. Most of the men in her family had wandered into the swamp and never returned. Search parties had turned up nothing, time after time. When her brother vanished, they did find a single white sock. Couldn't prove it was his, though.

The figure drifted over the shaggy lawn toward the woods. Suwannee controlled her emotions long enough to strain to see the apparition's face but shadows concealed its features.

To her aid, the moon came out from behind a cloud. Rather than proving the figure to be her senile neighbor Mrs. McGee, or her perpetually drunk squatter and friend,

Broken Drum, it was even more unnerving. Where the eyes should be, deep dark shadows formed holes. A long shadow concealed the nose, and a gaping maw had formed where a mouth should be.

The figure raised one arm and pointed straight at her.

Her heart seemed to stop in her chest and ice-cold adrenaline rushed through her veins. Sweat poured down her back.

The figure's arm dropped and it scurried away, seemingly drifting over the dewy grass. When it had vanished from sight into the dense woods, Suwannee dropped to the floor, knees tight against her chest. A sharp cramp seized her belly, painful enough to make her drop her legs. She hunched over them, rocking, keening softly as tears of fear and despair rolled down her face.

The swamp was a place of fear. Terror. Naturalists, including Michael, loved the place. "Rich in native history," they claimed as they tramped in on long hikes. Michael spent days at a time out there where he claimed to have found the actual remains of Indian tribes. He begged her to come with him to see them, but she always refused. Somehow, she knew the hour she stepped foot inside the boundaries of Hertley Swamp, it would be her last.

*I have to get out of here. Away. Far away.*

Nausea swarmed through her belly. She closed her eyes tight against the sensation. Lately, the swamp had become an entity. The presence was always there, no matter where she went. There was no where in Hertley she could go to escape. The swamp circled the tiny town on three sides, the only way through being a narrow two-lane highway. Suwannee found it harder and harder to leave her house each day and drive the short distance to her secretarial job at the Sheriff's Youth Ranch.

Closing her eyes tighter, she tried to envision a way out of town, a place to go. She had no family, no contacts outside Hertley.

Her best friend Derry might go with her. Unfortunately, he was also Michael's foster brother. They'd grown up in the same home and were closer than biological brothers.

Derry was Michael's opposite. Where Michael was tall and built like an underwear model, Derry was shorter, sturdily built, ordinary by all standards, except for his deep love for all things science fiction. He wore glasses, and he kept his blonde-brown hair shaggy. Michael wore his hair long, but immaculately trimmed. The only time Derry's mane ever encountered scissors was when Suwannee pinned him down and did it herself.

Derry hated Hertley as much as she did. While her dread of the place was founded by myth and legend, his was an innocent hate, stemming mostly from the lack of comic book stores and conventions.

He'd follow her to the ends of the earth. Happily. He loved her, truly loved her, deeper than Michael ever did. With Michael, it was all sex, passion and turbulence. She got pregnant with their first baby during their sophomore year of college. They dropped out, got married, and moved back to Hertley.

Thinking back, Suwannee wanted to kick herself. She'd escaped, actually moved into an apartment forty miles from Hertley. Yet she'd ended up right back where she swore she would never return. Sleeping in her old room, even.

She opened her eyes and traced the worn grain of floor with one finger. The hoot of an owl outside her window coupled with the rustling through the sycamores and massive live oaks heightened her sense of paranoia. With a loud *bam bam bam*, the screen door slapped against the porch, caused chills to race up and down her spine. Something deep in her belly fluttered.

What a familiar feeling.

Suwannee sat straight up, forgetting her fears for a moment. She sat stock-still, waiting for the sensation to repeat itself. As she sat and meditated, it happened again. The slightest tickle, like soda bubbles in a glass, bumping against ice.

"Oh God no," she gasped and crawled as fast as she could for her purse. She dumped it out on the floor and pawed through the contents for her pocket calendar. With it in hand, she scrambled to her bathroom on her hands and knees. Still on the floor, she reached up and slapped the light on.

Amber-yellow light flooded the dark bedroom and bathroom as she flipped the paper calendar open. A paper clip marked the current month, July. A photo of her and Michael fell out, followed by one of the three of them- her, Derry, and Michael. She scanned the month of June. No red 'X'. She flipped back to May. Nothing marred the blocks and columns.

Cold sweat popped out on her face. The pages of the cheap calendar stuck to her damp fingers.

She flipped through April. Nothing. March, the same...

At the very beginning of February, she saw the little 'X' she used to note the start of her menstrual cycle. Toward the end of the month, one block was scribbled over in black ink. The paper was gouged and torn in that little spot.

That was the night she saw Michael at Stompers'. In the dimly lit bar, her heart fueled by too many margaritas, she'd let him talk her into letting him come home with her. The next morning she'd kicked him out and forbid him to ever speak to her again.

Oh, Lord, that night. They hadn't used protection.

How had over four months of missed periods gone unnoticed? She was as regular as clockwork.

Right after their night together, her dreams had started. She'd lapsed into bouts of depression with long nights spent huddled by the window, staring out at ethereal figures moving through the dark, misty driveway, heart pounding, bathed in icy sweat.

The screen door slapped against the porch once more, harder than before, sounding much more powerful than the wind.

Fear crashed over Suwannee in a wave so powerful it made her dizzy. Her awareness heightened to levels so high she thought she could see the delicate currents of air. The sheen of perspiration dried to a stiff, cold skin atop her own.

She eased to her feet and took baby steps toward the doorway. Pausing at the jamb, she gazed out into the living room. The front door was locked, the security chain drawn. She glanced to her left, through the open kitchen to the back door. The kitchen door wouldn't even close properly, thanks to the swelling of the particle board beneath

the linoleum. To keep it shut, she'd propped one of her dining room chairs beneath the door knob then stacked several of Michael's abandoned weights on the seat.

The banging repeated itself, startling her so badly she lurched back into the doorframe and whacked her head.

"Hey, Suwannee!"

Nearly sobbing with relief, Suwannee dashed to the door, yanking it open but forgetting the security chain. The chain held and snatched the knob from her fingers, pulling fingernails painfully. Taking a second to breathe, she disengaged the chain.

"Derry!" She flew into his arms.

"I've been standing out here knocking for like hours. Well, maybe like five minutes. You're right, it is kinda creepy out here."

"Derry, Derry."

He smelled like popcorn and soft pretzels. He must have been to the theater. Suwannee dimly remembered some sort of anime movie-fest. He'd asked her to go, but she'd declined.

*Because she felt nauseous.*

Her revelation would break his heart. Though they'd never officially talked of seeing one another, they knew they never could. It would hurt Michael too badly. Neither had the heart for it. Even their friendship had to be censored.

She buried her face in his shoulder and inhaled. Beneath the scent of popcorn lay the crisp scent of his soap. Inspired with a bit of confidence, she led him into the house and turned on the lamps.

"Wow," he said softly. "You look really upset. What's wrong?"

"Bad dreams. Scary stuff outside. Stuff." *I'm pregnant and it's going to break your heart. Mine's already broken.* Suwannee's eyes ached from all the crying she'd been doing, but still more tears squeezed out.

Derry pulled her into another hug. "Hey. You know I'm not so good at the crying stuff."

"I'm sorry, Derr," she said, her voice muffled by his shirt. "Did you have fun tonight?"

"Yeah." They sat down on the couch. He reached over, grabbed tissues from the box on the end table and passed them over.

She swabbed her face. "It would have been a lot better if you'd been with me. I saw a couple anime shorts I know you would have loved. There was this one..." He paused and reached out with one finger, gently tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ears. "But that stuff really doesn't matter. I left early. I was worried about you."

Another bout of despair consumed Suwannee. He cared so much for her, and she cared just as much for him.

They could never be. Michael stood between them, even though her marriage to him was over.

Derry's bright blue eyes, always so full of mirth and curiosity, caressed her face, the lines of her neck, the curve of her shoulder. He could find the good in everything, make a joke or a game out of anything. There was no joke in his eyes right then. Silently, he confessed his love, his devotion.

It broke Suwannee's heart. She wanted to accept his offer. It would be so easy to lean forward, kiss his generous lips.

"You don't have to worry about me," she said. Heat suffused through her face. Flattered by his concern, she picked at a tiny hole in her pajama bottoms. "Really."

"Can't help it. I don't want to lose you – um, your friendship. No, I mean you –"

"I understand." Suwannee sniffled. She glanced at the clock on the DVD player. Not even midnight. Not nearly as late as she thought. She recalled her frightening dreams. It was odd for her to go to sleep so deeply so early.

"Have you seen Michael lately?" Derry asked, clearing his throat. "He called in yesterday and today."

"I haven't. He's probably off moping. He should have got the final judgment for the divorce in the mail this morning. I got mine. If he calls in tomorrow, just call me and I'll



come help you out." She forced a smile. "So, what brings you way out here this time of night?"

Derry shrugged. "I was just on my way home and I was thinking about you and the next thing I know I was in the front of your house."

His eyes dropped to her chest. A blush flared through his cheeks before he glanced away. Suwannee bit back a smile. She knew Derry had had a couple of girlfriends, but nothing had ever been real serious between him and anyone else.

Suwannee felt that soft tickle deep inside. Her heart lurched painfully. She forced it down. "Derry, when you drove up, did you see anybody outside? Like down toward Broken Drum's place?"

He frowned, thinking. "Uh-uh. I thought I saw him out by his teepee, but it was just a reflection or something."

"Reflection off what?"

He paused, frowning. "I don't know. Did you see somebody?"

"I thought...oh, you're just going to think I'm crazy."

"No, no, tell me." He took her hand.

Sighing, Suwannee told him about the pale figure running across the yard. When she got to the part when the figure pointed at her, her voice broke.

"It's going to kill me, Derry. One day I'm going to go into the swamp and it will kill me. Like my dad and my brother."

Derry shook his head. "Don't go into the woods, Suwannee. No matter what."

She tightened her grip on his hand. Being so close to him made her lightheaded. He was everything Michael was not. He was safety and steadiness and real, true love. He was sure arms and a steady heart. He wouldn't go chasing after floozies, wouldn't be so sure the next pasture was the greenest.

And she couldn't have him. He was Michael's best friend, the next best thing to a brother.

"Do you believe me?" she asked in a whisper. "About something being out in the woods?"

Derry nodded slowly. "I believe anything you say, Swan."

His eyes met hers. "We could leave," she whispered, mesmerized by the myriad of blues and aquas in his irises. Tiny flecks of gold sparkled, hidden in the striations. "Go somewhere far away. Just me and you."

Derry swallowed hard. A look flickered across his face. Suwannee knew from that brief expression he'd thought of the very same thing. "I would in a heartbeat, Suwannee. I want to more than anything. But..." he broke off and shrugged, staring down at his scuffed, dirty sneakers.

Suwannee nodded. "Michael."

Derry looked up, anguish etched on his boyish features. "Michael. He's my brother."

"I know." *Just do it. Kiss him. He'll never speak to you again anyway when he finds out your secret.* "I know."

Suwannee put one hand on his chest, the other on the sofa beside his thigh, and leaned forward. Her lips met his. His eyes opened wide for the briefest moment of time, then fluttered closed as they both savored the kiss.

His hands slid up her arms to her shoulders. He held on tight for a moment, kissing her back, then pushed her away, one hand moving to his lips.

"Suwannee..." Obviously torn, he reached out and ran his fingers through her hair. "God, Suwannee..." He stood and paced away from her. "I..." he plowed his hand through his own hair. "We can't hurt Michael."

"He didn't care about hurting us," Suwannee retorted. "He tore our hearts to shreds. Made it impossible for us to be happy. He cheated on me, with your girlfriend. Why can't we be happy?"

She leaned her arms on her thighs, her hair falling in a pale curtain around her face. "I'm sorry. I know. We can't hurt him."

Derry heaved a huge sigh. "The only thing I want in this world is to make you happy, Suwannee. I'd give up everything for you. More than Michael ever would or ever did. But right now we can't."

"That's why we should leave and never come back. Go so far away he'd never find us."

Derry, eyes shimmering with tears, shook his head. "I'm so sorry. I hate myself for this. But we can't do this now."

Nodding, understanding and hating it, Suwannee agreed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

Derry gave her a crooked grin. "I'm glad you did. I'll have something to dream about tonight."

Suwannee smiled, a tiny ray of light eeking through the thick black cloud around her heart.

"I should go. Go back to bed. Don't be scared. I won't let anything happen to you." He grinned at her again. "If you ever have any urges to go into the swamp, call me."

"Will do. Good night." She opened the door for him. "If you change your mind about... leaving..."

He gave her a sad smile. "You'll be the first one I call. 'Night, Suwannee. Sweet dreams."

"Night."

Suwannee watched him drive away. As his taillights faded into the night, something deep in the woods screamed.

Heart pounding, Suwannee whispered, "Just a bobcat, just a bobcat," over and over again as she shut the door and slid the security chain into place.

She dreamed again...In the heart of the jungle-like swamp, she stooped to pick something up. Heavy and oval-shaped, crusted with dirt and leaves. All around her rain fell in heavy, fat drops, soaking her in seconds. She brushed the debris from the object.

It was some sort of stone. Black as night. Smooth, weighing much more than it should have. It radiated a coldness that chilled her soul. She wanted to throw it away, but she felt compelled to clean off the other side.

Under her fingers, deep, gold-accented etchings formed. Thunderclouds obscured the sky and blocked the light, limiting her vision. She strained to make out the carving.

Eyes. A triangular nose. Deep slashes on either side. Whiskers? Was it a cat? After dislodging the last of the dirt from the top, she saw the ears and knew what it was.

A panther. Mouth open, fangs bared. It was the creepy pendant Michael had found in the river.

Something crashed through the brush behind her and Suwannee knew she had to run and run fast. She looped the medallion's leather cord around her neck.

She raced through the swamp as fast as she could. Behind her, the thing chasing her growled. She risked a glance over her shoulder.

Some sort of cat, blurry and unformed, chased her. Half as tall as she was, powerful muscles rippled as the pale tan fur formed. Huge sharp teeth snapped at the air.

Suwannee lunged forward. The medallion smacked against her chest with every step.

The sound of the pursuing panther finally faded. Suwannee slowed down, gasping for breath. She stopped and bent over her knees, sucking in cool air. Around her neck, the leather cord began to tighten.

"No. No!" Suwannee tore at the thin cord, tearing two fingernails off. It tightened, tightened, tightened until she couldn't draw in a breath. She dropped to the debris-covered forest floor.

The night faded into a blue wash. A damp cool nose touched her arm, and through the thick haze that proceeded oblivion, she heard a satisfied growl. Sharp teeth closed over the soft flesh of her belly, so gently at first, then meeting in the most excruciating of pains.

Blind from lack of oxygen, so weak she couldn't bother a fly, Suwannee fumbled at the panther's head as it chewed almost delicately at her belly with the softest of growls.

Instead of touching fur, she encountered smooth, human skin. Soft hair falling over her hand. Her fingertips brushed moist lips, a hard nose. Under her fingers, the human jaws worked in the motions of feeding.

The pain bore her away into oblivion.

## *Chapter Two*

The sun beat down on the withering grass outside the tour pavilion. *Ruthless*, Derry thought. Sweat dripped from every pore in his body. His very cells were sweating. Even his *DNA* was sweating. Why didn't Michael just buy one of those neat little trailers? The ones with air conditioning and reliable plumbing.

Derry wanted a real desk, file cabinets, storage that wasn't so easy for everything from raccoons to wild teens to get into. At night they folded down the wooden panels that formed the awnings and locked them with huge padlocks, but it wasn't any mean feat to unscrew the lock's hasp and shimmy into the shelter.

Not that there was anything worth stealing. The most valuable thing around was the cooler of sodas for sale for fifty cents each.

Derry had dreams for the place. There was enough profit brought in each month to buy one of those trailers, plus one of the concession trailers from which they could sell food and drinks and souvenirs from.

Michael roared up the dirt drive on his ATV, parked, and hopped the rickety counter. "We're canceling the tours for today, maybe tomorrow. Some fool kid went missing and we're using the boats to search the river and the canals."

"Swamp, too?" A vision of Suwannee popped into his head. This would be even more fodder for her night terrors.

"Not sure yet. I just got a call from the Sheriff's department about helping out. Swamp Baby's going to be the search base. Kid went missing from the youth ranch."

"W-want me to call Suwannee?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "You know she won't go an inch down this river."

"I meant, maybe she can help me out at the desk. It's bound to be pretty wild around here.

Michael frowned and Derry's heart skipped a beat.

*Does he suspect something?*

After a pause, Michael shrugged. "Whatever. Yeah, you better. I need you to pilot the other boat."

*Dang it.* Being next to Suwannee made him feel heady, wildly happy. He was invincible. If Michael wasn't around...

High school had been hell, being her best friend, but knowing he and Suwannee would never be more. Michael possessed her heart and soul. All his wild passion, his amazing good looks...Derry was nothing compared to him. Just the best friend. The brother-figure.

*What I'd do to be her lover. To share her bed every night. Her life, for as long as we live.*

Michael smacked the counter, startling Derry out of his reverie. "So, call her. Get her in quick. The search crews will be here in a few minutes."

"Yeah, okay." Derry grabbed the phone. Michael stood there, arms crossed over his chest, watching as Derry punched in Suwannee's number. Watching close, eyes intent.

*He knows something's up.* Dread settled in the pit of Derry's stomach. *I don't know what I'm scared of.*

The phone rang, three times, four times, five times. On the sixth ring, Suwannee's sleepy voice came on the other line.

Michael reached over and hit the speaker-phone button. Derry froze.

"Hello? Who is this? Michael?"

"No, it-it's me, Derry."

"Oh. Hey." She coughed and her voice cleared. "I was going to call you later and apologize for-"

He cut her off. "It's fine. Listen. I'm at the Swamp Baby and Michael needs you to come in and help."

She was quiet for a moment. "What's going on?"

"Kid's missing in the woods."

"I'm not going out there."

"I don't want you to. You're going to stay here in the pavilion man the phones."

Michael's red-hot glare seared through him. Derry realized he'd been speaking in a gentle, comforting tone. Definitely not one Michael would exactly appreciate his best friend using when speaking to his ex-wife.

Derry cleared his voice and stiffened up his tone. "Lot of people will be here. Can you come in?"

"I'll have to call the youth ranch and see if they need me."

"Okay. Bye." He dropped the phone. Glancing up at Michael, he grabbed the tour registration ledger and flipped to the first page. "Gotta cancel today's tours."

Michael's eyes roved his face, searching. "Yeah. You do that." He turned on his heel and stalked out the back door of the pavilion. He came around the corner and headed down the dirt path to the dock.

Derry slumped over the ledger. Good grief.

He wasn't real sure what he was scared of. Michael wouldn't physically hurt him, although if the notion came into the bigger man's head, he easily could. Michael just seemed...unsteady.

Before he could figure out the jumbled thoughts in his head, Fish and Wildlife Commission agents roared up the dirt drive in their big Fords, throwing a cloud of dust high into the air. The four trucks parked and the agents got out, dressed in field gear.

Within an hour, five hundred volunteers, sheriff's deputies, and park rangers had gathered. The people milled about, either donning bright orange vests and whistles or tying bright plastic tape around their waists. A group of people on horseback showed up, their mounts whinnying and bucking from the excitement.

Four concession trailers pulled up. Derry directed the drivers to park in a line near the pavilion.



Suwannee arrived, fighting her way through the crowd. "This is...insane. So unorganized." She hopped the counter, landing beside him on sure feet. "So who was it that went missing?"

"Some teenager. Kimmie Dumane."

"She's not from around here, is she?"

"Uh-uh. She's from further south. Her parents were bringing her up for the Project Cooperation reunion party at the Youth Ranch."

"Really? So why are they searching here?"

"They found some clothes she'd been wearing in a canal that feeds into the swamp."

"Oh."

Derry leaned closer. "They don't have much hope of finding her alive. I heard there was blood on the clothes."

Suwannee sighed. "I hate it. So sad. What am I supposed to be doing?"

"Phones. Just manning the pavilion. If anybody shows up for the tour, give them a rain check."

Her eyes flicked up to his. He gulped. His skin tingled from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. "Are you going to be here?"

"No. I'm taking one of the boats out."

A truck pulling an airboat on a trailer rattled and thumped down the rough drive toward the docks. Another one followed it.

Suwannee chewed on her bottom lip. "Be careful out there. The swamp's dangerous."

"I know." Risking it all, he reached out and stroked her silk-soft blonde hair.

Overhead, thunder rumbled an ominous warning.

### *Chapter Three*

Michael hopped on to the dock. The skies were black with thunderclouds, as well as the approaching night. The search had been called off for the evening, since there obviously wasn't much hope in finding the kid alive anyway. Her shoes had been found caught in driftwood about a mile down-river. One was bloody and mangled, most likely by a gator.

*What a fate*, he thought. Where had she found a spot to get close enough to the water to get grabbed? For nearly eight miles in either direction, the trees and brush grew right up to the waterline. In some places, cypress knees literally blocked access to the river.

Derry blew up to the dock. The giant propeller slowed, stopped, and he jumped to the dock to tie the boat off.

Michael watched him silently. He knew something was going on between his friend and Suwannee, no matter what either of them said.

If they thought the secret little glances and sneaky touches—hands brushing, fingertips touching, shoulders rubbing—was going over his head, they were sorely mistaken. He saw it all. Knew it all.

So what if the divorce was final? In his heart, Suwannee was still his. Would be his forever. It wouldn't take long before she succumbed to the passion that had kept her tied to him for nearly ten years. They'd separated before and always got back together. Always. Suwannee was still his. Derry had no right encroaching on his territory.

Michael stared through the gloom toward the pavilion. Suwannee's pale skin made her glow in the twilight. She had leaned over on the counter, head propped up on her hands, laughing with the drunken idiot, Broken Drum.

Full of contempt, he brushed by Derry and stalked up the dirt path. Trash littered the grounds, stuck in the low bushes and floating at the edges of the lapping river. Bright orange safety tape fluttered in the evening breeze like streamers caught in the grass.

He turned back to Derry. "Make sure all this crap is picked up."

Derry opened his mouth to protest. Michael silenced him with a sharp glance. He was the boss, and what he said, went.

Suwannee sighed as he approached. Broken Drum gave him a tight smile and backed up a step.

*Good. You better back up.*

Broken Drum patted the counter. "I'll talk to you about it later, honey."

"All right. I'll try to stop by in the morning before I go to work." She leaned over and pecked the grizzled old man's cheek. "Need anything?"

Broken Drum shook his head and walked off into the evening.

"Yes?" Suwannee asked, her tone short. She grabbed the duster from under the counter and swished it over the counter, over the phone and ledger.

"What's he got to talk to you about?" Michael jerked his chin toward Broken Drum's receding figure.

"Nothing important."

"Well, what is it then?"

"None of your business. Anything else you need me to do?"

Disgusted with her refusal to reveal whatever it was Michael gestured with his thumb toward the open land surrounding the Swamp Baby. "Help Derry pick the trash up. I need you to come in tomorrow morning."

She frowned at him. "So what's the attitude for, Michael?"

"You're keeping secrets from me."

“So? I don’t have to tell you anything anymore. And you’ve kept secrets from me from day one!”

“Suwannee, you know that sooner or later, we’re going to get back together.”

She recoiled, crossing her arms over her chest. “No, I don’t think so, Michael.”

“We will. You watch. It’s our destiny.”

The need to persuade her, right then and there, rose up so strong in him that it was all he could do to keep from leaping over the counter and shaking it into her.

She kept shaking her head. “Not in this lifetime.”

Michael hopped the counter and reached out for her. She backed away, uncertain in the gloom.

“Michael? What are you doing?” Her voice held a note of warning. “Michael!”

“Suwannee, you know I love you. More than anything.” He grabbed her shoulders and gave her the tiniest of shakes. She tried to squirm away, but he tightened his grip. “I’ll be better. I won’t hurt you anymore.”

Tight-voiced, she whimpered, “You’re hurting me now.”

“We got married, and I meant it. Forever. You’re always going to be connected to me.”

“Michael, you’re scaring me.”

“No, no, baby, I’d never hurt you. I won’t hurt you.”

“Mike?” Derry’s voice startled him.

“Get out of here,” he growled. “This is private.”

“Let her go, man.” Derry placed his hands on the counter, preparing to leap over.

“Don’t come over here. You know I can hurt you, Derry.”

Derry hesitated. Michael savored the feelings of superiority that rushed through him. He ought to rough Derry up a little, just enough to prove his point. He took a step in his foster brother’s direction.

Torn between jumping the counter and saving himself, Derry took a half-step back. He risked a glance over Michael’s shoulder, where Suwannee stood in the corner, reaching for the door.

“Mike, come on, calm down. It’s been a rough day. Just relax.”

Michael scowled. Who was this little twerp to tell him to relax? The only rough part of the day had been thinking about his foster brother moving in on his woman. Not to mention trying to figure out what the drunk old man wanted.

Suwannee swung out the door and vanished around the pavilion toward her car. Michael lurched after her, but stopped when she revved the engine. One hand braced on the splintery door frame, he watched her drive away, feeling as if part of his heart were attached to the bumper.

A sound distracted him. Derry walked down the path to his car, shoulders and back held straight and tense. A single stab of regret shot through his heart. He recalled all the nights as kids they’d spent in their bunk beds, talking about Derry’s family adopting him. Girls. Television. Girls. Sports, comic books, Star Trek, and girls.

He opened his mouth to call Derry back, but his voice caught in his throat. He couldn’t. Derry was messing around with Suwannee. At least he assumed so. Yeah, yeah, he knew what assuming meant...

Derry’s car started out in the darkness and headlights flashed by the pavilion. Red taillights vanished down the drive.

*Probably going to Suwannee’s.*

Stomping through the ankle-high grass, he kicked away the support poles and the awnings fell with a great crash. He snapped the locks into place. Cursing Derry and Suwannee and himself under his breath, he stalked over to his ATV. Tomorrow, he’d take care of every thing.

Complete darkness quickly descended over the woods. The river rippled quietly, and the wind ruffled the trees in a gentle whisper.

Propelled on the breeze, an oak leaf blew against his shoulder. He plucked it off and held it up to the starlight. Released it. It floated to the ground.

A flicker of motion near the dock caught his attention. He stared hard, trying to make out the wavering, pale figure. From the distance, it looked like Suwannee.

He called out for her. The figure jumped as if startled, then darted out of sight beyond the canoe rack.

“Hey! Suwannee?”

He jogged down the path worn by hundreds of feet a month. He reached the dock and looked left, then right. No sign of the figure.

“Hello?”

“*Over here, Michael.*” The voice was so soft; he barely heard it over the quiet gurgle of the river. It seemed to come from the edge of the woods, beyond the thick stand of cypress trees.

The voice called him by name. An odd feeling stirred in his belly. A pull toward the voice. The knowledge that something huge was about to happen. He made his way along the river to the first cypress tree. He stepped up on the thigh-high cypress knee and leaned over into the forest.

He froze as soft, unseen hands, cool as moonbeams, caressed his face. The touch was oddly familiar. His eyelids drifted shut and he savored the sensations.

The wind whispered to him, the words barely audible. Try as he might, he couldn't make sense of them. The hands rifled through his hair. His thick, collar-length hair slipped from his ponytail and swung across his jaw. He shivered and leaned into the strange, wonderful presence that saturated the little pocket of shadows.

Cool lips touched his forehead. The gesture triggered a memory buried so deeply in his mind he wondered if it was even his. The images burst like fireworks through his head, blinding him to the outside world for a long moment. Pictures, sounds and events flashed through his skull so rapidly he sank to his knees in the musty forest debris.

After a while the images slowed and faded and he could consciously remember no more than he had before. He strained to recall anything, but only a single, overwhelming word filled his mind to bursting.

Not just a word. A state of being, a satisfaction, a sense of being complete.

He uttered the name of something he'd never known and always longed for.

“*Mother.*”

The presence rippled in acknowledgement. On the wind, the words finally became whole and made sense. "I am Spirit-mother. Mother of your mother, mother of her mother. I am your mother, back a hundred generations."

"Spirit-mother," Michael breathed. He knew his heritage as a Native American, his blood a pure mix of Mikosukee, Seminole, and Cherokee. Never before had he truly *experienced* his heritage. Power sang through his veins and deep pride in his dark skin and brown-black eyes blossomed. Untapped skills passed down through generations of blood memory chanted in his flesh, summoned to life by Spirit-mother.

The atmosphere changed as suddenly as the weather of a Florida afternoon. The happiness that pervaded the small area was sucked out as if by a vacuum, leaving a deep desolate void in its place. A sense of sadness, thick and heavy like syrup, crested in a huge wave over Michael. Even the foliage seemed to bow under the weight. Caught up in the tide of agony, he wailed into the night sky.

Spirit-mother floated like a fog over everything he could see. She gathered herself up and screamed to the heavens. Her ungodly screech made the very trees shiver.

*Suwannee really did hear her*, Michael thought, pleasantly surprised. If she was sensitive to Spirit-mother as well, then it was a sure sign they were meant to be together. His thoughts barely formed in the din of pain and chaos in his skull.

The scream ebbed away, echoing back in ripples.

"Come with me," Spirit-mother, her voice barely audible over the pines in the wind. Her voice *was* the wind.

He followed the mist through the scrub. He reveled in the ability to pick the perfect steps, to tread as soundlessly as his native ancestors did on the very ground they had walked over.

Spirit-mother led him to a massive live oak he'd always admired and pointed out on the river tours. It was mere feet from the river. Another big storm, one more flood, and the ground beneath it would dissolve. The tree would crash into the murky water. There was no doubt its size and weight would form a formidable natural dam.

Beneath one of the largest branches, the grass had worn away. At Spirit-mother's instructions, he knelt in the sandy patch of land.

"Dig, my son."

He shoveled sand out of the hole by the handful, until he reached cool, black dirt. Things came out of the hole; bits of cloth and bone and beads. Long black hairs that tangled around his fingers.

His fingers brushed something smooth and heavy. It didn't move when he touched it again, so it was definitely heavier and more substantial than the other bits he'd dug out of the hole.

It wasn't coming out easily. He crouched over the hole and pulled. His grip slipped from the artifact and he fell back on his butt. Spirit-mother's laughter rippled around him.

He dug deeper, until he could get his fingers around the object. Finally, he tugged it out of the dirt and held it up in the moonlight. Something akin to electricity shot through the round stone, blasting it from his fingers and tossing him onto his butt a foot away from where he'd been kneeling.

His fingertips throbbed.

"With power comes pain. Pick it up."

He crawled forward and took the round object into his hand. The moonlight caught in the fine lines etched into the surface.

"*Kotza.*" This time, Spirit-mother's voice came on the lapping of the river at the narrow shoreline.

"Panther," Michael replied, nodding. He'd never heard the Seminole language before, but he knew without a doubt what the word meant.

He traced the design on the face of the stone, scraping the dirt out with his fingernail.

Stylized, yet primitive, the face of the big cat had been etched into the satiny black stone.



He touched a little nodule on the top. A hole went all the way through it. A medallion, then. Michael slipped the leather loop off his neck. It held a charm Suwannee had given him years ago. He untied the knot, slipped the silver charm off, and replaced it with the heavy, polished stone pendant.

When he settled the leather thong over his neck again, the medallion rested against his breastbone. It felt right. The medallion belonged there...belonged because the panther was part of him now. Power rippled through him like waves over a rough sea, the wind pouring over the dunes, rippling the salt-silvered palmetto fronds.

As long as he had this force within him, he was unstoppable.

Spirit-mother caressed his hair once more. "My son, follow me. As you truly are..."

A deep burning seared his belly. He crouched, clutching his stomach, until the sensation subsided. When he stood, the woods whirled around him wildly.

A long shaky moment later, he gazed through the darkness surrounding him with new senses. He heard every bug, every animal crashing through the trees. He *smelled* the animals, saw the subtle signs of passage through the brush.

Michael knelt and brushed aside a leaf. He picked up a single coarse hair. Bobcat. Under a thin layer of scuffed-up dirt, he saw the track. In a semi-crouch, he followed the path through the woods a ways, smelling the spore on the still air.

Another scent caught his attention. Raccoon. He dropped to his hands and knees.

His hands...

Before his eyes, his hands folded in on themselves, tan fur sprouted and his nails formed into deadly claws.

He glanced down at his body. From tall and lean he'd become short, stocky and covered with light tan fur. Claws. A tail sprouted from his rear end. To his amusement, he whipped it back and forth.

A panther. He was a panther! *As you truly are*, Spirit-mother had said.

He bounded over a palmetto bush, yowled into the night.

He sniffed the air. Suwannee. He smelled her. And Derry.

And sex. Images of them coiled together passionately swam through his mind. He began to lose his grip on specific thoughts. Everything melded into basic instincts. *Hunt, feed, sleep, hide.*

A cold hand on the back of his neck reined him in, jerking him back to his human thought-processes.

“You must not lose yourself to the panther, my son. Become one with him, but do not lose your mind. You have a task.” She knelt before him, a woman in a misty white nightgown that billowed in diaphanous folds in the slow night air currents.

Michael leaned forward and nuzzled her cheek. She cupped her hands around his face. “Follow me.”

Spirit-mother rose and drifted into the woods. Michael hesitated, one paw raised to step forward. Where had she gone?

He sniffed the ground. Only the scent of his human-form rose from the dust.

The primitive instincts crept back. Slowly, the thoughts of stalking unwary prey clouded everything else in his predator’s mind.

Suwannee’s vanilla-musk scent nipped along a fresh breeze. Part of him knew he really wasn’t smelling it, but the animal in him drove him forward.

The palmettos parted for his lanky body. The saw grass dared not slice though his thick fur to harm his surprisingly delicate skin. Not far down the path, he caught the scent of something else. A wild pig.

Salivating, he neared the spot where the small sow rooted in the muck and debris not far from the water’s edge. A few feet away, in the river, the golden-yellow eyes of a bull gator watched, unblinking.

Michael lunged too soon, startling the sow and inciting the gator into action. The sow leapt into the water, the gator leapt out, and Michael landed somewhere in the middle. Front paws in the water and his hindquarters on dry land, he was in a bad position. The pig could turn at any moment and rip into his belly with her razor-sharp teeth, or the gator would happily accept him as a meal substitute.

The pig squealed and raced up the shore. The gator twisted as she shot by and snagged her by her hind leg. He went into his death roll, ripping the hind leg off and flinging the rest of the pig into the brush.

Michael heard it thrashing and squealing. The odor of blood was heavy in the air.

*Mine*, he thought, and sidestepped the less-than-happy gator.

After a quick search, he found the quivering, squealing pig and ripped her throat out in one bite. The hot gush of blood poured over his snout and whiskers. He lapped it up eagerly before tearing into the soft belly.

When he'd finished, he carried the carcass high into a tree. Leftovers, the human part of his mind laughed. It was an alien sensation that made him sneeze and rub his paw over his whiskers.

He dashed through the jungle-like swamp, leaping over fallen trees and limbs, surging into trees and flying from branch to branch. He missed once and skittered along the length, trying to find a purchase.

He hit the ground with a thud and knocked the air from his lungs. Exhilarated, he felt no pain. His laugh came out as a throaty growl and whip of his tail.

He burst through the woods into Suwannee's backyard. She was outside, walking from Broken Drum's trailer. For a moment he was surprised and frightened. Cowering at the edge of the woods in tall grass, his humanity elbowed through to his consciousness.

Suwannee.

Perfect.

He stalked her, low to the ground. On silent paws he padded close. She had no idea he was there. One back paw landed on a small stick. It cracked.

The woman before him froze. She turned around. He readied his feet under him for the pounce. The tight muscles in his legs quivered as he shifted his feet ever so slightly. The long grass covered any movement he made.

He watched her through the grass for a moment. In the moonlight, she was beautiful.

*Beauty fades with betrayal. Blood is thicker than water, my son. But this isn't the time.*

His concentration interrupted by the soft feminine voice echoing in his mind, he crouched tight against the moon-cooled ground.

Suwannee gasped and whirled around suddenly, alarmed not by him, but the tall, dark-haired woman who'd emerged from the woods.

He rose up, ears pricked forward. Suwannee saw him and gasped, one hand flying to her mouth. Her terrified eyes flashed from him, to the woman, back to him.

He wanted to assure her it was just him, Michael, but the only thing that came from his mouth was a low whine.

Spirit-mother extended a hand toward him. Compelled, he moved to her. Her fingertips were icy against his nose.

"The evil of our past flows through her veins," the woman whispered. She knelt and wrapped her arms around his neck.

In the blink of an eye, he was a child, a human child, with long black hair hanging around his shoulders, naked save for a thin leather flap hanging over his groin and buttocks. Small dark arms looped around the woman's shoulders. His arms.

He knew what she wanted him to do. The wail of a baby filtered through the trees. "There must be a sacrifice," he whispered.

She released him and he was an adult, himself again. Suwannee whimpered and clasped both hands over her mouth.

"I don't understand." The Swamp Baby legend came to mind, but Spirit-mother wasn't part of it.

Cold hands rested on his shoulders. "I am older than any story, Kotza. Many before you have tried to make the sacrifice. Only the worthy shall prevail."

Michael had a sudden vivid image of Suwannee before him on her knees, his hands clasped tight around her throat. Her eyes bulged and her tongue protruded from her lovely lips, swollen and blue.

She couldn't move. Her eyes tracked his every move. He watched his hands move up, seemingly on the air currents. One after the other closed around Suwannee's slender throat.

Thumbs on her windpipe, he squeezed. Her hands scrabbled at his, clawing and pinching. She went limp and tried to squirm from his grip.

It didn't take long before her movements became frantic. Desperate.

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she went limp once more, this time for good.

The icy woman placed a hand on his shoulder. "You did so well. Mother is proud of you, dear one." Though he'd never seen his biological mother, he knew this woman was not she, but they were connected in some way. With another soft touch, she faded as silently back to wherever she'd come from.

Hot tears rolled down his cheeks as he laid Suwannee gently on the dewy grass. He sat next to her and sobbed until dawn brightened the sky.

## Chapter Four

*Dear God, I can't breathe!*

Suwannee clawed at her throat, trying to tear away the hands that squeezed tighter and tighter, crushing her windpipe.

Black spots flashed before her eyes. She tried to arch her throat out of the iron grip. Frantic now, she grabbed handfuls of the bed sheets and pulled herself toward the edge of the bed.

No one loomed over her, strangling her.

This was happening without another person in the room.

But she *felt* the hands beneath hers. She felt her fingernails digging deep into someone else's flesh. Finally her head hung over empty space. One more kick, and she tumbled off the bed.

Sweet, cold oxygen filled her lungs. Her starved body relished it. Icy tingling rushed up and down her limbs. The floorboards felt wonderful beneath her back.

It was a dream. A very vivid, painful dream, but it was just a dream. No one had been in her room, trying to strangle her. The whole weird thing with Michael at the Swamp Baby must have triggered it. Suwannee sat up and felt the faint wiggle deep in her belly. She smiled, one hand over the vague bump. Somehow she'd missed the firm little hill forming.

"Wonder how?" She used the bed to pull herself to her feet. What was she going to do with a baby? She barely made enough money to support herself, much less a child.

And with the way Michael was acting, he'd never believe the kid was his.

Suwannee didn't know what was worse. Did she want him involved in the kid's life? Michael had issues, and he was getting worse every day.

Her neck really stung. Ached, too. Jeez, what a vivid dream. Maybe she'd bruised herself in her sleep. In the bathroom she flipped on the light as she stretched toward the ceiling, yawning, almost light-hearted. For the first time in weeks, the rapid fear that plagued her at night remained at bay.

Maybe things were getting better. She felt a dull sort of resignation to the fact that even though they were divorced, she could never fully escape Michael. Not as long as she lived in Hertley.

She'd asked Derry to run away with her. He chose Michael over her. Bitterness as strong as seawater flooded her mind, her heart. She *knew* he had feelings for her. Knew it as sure as the sun was yellow, the sky blue.

Michael treated Derry like crap. Made him do all the maintenance work at the Swamp Baby, made him work the desk instead of taking the boats out. Derry cleaned the bathrooms, the docks, everything. Derry ran all the errands. If it had to be done, he did it. Subjected to Michael's demands and expectations, he never complained. He was loyal to Michael. Though not blood brothers, Derry treated Michael as one.

Suwannee heaved a sigh and gazed into the mirror. "What the..." She leaned closer. Eight deep red marks imprinted the skin on both sides of her neck. Two dark bruises marred the pale skin along her windpipe. Breathless, she touched the contusions.

"It wasn't real, it was a dream."

But the wounds were there, purple and red. Her throat ached. She could still feel the after-effects of asphyxiation. It was just a dream. Dreams don't leave marks.

But she'd been *awake*. The pressure of the unseen hands had awakened her!

With a low moan, Suwannee dropped to the floor and huddled against the cabinets.

*I have to get out of here. This place is driving me crazy.*

Beyond the thin wooden walls of the house, the swamp began to howl her name.

"Just the wind in the trees," she whispered fiercely to herself. "Wind in the trees. It can't hurt me. Can't hurt me."

Suwannee rocked back and forth until her butt ached and her thighs cramped. Hours had passed and dawn's pale light filtered in through the cheap blinds in the window over the toilet. Giddy with relief, she stretched out her legs. She winced from the sharp pains radiating down her stiff legs. Stumbling back to her cold rumpled bed, she eased down on it.

She touched her neck. Still sore and tender. In the light of day, she believed more readily that she herself had caused the bruises.

Though a bit comforting, the thought didn't ease the chills from the dream. In her mind's eye she saw the panther bounding through the long grass, mouth open in a snarl that reverberated through the dark night. Behind the panther stood the woman in white, one hand outstretched, finger pointing at her. Suwannee had turned to run, even made it a few steps, when the panther reached her. Instead of sharp claws tearing her skin, she'd felt hands, all too human, closing around her throat.

Broken Drum would know what it meant. Fake Native American or not, he had a knack for figuring out dreams and the like. His interpretations had never failed her.

She glanced out the window, ready to walk to the end of the property to see the old man.

Though the east was brightening, the Florida morning was still dark. Suwannee let the curtain fall back into place and stretched out on the bed. Sleep beckoned her.

*Maybe just a little nap.* She closed her eyes and was out in five minutes flat.

\* \* \* \*

Derry got to work early. The pavilion was still closed up tight, but Michael's ATV was parked next to it. Weird. He usually didn't come in until the place opened at ten.

He might have walked home...

Doubt it. Michael wasn't the physical type. If something had been invented to make the mundane easier, Michael used it. Derry didn't think he'd so much as darkened the door of a gym.



Derry worked out three or four times a week, but could never seem to attain the same level of fitness Michael had naturally. His belly always remained a little soft, his arms a touch flabby.

He'd never appeal to Suwannee. Why would he, when she had someone built like Michael?

He remembered the night before, the fear in her beautiful blue eyes, the fury in Michael's. The terror in his own heart. He stopped in his tracks. Where did his loyalties lie? With Michael, the next best thing to a brother, or to Suwannee, the woman he loved with all his heart? Being loyal to her was the only way he could show his love. Standing by her, as a brother, as a friend.

He meandered down to the dock and gazed out over the rippling river. A flash of red at the water's edge caught his eye. He stepped off the wooden planks and found a stick. Using the end, he lifted a heavy piece of red fabric from the muck.

Spreading it out on the dirt, he recognized Michael's Swamp Baby River Tours polo shirt. A cold surge of panic raced through him. Had something happened to Michael?

"Michael!" He hollered down the river as loud as he could. His voice echoed off the flat surface of the water, bounced off the tall oaks and cypress trees lining the St. John's.

Derry heard a grunt and crackle of leaves to his left, in the woods. He dashed that way and hopped up on to a half-fallen tree. "Michael?"

There he was, nearly buried under a pile of leaves and pine straw. As naked as the day he was born.

Derry halted and waited, frowning. "Michael?"

His friend, his foster brother, moaned and sat up. Deep red gouges raked across his chest. Leaves fell out of his hair and his eyes were bloodshot, rimmed with red. He had smudges as dark as paint under his eyes.

"Derry." His voice sounded raspy, worn.

"Yeah. Wh-what're you doing out here? Where're your clothes?"

Michael held up his hands. Up to his forearms, a dark, crusty substance stained his flesh.

Derry retreated a step. That crap on his hands, it looked like blood. Immediately he thought of Suwannee. Had Michael followed her home, done something to her? Derry gulped his fear down and hopped off the log.

"I remember," Michael said, his eyes shining with an eerie intensity. "I heard somebody calling me. I came over here and —"

He stared down at his hands. "I changed." He stood up, shedding a layer of dirt and leaves. "I've never felt so powerful, Derry." He clenched his fists and flexed his muscles. "Power, Derry. Pure, unadulterated *power*. I could have snapped her neck with my bare hands..."

"Suwannee's?" Shock rippled through Derry's body like an electric current. "What'd you do to her? If you've hurt her —"

Derry turned and dashed for his car without voicing his threat. He heard Michael crashing through the brush right on his heels. If Suwannee was hurt, all ties, all loyalties to Michael would be severed.

He jammed his key into the car door and twisted it. Michael hit him like a truck, knocking him to the ground, snatching the keys from his grip. Derry kicked and struggled, but he was no match for Michael.

The bigger man straddled his chest, holding him down. Derry bucked and kicked, trying to free himself. Michael laughed, a cold, hard sound in the muggy morning.

Derry stopped struggling. "Get off me, man."

To his surprise, Michael swung his leg over him and crouched not too far away. He chuckled, as if it were completely natural for him to be running around in the woods, covered in blood, stark naked.

Derry sat up and leaned back against the car door, wary. His hand found the keys and he held them tight, keys poking through the cracks in his fist. If Michael tried anything else, he'd get a few keys jammed into his face.

He felt heart-sick. He had to get away from Michael, who'd obviously gone off his rocker, and find Suwannee.

Michael regarded him with a creepy half-smile for a long moment.

“What’s going on, man?” Derry managed to ask. His throat was dry, his mouth cottony. His eyes drifted down to the dried, crusted blood on Michael’s arms. “What’d you do?”

Michael brushed a hand over the blood. It flaked off beneath his fingertips. “I don’t know. I felt...death.”

Derry’s heart shuddered and fell over, stalled out. *Suwannee*. He held his hand palm out, warding Michael off. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you, man, but it’s not right.”

Michael grinned and stood up, his six-feet-two-inches stretching up higher and higher in the morning light. Derry slid up the car and yanked open the door. Shaking his head at his foster brother, the man he no longer knew, he got in the car and gunned the engine.

Michael stepped back, naked, proud, hands on his hips. A huge cunning grin split his face, ear to ear. The look in his eyes haunted Derry all the way to Suwannee’s place.

\* \* \* \*

Nobody’d understand.

He’d *become* the panther.

Michael walked back out to the spot where Derry’d awakened him from vivid dreams of chasing deer and rabbits – tearing open tough furry hides with his claws and teeth, feasting on warm flesh. Hot blood pumping from severed arteries over his face as he indulged. A dizzying thrill raced up this spine. Made his blood bubble in his veins. His breath caught in his throat.

He picked up his pants and slid into them, leaving flakes of blood all over them. He felt so trapped in the thick denim. He found his white undershirt, stained with blood.

Whose blood?

Flies buzzed over a pile of debris not too far away. He investigated. A dead rabbit.

His upper lip curled in disgust. Then he recalled the sensation of the thick hide ripping. Heard the rabbit scream. Tasted the still-hot flesh in his mouth.

Voices drew him out of his reverie. The search parties, looking for the dumb lost kid. He hurried to the waters edge and scrubbed away the dried blood. It stained his skin, but his dusky skin-tone made it hard to see.

He hopped the log and dashed to the pavilion before anyone could catch a glimpse of him. Derry always kept a few extra t-shirts around.

Michael grabbed a dark green one from beneath the counter and tugged it on over his head. Hopefully, he didn't look too rough. Or scary. He didn't have a mirror, so when he splashed a handful of water on his face from a water bottle, he hoped he scrubbed off all the grime and residue.

Happy voices filtered through the wooden walls of the pavilion. Michael froze. Something was happening to his hearing. It was like listening through a funnel. The sound expanded, clarified. Two women, in their early twenties. Both were more interested in scoping out the law enforcement hotties than finding the lost kid.

He took a deep breath in through his nose. He smelled perfume. Floral. The mosquitoes would carry the girls off before they made it five feet into the jungle! Fruity-scented deodorant, the kind made for teeny-boppers. He smelled their shampoo. Clean and crisp.

Abruptly, he shuddered and the sudden enhancements faded. He couldn't smell anything but the stale-old-wood smell of the pavilion. Couldn't hear anything more than the chitter-chatter of the young women.

He stepped out into the muggy heat. None of the ten or so volunteers gave him any more than a single glance. Must not look too bad, based on the flirty glances and shy smiles from the two women standing in front of the pavilion.

Where had Derry run off to? Like the little bitch that he was, he'd run. Michael stifled a snort of laughter. Still, the man was his only employee. He was needed.

Michael got the awning set up. The girls gushed over his strength. He thought of his new-found feline prowess and gave them a secret smile. New blood flowed through his veins. Hot and powerful. Feline. Dangerous.

Michael stared down the road, hoping to catch a glimpse of Derry's dark blue car. Nobody.

After hopping the counter, he grabbed the phone and punched in Derry's cell phone number. On the fifth ring, Derry picked up.

"Where are you?" he demanded. "You need to be here."

"You're freaking me out, Mike."

"You're too uptight. I had a spiritual revelation."

"You killed something, you were naked, and you were talking about death. That's not a spiritual revelation. That's a nervous breakdown."

Michael sighed heavily into the phone. "Come on, man, I need you here today. You can quit tomorrow."

"I've got to check on Suwannee. I'll think about coming back in, but I doubt it. Mike, I love you, bro, but you scared the crap out of me."

Wimp. Wuss. Loser. "Sorry, Der. Listen, I really need you in." He paused. *Why did Derry have to check on her?* Suspicion cast dark cloud over his new-found joy. "What's wrong with Suwannee?"

"I don't know. I hope nothing. I got to go, Michael."

"No. You tell me what you're —"

The call ended abruptly. Michael cursed and dropped the phone. *Get to Suwannee before Derry does.*

He'd hurt Suwannee the night before. He recalled stalking her through the grass, pouncing, his big tan claws morphing back into his human hands as they closed around her neck. He stared down at his hands and felt her strong, rapid pulse fading under his thumbs.

He still had bloodstains under his nails.

Not Suwannee's blood.

Guilt overcame him and he stifled a cry, leaning against the wobbly pavilion wall. It had to have been a dream. Humans don't turn into animals, and there was no way in hell he could hurt Suwannee, whether she was banging Derry or not. He loved her with

his whole heart. It was his fault, their divorce, and he still planned on finding a way to make it up to her. Make it all better.

Make her love him again. But he had to get there before Derry and apologize for his behavior at the Swamp Baby.

He hurried outside and slung his leg over his ATV. He barreled through town, frightening kids and old ladies.

Derry wasn't at Suwannee's yet. He raced up to the front door. After a solid minute of beating on the splintered old wood, he guessed she wasn't home. A flash of movement far to his left caught his eye. Broken Drum, moving around his ever-burning campfire. Suwannee's hair fell all around her shoulders, catching the sun and refracting it. She was a vague pale shimmer.

A little spark of jealousy flickered in Michael. What was she doing down there?

Rational thought returned. She and Broken Drum were friends. She took him food sometimes.

He jumped off the porch and stalked through the long grass. A thrill, almost erotic, raced across his skin.

If it was a dream, some kind of mental breakdown, why did it still affect him so?

Not far behind him, Derry's car swung into the driveway, something in the engine knocking loudly.

## Chapter Five

Pissed off about something, Michael was in Suwannee's face, waving his arms. Derry slammed the car into park and climbed out, heading as fast as he could across the field to Broken Drum's encampment. The grizzled, scrawny old man stood by helplessly clutching his usual bottle of moonshine by the neck.

Michael reached out and not so gently tilted Suwannee's chin up. He stepped back, hands on his hips, shaking his head. Faintly, Derry heard him denying anything to do with it. Suwannee groaned aloud and stepped back.

Derry sped up his pace, relieved. Suwannee was fine. All the way over to the house, he'd been terrified of finding her hurt or worse.

"I didn't say *you* did it!" she exclaimed. Michael grunted, in disbelief.

He whirled on Broken Drum. "Did she tell you I did this?"

Broken Drum's wild eyebrows raised. He shook his head, staying mute.

Michael saw Derry and his eyes narrowed. "Did she tell you I did this?"

"Did what?" Derry was finally close enough to see what the topic of conversation was.

Suwannee's throat was red and swollen. Bruises like inky hand-prints stood out on the sides of her neck, alongside her windpipe. Rage rose in him, so uncharacteristic that he didn't know what to do. His fist figured it out before he did, and the next thing he knew, Michael was on the ground, one hand clasping his nose. Blood gushed between his fingers, staining his t-shirt.

*His* t-shirt. Another slosh of indignant rage took hold of him. He expected it this time and held back, fists clenched.

Suwannee took half a step toward Michael. She stopped so fast her body jerked forward. She glanced up at Derry, unsure.

He met her eyes. Swore he saw relief reflected in the bright blue irises.

She bit her bottom lip and stepped back, sort of behind him. Michael waited for her to come to him. His glare said it all. When it became evident she wasn't moving, wasn't even going to ask if he was okay, he snapped to his feet. He advanced on Derry.

Derry's surge of adrenaline faded as suddenly as it arrived, replaced by a flashflood of mortal fear. He stood his ground, though. He was no warrior, but he wasn't going to cower any longer. Michael was bigger, could kill him very easily, but he'd made his decision to stand by Suwannee. No matter what.

Suwannee moved closer to him, close enough for him to smell her clean, soapy scent. It took him back to the night she kissed him. As Michael closed to three steps between them, he was far away. Sitting in Suwannee's living room. Her petal-soft lips against his, her tongue responding to the gentle caresses his delivered. Her hands on his shoulders, cool fingers rising to move through his hair, over his scalp.

He barely felt Michael's first blow. Suwannee shrieked and threw herself over him as he fell, taking Michael's kick directly to the gut. She landed on him, curled in on herself, gasping for air.

He heard a sloshy *thunk* and Michael pitched forward, blood and moonshine pouring down his face. Broken Drum loomed over his inert body, eyes wide. The broken neck of his bottle dropped from one hand to the packed-dirt circle.

"I didn't want him to hurt Suwannee," he said, for once not adopting the clipped tones of what he considered a Native American accent. He sounded pathetic, like the drunk bum he was.

Derry gathered Suwannee into his arms. She moaned into his shoulder. "It's okay, Broken Drum. He deserved it." To Suwannee, he said, "I gotta check on Michael."



She nodded and shifted to the ground between his legs. He stepped over her and rolled Michael over with his foot.

He was still breathing. Blood oozed out of his hair and darkened the dust. As Derry gazed down at him, he moaned and grabbed the top of his head.

Derry guessed he'd be okay and went back to Suwannee.

He touched the dark marks on her neck. "Did he do this? Tell me the truth, okay?"

She'd protected Michael before. Derry clearly remembered the black eye she'd sported for nearly two weeks...the bruises on her shoulders, upper arms. Wild horses couldn't have dragged the truth from her. Truth he knew, plain as day.

"He didn't do this, Derry," she said softly, laying a hand on his arm.

"Who did it?"

Suwannee walked away, hands crossed low over her ribs. She shivered and hugged herself. Despite the heat and the humidity, he saw chill bumps on her arms and legs.

"I had a dream. When I woke up, I could have sworn somebody was choking me." Her lovely voice cracked. Derry stepped up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. One of hers, moist with sweat and tears, covered his left hand.

"I was dying. I was...dying." She sniffled and her back straightened a bit as she swallowed hard, swallowed down her fear and sadness. "Then it just went away. I saw this stuff when I went to the bathroom." She brushed the hand that had been atop his across her throat.

He turned her around. "That doesn't make sense, Swan."

She shrugged, a defensive hardness shelling over her bright blue eyes. "I must have done it myself."

Derry's mind whirled. The marks were too big for her hands. She had long, slim-fingered hands, but her flesh was bruised so clearly he could make out the indentations from fingers and thumbs.

Two thumb marks at her trachea, deep and dark, purplish-black giving way to contusions all the way around her neck, and two parallel lines of four marks below her hairline in the back.

Big hands had done this. Bigger than his, even. He glanced down at Michael. He lay moaning in the dust, both hands on top of his head, Suwannee crouched by him.

"We should take him to the hospital. That gash is really bad." She grimaced, empathizing. God, she had such a good heart.

*I'd prefer to just leave him out here. But he couldn't do that.*

"Derry? What are we going to do?"

What *were* they going to do? They couldn't just leave him out here. He was hurt, but he'd come out of it and hunt them down.

Derry recalled the thick coat of blood on Michael's hands earlier. So much like the fresh layer staining his tanned skin at the moment.

*Where had that blood come from?*

"Derry, we should take him to the ER." Suwannee glanced up at him with pleading eyes. Broken Drum stood off to the side, sweating in his leather vest and long gray-white hair. His eyes flipped back and forth from Derry to Suwannee to Michael and then to the remains of the shattered bottle. He wavered on his feet.

*He's my brother. Foster brother, but we grew up together. I owe it to him. He gave me a job when I needed it. He's given me more than what's fair. I owe him.*

"Okay. Can you wake him up a little more? I can't carry him."

"Can you drive the car up here?"

Duh. Derry nodded and jogged across the lawn. He looked back when he got to the car. Michael was sitting up. Suwannee had his hands, trying to keep him from clasping them over the wound. She had her shirt off, revealing a bright green bikini top. After folding her pale pink shirt, she pressed it to the top of Michael's head.

Derry drove back to them. For a long moment he watched Suwannee's tender treatment of the man who'd hurt her in every way. His heart ached for her. She gave one hundred percent to Michael, who returned absolutely nothing.

Wait, he did give her something in return. All the misery she could handle, and then some.

He got out when she shot him a sharp glance. Together they got Michael into the back seat. Expecting her to hop up front with him, Derry was surprised when she slid in, resting Michael's head on her lap. She sat combing his matted hair off his face.

Hurt, Derry got in the driver's seat. The other night, she'd begged him to run away with her. Now she cradled her ex-husband's head in her lap as if he were a lover.

Was he her lover?

No. No. She was done with him. Done. She was terrified of him, hated him, longed to escape him and Hertley. She wouldn't reopen the can of worms she'd finally managed to seal.

Would she?

She'd done it before.

"...kill that fake Indian bastard..."

Suwannee snapped her attention back to Michael. He had his eyes open, finally. They didn't seem to be too clear, so she wasn't sure how conscious he really was.

"Michael?" she asked, flipping a clumped strand of hair out of his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Bastard. He hit me...I'll kill him." He spoke with a groggy slur to his voice.

A stab of fear shot through her. He really would hurt Broken Drum. "No, no, Mike, I hit you. It was me."

Michael rolled eyes, wincing as if it hurt. "Na-uh. It was that old bastard."

"No, it wasn't. Michael, I hit you. I grabbed the bottle and hit you."

He scowled, winced. "Why'd you hit me?"

If she mentioned Derry, they'd be in it all over again. "You kicked me and it really hurt."

As if confused, he asked again, staring up at her with narrowed eyes, "You hit me?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry, Mikey. I just wanted to get you to stop hitting Derry."

"Derry. Bastard. Is he sleeping with you?"

"No. And he's your brother. He's your best friend. You two do *not* need to be fighting like teenagers."

"Hit me first."

"He thought you'd hurt me. He was trying to protect me."

Suwannee risked a quick look into the rear-view mirror. Derry had his eyes frozen on the road ahead. He wouldn't look at her. From the little bit that she could see, his face seemed set.

*He thinks I'm still in love with Michael and that it's why I'm being nice to him.*

Deep inside, she felt that little wiggle that created so much inner turmoil. Did Michael feel it too? The side of his face was right against her belly, right over the spot she felt it.

What would he do when—if—he found out?

Probably insist we need to be back together.

*And part of me would believe him.*

Suwannee gazed at the back of Derry's head. His golden-brown hair was wind-swept into whorls and tangles. *He needs a haircut, she thought. Just a few snips. He looks so adorable with tousled shaggy hair.*

She looked into the rear-view mirror again. This time, he was looking back. She twitched her lips in a super-quick smile and glanced away before she could see how he reacted.

\* \* \* \*

The hospital was thirty miles away. The drive seemed endless, especially with Michael drifting in and out of consciousness and bleeding like a stuck pig. His blood had soaked through her shirt, Derry's, his own, and even one Derry had over the back of the passenger seat as a slipcover.

When they finally got to the hospital, Derry hurried in and came out with an orderly pushing a wheelchair. Somehow, they managed to get Michael into it. He slumped a little, but he seemed to be coming around.

Suwannee began to follow the orderly back into the cold hospital. She waited for Derry to draw abreast, but he never did. She stopped and looked back. He stood facing the parking lot, hands shoved deep into his pockets.

Lonesome. Sad. A little betrayed? His boyish, handsome face was so expressive. She could read him so easily.

"Hey," she called. He looked up. The sun glinted off his glasses. He had a slash of blood across his shirt, blotches around the collar where his nose had bled after Michael punched him.

He raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to speak.

"Will you come in with me?" In her own ears, her voice sounded weak, scared, like a lost little girl's.

*I am lost. I need him to direct me.*

"Do you want me to?"

A wet Florida breeze blew between them. It fluttered her eyelashes. She nodded. "I do."

He joined her at the door. It hissed open when they crossed the sensor mat. Icy-cold air-conditioned wind, scented with Lysol and something chemically sinister, buffeted their hair and clothing. Derry's warm arm brushed against hers as they entered. Suwannee longed to curl up in his warmth. Hide from the world, the future, in his arms.

The nurse at the reception desk directed them through a security door and down a long hallway. They came to another nurses' station. The perky brunette behind the counter stood and leaned way over, pointing to an exam room across the hall.

"He's not going to want me in there," Derry said, halting in the middle of the hallway.

"I do, though."

Their eyes met. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"Okay. I'll do whatever you want me to, Suwannee."

*Run away with me* lingered on the tip of her tongue. Instead of saying it, she brushed her shoulder against his arm as they walked into Michael's room.

He had a nurse charmed to blushing. She cleaned up his face and neck, giggling, wiggling her boobs just a bit closer to him than necessary.

*Watch out, he bites,* Suwannee wanted to say.

The nurse gave his nose a comical little tap with her finger. "The doctor will be right in."

He winked at her. She giggled and nearly danced out of the room.

Michael and Derry exchanged cold, hard looks. The stony silence ate at Suwannee. She busied herself peeking into the cabinets above the sink. Derry remained at the door, leaning on the frame. Michael stayed quiet.

He spoke first. To Suwannee. "You sure it was Broken Drum that hit me?"

"No, Michael. I did it."

Derry's eyes jerked toward her, alarmed. Hadn't he heard what she said to him in the backseat?

Must not have.

Michael had never taken his eyes off Derry. He had a scary satisfied smile on his lips.

"Whatever you say, Nee," Michael said. "Crap, this hurts. Where's that damn doctor?"

## Chapter Six

Derry waited an eternity for Suwannee to emerge from Michael's tiny apartment. He tapped the steering wheel, fiddled with the radio, and counted the change in the ashtray...a buck seventy-three. Enough for one of the Double Gulps at 7-11, and maybe a candy bar.

A big drop of sweat rolled down his temple. He swiped it away and cranked the air conditioner full blast. Cold air whipped his long hair into his eyes then puffed it up over his forehead. Derry sighed with relief. He hated the heat. Sweat was the bane of his existence.

Finally, the screen door to the old duplex opened up and Suwannee swung around the banister. He saw the vague silhouette of someone watching through the opaque accordion windows in the Florida room. *Michael.*

Derry groaned softly and folded his arms on the steering wheel, awaiting Suwannee's return to the car. She stopped halfway across the dirt lawn and turned back.

Her mouth moved. Michael must have said something to her. Dismayed, he watched as she smiled and laughed at whatever it was. A bolt of jealousy stabbed into his heart. She never smiled like that around him. She always looked mournful and tormented.

Sweat dripped into his eye. Derry winced and swiped his hand across his forehead. His palm came away soaked with moisture. *Wish I was brave enough to honk the horn.*

Suwannee might start thinking he was pushy or something if he did that. He didn't want to do anything to ruin his chances with her.

What chances? Sheesh, she'd practically begged him to run away with her. *With her. As in, together. Me and her.* A sharp pang of something like pleasure shot through his gut.

*Me and Suwannee together. Me, coming home to Suwannee every night. Me, making love to her every chance we get. Suwannee smiling at me like that.*

He'd ruined it when he chose Michael over her. Michael was an ass. Michael hurt her every chance he got. Whether it was physical or emotional, he made sure Suwannee cried.

Suwannee finally turned, her hair glinting like gold in the sunshine. The remains of a smile lingered on her face. She got in and slammed the door.

"Okay. I think he believes I hit him."

"He's not an idiot, Suwannee. He knows it was Broken Drum."

Suwannee made a face and shook her head. "No. How could he? I told him I did it."

Derry shook his head. "He just knows. I don't know how to say this, but I think he's losing it."

Suwannee smirked. "Nah. He's just under a lot of stress."

He looked at her sideways. The larger bruises on her neck were fading. The deep crescent imprint-bruises on the sides of her throat were still vivid, though. It was a miracle the docs in the ER didn't question her about them. He doubted they'd believe the "did-it-in-my-sleep" defense she insisted on. He was sure, one hundred percent, that Michael had something to do with the marks.

Suwannee propped her elbow up on the door then rested her head on her hand. She let out a heavy sigh. "I'm so tired."

"Maybe you shouldn't be home alone," Derry said, not even knowing why he thought that. He needed to be around her. Somehow, he had to figure out how to tell her he was so in love with her he couldn't see straight.



She would tell him to blurt it out. Just say it. Don't hesitate. Suwannee grabbed life by the horns. Her advice was always the straight-forward route.

She gave him that smirk again. "Why's that?"

Frozen like a deer in the headlights, Derry focused his attention on the road whizzing by under the tires for a moment. His mind raced, trying to figure out what the hell to tell her.

"He might try to see you again."

Suwannee gave him a strange look, one that made him feel stupid for saying it. "He's allowed to do that, Derry."

"No, I mean, he's acting so weird lately. Something might be wrong with him."

Suwannee laughed, a sound that tore his heart to shreds. She didn't care for him. She must have been drunk when she pleaded with him to run away. Strange, though. He hadn't tasted alcohol on her lips, her tongue.

Her laugh reminded him of the ice queens from high school all over again. Condescending and patronizing all at once. The "that was so lame but so cute" laugh.

"He's not a stray dog, Derry. I don't have to watch out for worms or rabies."

Face aflame from shame, he couldn't have been any happier to see the entrance to her long, winding driveway. Happy and heartbroken, all at once.

The other night, she wasn't herself. Everything she'd said had been, well, a load of bull.

He stopped at the end of the gravel, a good three meters from the front porch. Suwannee flipped her hair over her shoulder and reached for the door handle. She paused, glancing up into his face. He looked away, at the steering wheel.

Her hand touched his arm. Soft, cool, satin-skinned. Derry steeled his rebelling emotions and waited for her to do whatever she was going to do.

"Hey," she said, her voice softer, kinder. The patronizing tone was gone, replaced by nothing but tenderness. Everything in him cried out for clarification. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing. I’m just trying to figure some things out. I guess you can just call if you need anything.” He paused. She waited for a moment. Unsure, he guessed. *Stay or go, Nee.*

“I will.” Her hand dropped from his arm and she slid out the car door.

*You won't need me.*

Derry flung the gear shift into reverse and shot out of the driveway.

*You won't need me because you have him. Always have, always will.*

\* \* \* \*

Suwannee made it to the front porch before she thought about the mail. She shaded her eyes from the glaring sun and gazed down the driveway to the mailbox.

Even in broad daylight, she didn’t want to venture down the drive. One side was safe, the other bordered by Hertley’s Swamp. That side looked dark and dreary. Scary. Full of hidden things.

Just wait.

But there might be something interesting in there. Suwannee loved getting mail. Seeing her name on an envelope thrilled her.

Sighing, she reached up onto the porch and grabbed a long screwdriver with one hand and a two-foot length of pine branch that she’d stripped and sanded and polished. If she was going, she was going prepared.

*Although, sticks and screwdrivers won't do much to protect me from a ghost.*

The baby swirled in her belly. She sighed and pressed the hand holding the stick over the barely-there mound. She recalled something she’d heard an old black woman tell a young woman who’d gotten herself in to trouble. *Drink a whole bottle of whiskey while you sit in a cold bath, and you won't have to worry 'bout no baby no more.*

Broken Drum had more than enough whiskey.

*Oh God, what am I thinking?* Sickened by herself, Suwannee strode off down the driveway.

Mosquitoes buzzed her ears and dipped in the air before her eyes. She batted them away, nearly swiping the screwdriver across her forehead.

Everything was so quiet.

No birds, no bugs. Even the ever-present, distant sound of four-wheelers was missing. Not even the mosquitoes hummed around her head anymore.

Cold fear filled her belly, slippery and slimy as Jello. It oozed through her veins, leaving behind an icy trail of terror that tingled and buzzed like something alive eating her from the inside out.

Just beyond her line of sight into Hertley's Swamp, a branch cracked, a hollow sound in the silent afternoon. It was all Suwannee could do to keep from gibbering madly from fear and racing full-tilt back to the house.

"It's just the woods," she whispered. Her voice quivered, cracked. "Just trees and leaves and animals."

There was another sound, the unmistakable sound of a footstep on dry leaves and debris.

Terror wound up Suwannee's esophagus and curdled her blood. Her thoughts turned primal. *Run. Hide. Scream.*

No one can hear you. The closet neighbor was Broken Drum, and she was pretty sure he was in a drunken stupor already.

Another crunching step. She heard heavy breathing over the soft sigh of the breeze through the trees. A fetid stench wafted into her face.

Suwannee gagged so hard her eyes clenched shut involuntarily.

The branch fell from her hand, but she hung on to the screwdriver.

Coldness fell over her.

Suwannee forced her stinging, watery eyes open. A scream so loud it seared her throat burst forth from her mouth.

She knew for sure that Hertley's Swamp harbored something much deadlier than an old legend.

## Chapter Seven

Reality crashed down around Suwannee like icy water. She came to, gasping for air.

She was sitting against a wall, she guessed. Her hands were tied together. Rope looped almost all the way up to her elbows in a figure-eight braid. It was the same from her knees to her feet.

The red-hot threat of cramps raced through the fibers of her thigh muscles. With a whimper, she eased her legs to the side, wincing when a rope she hadn't noticed before tightened around her neck.

"Shhh."

She froze at the sound. In the gloom before her, a shape moved. A match flared, then a lantern blossomed with a small flame.

The thing that had carried her away rose from a crouch before her. Suwannee felt the soreness of her belly where he'd tossed her over his bony shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Her face stung from the razor-like slaps of palmetto leaves.

"Shhh. You don't want to wake the baby." A hand stained by who-knew-what pointed toward a dark corner. For a terrible, mind-numbing moment, Suwannee thought he was talking about *her* baby. His voice raked over her raw nerves like metal on metal. He had an odd affectation, almost British.

Then he raised the lantern higher, and she saw the dingy white skull peeking out of a faded and moth-eaten baby blanket. The rest of the skeleton was swaddled like a living child.

Hysteria rose like fog within her. She clung to reality tenaciously through waves of panic that left her gasping and dizzy.

"Who are you?" she squeaked out. "Don't hurt me."

The man's crazed eyes flickered over her. "Hurt," he whispered. "Who am I?"

Dizzy to the point of faintness, Suwannee didn't know what he meant. Whimpering, she shook her head.

"I'm..." The freak frowned, his craggy face an awful visage in the flickering lantern light. "I'm your friend."

An iron fist squeezed Suwannee's heart. "Let me go. Please."

The man scuttled forward on his knees. He had an awful, eager look on his face. "Let me be your friend. I want to be your friend. We'll have tea. And you'll stay here forever."

His eyes gleamed maniacally. "I'll be your friend forever."

With one grimy finger he stroked her cheek, grinning around rotten teeth. His foul breath washed over her. Suwannee gagged.

Hot vomit splattered her knees, splashed on the lunatic kneeling in front of her. "Ohhh...pretty," he cooed, in a detached, amused voice. "You'll be such a lovely friend."

"What do you want?" Suwannee sobbed between back-straining heaves. Her stomach was empty but she retched again and again. The creature leaned forward, sniffing, which set her off retching more forcefully.

He backed away, finally. "You'll come for tea, won't you, Mabel? Tomorrow, at two. A picnic, perhaps."

"I'm not Mabel."

"Oh, dear. Oh. Oh." He frowned, his filthy-encrusted brow knitting together. "Oh. Well." He tapped his fingers together and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Oh. Oh. Well. You...you say you're not...you're not Mabel?" He leaned down, squinted at her. "If you're not Mabel, then you can't be here. No, no, my lovely

blossom." He paused and put both hands over his gaunt mid-section. "Oh, the belly box."

Suwannee wondered if maybe she should be Mabel, whoever Mabel was. She was sitting in her own puke, at the feet of a retarded lunatic, in the middle of the swamp. Giddy desire to stay alive at all costs welled up in her, dazed her mind. "I'm Mabel," she heard herself say although a croak was more like it. Her throat burned from the bile and the force of her retches. "Mabel."

The man straightened up. His shoulders hunched, he shivered from head to toe. He seemed to be looking right through her. "Oh. Mabel," he replied in his creepy voice. "Mabel..."

He shook his head, flinging bits of filth from his hair and his beard. Suwannee flinched when the crud bounced off her arms and legs.

"I don't like your mouth-sounds," he said, almost thoughtfully. "Makes my belly-box quiver, it does."

Giving her resentful glances all the way out, he took the lantern and left Suwannee in the dark.

\* \* \* \*

Muttering, the odd creature scuttled through the dogtrot porch and into the other section of his deteriorating house. Mabel wasn't well in the brain-box, that was for truth.

Mabel wouldn't pass up the chance to see Little Brother. After Big Brother had gone off to be a hero in the Great War, Mabel doted on Little Brother. Ate pudding with him every Wednesday.

Sweet pudding. Little Brother shuddered with delight and knocked on the door to the only other room. "Gloria Heffernan-Mills? Are you...are you awake?"

Little Brother didn't hear anything. He pushed the door open. "Oh, Gloria Heffernan-Mills. What ever shall I do with you? Mabel has come for a visit. A picnic maybe!" He clapped his dirty hands gleefully. "Ah yes! With sweet puddings and..."

his voice dropped to a whisper as he slipped into the dark room. "And lovely, lovely scones. You like scones, Gloria Heffernan-Mills. So yummy."

Little Brother reached into his pocket and pulled out his knife. Filth crusted over the blade and nicks marred the dull edge. Dry tongue flicked over cracked, crusty lips. "Yes, Mabel, we'll have pudding. Sweet puddings."

The dark shape in the corner replied with a faint rattle of heavy iron chains.

Little Brother grinned, the cracked surface of his upper lips splitting. A tiny drop of blood oozed on to his upper teeth. He paused and touched his tongue to his rotten teeth.

"Oh, Gloria Heffernan-Mills..." He crouched in front of his guest and reached out. His searching fingers touched warm, sweaty skin, a foot. The knife blade pressed against flesh.

Finally, Gloria whimpered.

"Shhh, shhh. We must have pudding for Mabel. We must."

## *Chapter Eight*

Where was Suwannee?

She hadn't shown up for work in two days. The Youth Ranch had called the Swamp Baby, looking for her. Derry hadn't seen her, and Michael shook his head.

Of course, Derry instantly jumped to conclusions. Had Michael done something to her?

Michael was out with a tour group. If Derry hurried, he could make it to Suwannee's house before Michael got back.

Derry hurried to his car and got in, jamming the key into the ignition so hard he smashed his fingers against the steering column. Biting his lip, he sped over the distance to Suwannee's.

Everything seemed peaceful in the yard. Nothing out of place. A curtain flickered in the window of the neighbor's house; a faint ghost of a face peered out, then vanished.

Broken Drum's corroding single-wide trailer sat off to the far left, the usual bonfire burning out front while the old man sat in a sagging aluminum folding chair a distance away from the flames. The usual bottle of spirits glittered in the sunlight.

Derry got out of the car and waved in the old man's direction. The bottle flashed in the sunlight in reply.

The screen door was off the top hinges, still. If Michael didn't fix that soon...No, Derry would come out as soon as he could and try to fix it himself. He didn't want Michael anywhere near Suwannee. He wasn't altogether sure that his foster brother hadn't put those bruises on Suwannee's neck.



Despite what she insisted, she'd protected Michael before.

"Suwannee?" He called her again, louder. No answer.

The house was hot and stuffy. The window-unit air conditioners hadn't been run in a while.

He paused at the door to her bedroom and called her name once more.

Nothing. A thin tendril of alarm ran through his flesh. He pushed open the door.

The bed...

Frowning in confusion, he tried to make sense of the mess of mud and debris scattered through the tousled sheets.

Paw prints, big ones at that, decorated the center of the bed, along with dark brown smears and clumps of fur and —

His gut heaved and Derry snapped his arm up across his mouth and nose. The fetid stench of decay hit him like a hammer to the midsection.

A scuffling on the front porch nearly sent him into panic. He fumbled on the nearby dresser for a weapon, coming up with a heavy cut-glass vase, the kind that florists used en masse.

He clutched, panting, sweating, ready to bash out the brains of whoever came at him.

It was just Broken Drum, poking his head in cautiously, his eyes glittering with the effects of the alcohol he'd consumed. "You gonna smash me over the head?" he asked, chuckling.

Derry put the vase down. "You...startled me."

"Uh huh. That why you need to go change your panties?" Broken Drum guffawed, then muttered, "I'm just kidding, Derry, just kidding." He paused and sniffed the air. "What's that stink?"

"Something—" He broke off short and regained his composure "Oh, God, I'm not real sure." Derry gestured toward the bedroom. "Look."

Broken Drum stepped through the door into Suwannee's bedroom. He cursed, shaking his head, and got closer to the bed. "Rabbit. What's left of it, anyway. Those prints, that's a panther."

"Panther?" Derry couldn't bring himself to believe it. "There haven't been panthers around here in ages."

"Well, them prints sure don't belong to no house cat."

Derry shook his head. "It's got to be just a big bobcat."

"Nope. Panther."

Derry felt like shaking the old man. Panthers lived down south, in the Everglades, not up north just a stone's throw from the big cities.

Broken Drum leaned over the sheet. "Suwannee hasn't been here in a couple of days."

"Where would she go? I don't think she'd just take off without telling me." *Especially not after nearly begging me to run away with her.*

"No where real fast, I can tell you that much."

Derry's senses zinged in on Broken Drum. He knew something!

"What do you mean?"

"I saw her walking down the driveway with a big stick and a screwdriver two days ago."

"The day you hit Michael, right?"

"Yuh."

While as much alcohol as Broken Drum consumed would inebriate any normal person, the old man's tolerance for the poison had gone beyond most human levels. The more he drank, the more coherent, the more intuitive he became. Sober, he couldn't find his way out of a paper bag with a flashlight.

"You didn't see Michael anywhere, did you?"

Broken Drum shook his head. "I suspect the swamp's got her."

Derry would have dropped the vase, had he still been holding it. "You said she was walking?"

The old man nodded. Derry burst out of the house and jogged down the driveway. Halfway to the road, he tripped over something.

Suwannee's stick. The one she kept on the porch. He picked it up almost reverently and turned it over in his hands.

Not far away, a dull red cylinder caught his attention. The screwdriver.

"Suwannee!" he bellowed. "Suwannee! Can you hear me?"

"Ain't no use. If the swamp's got her, she's gone."

"Shut up, old man! She won't let it take her without a fight. She just wouldn't go easy."

Broken Drum put his hand on Derry's shoulder. Tears prickling his eyes, Derry shoved him away. The alcohol boosted the old man's brainpower, but it was hell on his coordination. He fell to the hard-packed drive.

Derry squeezed his eyes shut. Going into the swamp was suicide. Maybe not as quick as a gun to the temple, but it was suicide nonetheless. Suwannee knew that.

Suwannee wouldn't walk into the swamp. She was terrified of it. And she hadn't given up on the fact that he might change his mind and get her out of her own personal hell. She wouldn't walk into the swamp.

Not Suwannee.

He stared hard at the impenetrable wall of dense Florida scrub. Not a single break in the line of palmettos. Nothing marred the thick tangle of vines and underbrush. Where had she entered? He paced several yards in either direction.

It was impossible.

"Suwannee!" he hollered into the brush. The itchy tears that had pricked at his eyes coursed down his cheeks. Angrily, he swiped them away. He was acting like a baby. Michael would have a field day with this.

*Michael.* Wild rage replaced his grief and fear. Michael was responsible for whatever had happened to Suwannee. He had gone crazy. Suffered some sort of nervous breakdown.

"I'll kill him myself," Derry growled.

"Michael's not responsible for this," Broken Drum intoned from his comfy spot on the packed drive. "There's something else here, something bad. Something dark."

"Michael did this," Derry seethed through ground teeth.

The roar of an ATV interrupted him.

Speak of the devil.

Michael sped around the curve and nearly ran over Broken Drum. He slammed on the brake and slung his leg over the seat.

"What're you doing?" He stalked over to Derry and grabbed him by a handful of his collar. "I got four groups out there waiting, and you're nowhere to be found."

Derry stared him down. "Where's Suwannee, Michael?"

Genuine confusion rippled through Michael's eyes, although his facial expression didn't change. His grip on Derry's collar loosened just a touch. "How should I know? I'm talking to *you* right now. What're you doing out here in the woods instead of doing your job?"

"Suwannee's missing, Mike, and there's blood all over her bed." Derry didn't mention it was rabbit blood. "There's panther tracks all over the sheets, and you've been jabbering on and on about panthers for the last three days."

"Suwannee's missing?" There was a note in Michael's voice that even fear-stricken Derry didn't miss. *He really doesn't know where she is.*

"How long has she been missing?" Michael let go of Derry and stepped back.

"Two days, as far as we know." Derry regarded Michael carefully, cautiously.

Broken Drum wavered on his feet. "We have to go into the swamp to find her."

"Suwannee's terrified of the swamp, old man." Michael shot a withering glare at Broken Drum. "There's no way she's going to willingly walk into the woods here."

"Not willingly, no." Broken Drum reached out and plucked something out of a clump of sharp-edged leaves.

Four long, shining strands of Suwannee's long, blond hair.

\* \* \* \*

"We'll take one of the boats down the river," Michael said. He had his maps spread out before him. "We'll try to get into the swamp...here. You know where I'm talking about...the scrub's pretty thin."

"Yeah."

Michael squinted at his friend. The sunlight was bearing down directly on their heads. Up the riverbank at the pavilion, the "closed" sign creaked on its chains in the gentle breeze.

"What's the matter with you?" Michael leaned back away from the high table, arms crossed over his chest. "You still thinking I might have had something to do with this?"

Derry shrugged.

"I didn't touch her, Derry. Those bruises on her neck, I didn't have nothing to do with those either."

Derry remained silent, looking especially owl-like in his glasses. Michael sighed. "Believe whatever you want. I love Suwannee, and I wouldn't hurt her."

It was true. He wouldn't touch her. He dimly recalled some twisted thoughts he'd had a few nights ago, about hurting her, maybe even...*killing* her. But he wouldn't. Couldn't.

They were just thoughts. Everybody had morbid ideas sometimes. That didn't mean he acted on them.

*What about the blood all over you, Mike, night before last?* The little voice nagged and gnawed at him. He'd woken up in the woods again, naked and dirty, with blood crusted all over his arms and chest and face, the gamy aftertaste of meat on his tongue.

He was nearly completely sure he hadn't hurt Suwannee. He'd been chasing rabbits. He closed his eyes against the sunlight and remembered the feel of earth under his paws as he loped across the flat Florida prairie. The way the palmetto fronds felt, rasping against his thick fur when he passed through the scrub like a shadow.

It was hard to remember more than the most basic of sensations. Animal thoughts weren't as formulated as humans. As a panther, he only processed the most basic of emotions, sensations.

A loose knot of self-satisfaction settled in his gut. He had finally been able to admit it to himself.

*He could turn into a panther!*

He was sure he could find Suwannee, once he got out into the woods. He'd lose Derry, somehow, then transform into his feline form, then seek her out using his amazing sense of smell.

Sometimes, though, his senses peaked and he could use them without having to change. But it wasn't predictable and didn't respond all the time to his requests.

If he rescued Suwannee, she'd come back to him. She'd forget whatever sophomoric thing she had going with Derry and recall his wild passion, the way only he could satisfy her.

He refolded the map and sent Derry to the pavilion to get supplies: water bottles, snacks, flashlights, and bug repellent. Derry came back, still moody and silent. He tossed the backpack into the boat.

Was Derry wearing a knife on his belt? He almost laughed aloud. The sheathed bowie knife looked utterly out of place on Derry.

He just needed to stick to his video games and spaceship models.

What a loser.

Michael sat down in the pilot's seat. Wouldn't be too hard to lose him in the woods. Maybe, he'd forget about him entirely.

## *Chapter Nine*

A quiet hissing laugh woke Suwannee from her light, tormented doze.

"Mabel, you're a million miles away, aren't you?"

The crushing gravity of her situation crashed down. She moaned and jerked away from the crusty hand reaching out for her.

"Now, Mabel." The grimy hand gripped her chin. He held something cool to her chin.

Warm liquid touched her lips, slipped through before she could clench her jaw shut.

Water, but rancid with who-knew-what. She choked on the minute amount of water, hacking until her strained chest and stomach ached fiercely.

"Leave me alone, just leave me alone!"

"Be a nice woman-thing, now, Mabel," the freak cooed. "We're going in for tea and pudding."

He worked at the knots in the rope at her throat, wrists, and ankles. Instead of taking them off, he only loosened the slipknots.

He jerked at the rope around her neck, forcing her to her feet. The caked-on vomit flaked off her legs in moist chunks. Suwannee stumbled after the man, hoping she wouldn't trip. He led her out the door, into the hot, wet daylight. The sun barely filtered through the thick jungle canopy overhead. Mosquitoes hummed and buzzed and sucked at her blood. She felt it every single time one landed and began to feed.

Happening in a hundred different places over her body at once, the sensation nearly drove her mad.

*I'm just sick, she consoled herself. I'm in shock.*

The degenerate pulled her along a narrow wooden passageway and into another squat building, identical to the first.

A bright green lizard scurried up the wall, pausing to cock its tiny head at her.

The rope around her neck tightened. She followed the creep inside.

The door shut behind her.

Suwannee stood with her eyes closed.

She would die out here. The swamp had gotten her after all.

She opened her eyes.

Every wall was lined with dolls of all types. Barbies, porcelain dolls, rag dolls, realistic ones, and caricatures. They all stared at her with their glassy gaze. The light wasn't as bad as it had been in the other room. She could make out more of the man.

If he could be called that.

He was all skin and bones, his back humped. The top of his scabby, tick-infested scalp was bald. Thin clumps of matted, filthy hair hung past his shoulders. Dirt obscured the natural color.

The dolls watched with cold glassy glares as she stumbled across the little room. The man stopped her at a leaning table and pulled a chair out for her.

"I won't be thought of as anything but a perfect gentleman," he said. He tethered her to the back of the chair, yanking the rope tight.

She choked and fumbled at her throat with her bound hands. The kidnapper didn't readjust it. He wandered off, wringing his hands and muttering to himself in his creepy, sing-song voice. With an unreadable glance over his shoulder, he pushed open another door and disappeared in to the gloom.

Suwannee heard the soft rattle of chains and a quiet moan.

A very human sounding moan.



"Hello?" she called. If it was another person, maybe he or she would answer, despite the kidnapper being in the room.

Unless that person knew something about the kidnapper that she didn't know.

The freak came back out of the room with a bowl. He busied himself at the far end of the room, talking to himself.

Suwannee wiggled her butt in the chair. The wood squeaked and wobbled- but not enough. Her hands were still tied, but she could reach the rope at her throat. She followed the barely two-inch length between her neck and the back of the chair. The knot was tangled and twisted, and utterly impossible to do with bound hands, sightless.

The freak shuffled back to the table carrying two bowls. He put one down in front of Suwannee. The other he placed in front of the other chair.

"Pudding, Mabel. You're favorite." He grinned. His rotten teeth were enough to turn Suwannee's stomach.

Suwannee knew whatever was in that bowl would be putrid. The smell alone, the sour smell of sickness, the hot smell of decay, made her insides grumble a warning.

She glanced down.

Pale strips of flesh floated in a reddish soup. Her gut clenched and she sucked in gulps of stale air. "I can't eat that."

"Mabel? It's your favorite. It's pudding."

"I don't like pudding anymore." Suwannee felt her throat tensing up. Her already-strained stomach and chest muscles cried out in pain.

"I-I-I don't understand, Mabel." The man got out of his seat and paced, stuttering and twisting his hands in front of him. "You must like pudding. Mabel always eats pudding."

"I don't like it anymore." Suwannee wasn't sure if she was helping things or nailing another board in her coffin.

He let loose a howl that terrified Suwannee to sobs. Wheeling about, he kicked over the table, sending the foul bowls flying. His chest heaving as he breathed, he shoved

Suwannee's chair over backward. She cried out when her head smacked against the sandy plank flooring.

He dropped down on one knee next to her and grabbed her hands. She snatched them back and tried to hold them against her chest.

"You will eat your pudding! You will eat it! Every bite! Or I shall have to punish you." From his back pocket he produced the disgusting knife. He touched the dull tip to her cheek. Suwannee groaned and tried to flinch away. "You'll listen to Jackie-jack, yes, you will Mabel. You were always such a bad, bad girl."

He flipped the chair over on to its side. The rope tightened around her neck. Black spots began to swim in front of her eyes. Sparkles shot off in her peripheral vision.

Jackie-jack grabbed her hands once more.

*Stop, lift your head!* Suwannee stopped her panicked struggles and strained to raise her head so the rope wouldn't dig so deeply into her flesh.

Musty, smelly air made it into her lungs.

*Oh, God, what is he doing-*

Pain more intense than any she'd ever imagined sliced through her right hand.

*He's cutting off my finger!*

Jackie-jack sawed through skin and muscle, all the while seemingly heedless of Suwannee's piercing screams. He hit the bone and somehow she found the strength to yank her hands away. He smashed the handle of the knife against her skull, hard, hard enough to send stars fluttering through her vision.

The knife gnawed at her pinkie finger again.

\* \* \* \*

The fuzzy edges of reality sharpened until clarity moved in. The slightest movement sent lightening-hot pain shrieking through her entire body. Her hand throbbed, like a hammer pounding away at it with every heartbeat.

She pushed away from the wall. A hot gush of blood from the wound soaked her thigh. She felt a moment of relief. Her position, slumped against the wall mostly on her arm, had probably kept her from bleeding to death.

Her mind felt disassociated, like she'd taken too many Tylenol PM's. A low buzzing sound penetrated her head. Suwannee listened hard, trying to differentiate the sounds from her surroundings from the roaring in her head.

Shock.

She shivered. The slight motion made her dizzy. She forced herself to breathe slowly. *Can I think my way out of shock?*

Breathe.

The smell of her blood nauseated her. Biting her lip so hard she tasted blood, she started to tear off a strip of her shirt.

"This is so freakin' easy in movies!"

Desperate, barely able to move through the pain, she raised the hem of her shirt to her mouth and worked at the rancid-vomit-tasting fabric with her teeth. The room was dark, too dark to see anything useful.

Like if she was getting anywhere with the shirt.

It hit her.

*My hands aren't tied!*

Her legs were free as well.

If her hand didn't hurt so badly, she might have tried to get up.

Something nagged at the back of her mind.

Her hand hurt—

*Because the freak cut off my finger!*

Horror blasted through her skull, numbing her all over. She'd be a freak. People would stare.

*He cut off my finger!*

Panic squeezed up into her throat, choking her with cold internal fingers.

*He cut my finger off!*

Suwannee held her hand up. Dim light filtered through dirty window fogged over with grime. She couldn't see much, just the shaking, malformed silhouette of her left hand. She choked back a sob.

“Get a grip, Suwannee, get a grip! Get a grip! Get a grip.” She chanted to herself, rocking back and forth, until she felt a semblance of control return.

The rocking motion kept her grounded. Every time she hit the wall behind her, invisible particles of *something* fell on her shoulders, her arms.

The stump of her pinkie throbbed and burned, nearly pushing her back over the edge of hysteria. It was an insatiable pain that ate at her state of mind as well as her body.

Bandage. First things first. She was bleeding, and in the moist, jungle-like surroundings, it could easily mean more trouble for her.

Infection...gangrene.

Bugs crawling over the open wound, laying eggs, eating her flesh.

Suwannee gagged and barely managed to stifle the urge to puke. Already covered in her own dried filth, she didn't have much dignity left.

Something moved in the farthest dark corner, a soft rustle that made Suwannee freeze.

“H-hello?”

Nobody answered her and she didn't hear anything else. Shaking from pain and exhaustion, she raised the hem of her tank top to her mouth once more.

She worked at the fabric for what seemed like hours. Tears rolled down her face and she bit through the thin skin of her bottom lip. Blood mixed with sweat and tears and soaked into the thin cloth.

*Is that it? Is that...*

*Yes!*

With her tongue, she probed the tiny hole. Her left hand was useless, so she struggled with the suddenly-Teflon-tough fabric. The harsh *rip* was music to her ears.

Now, wrapping the strip of cloth around her mauled hand.

Even the lightest pressure sent waves of pain through her strong enough to make her nearly black out. Suwannee waited until the stars faded from her vision, then started again.

The cloth. Where was it?

She'd dropped it.

"Oh, God..."

The thing in the corner moved again, this time with a metal tinkle. Suwannee called out once more. "Hey, anybody there?"

Just another soft rattle. Something like a moan. A gush of fetid air rolled over her.

It had to be a person. "Can you answer me?" Suwannee whispered.

Suwannee floundered between her thighs for the strip of her tank top. Holding it, she took a deep breath and braced herself. Lightening fast and fading quick from the pain, she wrapped the fabric around her left hand. She held the loose end against her palm until the twinkles, lights and black blobs faded from her vision.

Oh good. She hadn't puked.

Vomit rose faster than she could move and she spewed all over herself once more. Thin, goopy bile trickled down her thighs.

Suwannee sobbed and flopped back against the wall. "Somebody, help me, please!" she whimpered.

*Derry, if I ever see you again, we're getting out of Hertley. We're taking the first car, boat, train, space-ship whatever!*

*What am I thinking? I'm going to die here. That freak out there is going to kill me and eat me. I wonder what he did with my finger.*

She was losing touch. Such a strange feeling, like floating. Her hand throbbed like the devil himself were chewing on it, but the agony had abated.

She wanted to sleep. Curl up on her side and just doze off. Everything was better in dreams, anyway.

Derry whispered in her ear, "Stay with me, Suwannee."

Her eyes snapped open. The blob in the corner rustled again.

The window. If she moved slow...or maybe quickly enough to fool her body, she could knock the window out. It wasn't anywhere near big enough to crawl out, but it would let some light in, some fresh air.

The stench in the room was thick as steam, palpable on her skin. She felt saturated with it.

If she didn't have air soon, she'd suffocate.

But getting to the air meant getting up. Raising her head away from the wall made her dizzy. She'd never make it to the wall, even though it was barely four feet away.

Crawl.

Her head reeled when she sat up on her knees.

"Come on, you can do it."

Suwannee's head snapped up. "Derry?"

She was alone, except for the thing in the corner.

"You're in my head," she said with a little smile. Her little secret.

He coached her on. "Do this for me, Suwannee."

She made it to the wall. It was too high to reach from her knees. Leaning her forehead against the warm, soft wood, she let out a few heavy breaths. "I don't think I can, Derry. I'm real tired."

"For me, 'Nee. Come on."

She swore she could see his smile, his longish hair tousled and shaggy around his face.

The windowsill crumbled beneath her fingers. The damp wood clung to her fingers like cracker crumbs. Its nest disturbed, a big flat palmetto bug scuttled across her fingers.

Suwannee wondered what she could use to break the glass. It was thin and brittle with age, but she knew from experience that old glass sliced quicker and deeper than the modern tempered stuff.

*Shoe.* Suwannee leaned on the wall and swung one foot up. Her flip-flops were made of thick foam, soft enough to be comfortable, but hard enough to break the glass, she guessed.

A wave of weakness swamped her. She slumped against the wall. The black spots clouded her vision again.

*"You keep your eyes open!"*

She'd never heard Derry speak with such authority, such fear.

His tone softened. "Please, Suwannee. Be strong. You're so strong."

She tightened her grip on the thong of the flip-flop and swung it as hard as she could.

Not hard enough. The foam-rubber flip-flop bounced off the glass with barely a *whump*.

"Oh, God, I can't do this!" Suwannee trembled with exertion. She was sick, real sick. She'd lost too much blood, and she hadn't had anything to drink in...

How long had she been in the swamp?

Weeping softly, she battered the glass with the flip-flop. *Help me out, God, just a little bit, please!*

Three, four, five more whacks. On the sixth, she heard a barely perceptible crack.

She hit again, with the last little bit of strength she possessed.

The window shattered, raining sharp little slivers of filthy glass down on her. Light flooded the room, along with hot, moist air that smelled of pine, palmettos, and the familiar stagnant-water smell of the swamp.

*Maybe I can get through the window.*

Despite the unnerving sense of detachment, Suwannee looked around the room for something to stand on. The bottom edge of the window was level with her shoulders. Even in perfect health, hauling herself up that high with no booster would have been nearly impossible.

*The thing in the corner.*

Suwannee's head swirled in disbelief. Disgust.

Pity.

It was a girl. Or what remained of one. She was dead.

*No, she couldn't be dead. She'd rattled something.*

*Swamp gas*, Suwannee thought, barely able to suppress a fit of ghoulish giggles.

Suwannee edged closer, side-stepping piles of trash and debris. She saw chains

coiled haphazardly on the floor, attached to huge eyebolts in the wall.

The girl only had one leg. The other ended mid-thigh in a ragged, black-cruste d stump. Flies infested the open wound, lifting off like a blanket and settling back down again. That was the source of the buzzing sound.

The living blanket lifted off once more, buzzed the girl's head. Suwannee saw writhing, squirming in the gory mess. Maggots.

Suwannee flinched, expecting to barf again. She even braced herself.

Nothing. She smiled. "Hey, I'm getting used to this."

The girl was naked. She was overweight, her belly soft and flabby, streaked with blood. Her breasts hung like pendulums, the nipples huge and dark. A long braid of dark hair hung over her shoulder. Her head lolled to the side, revealing a big bloody hole where her right ear had been.

Dark cruste d blood had run down her chest, creating another feast for the flies.

Suwannee saw the chains around the girl's wrists and her remaining ankle. The girl had a loop of chain clutche d in her left hand.

"Are you the one they were looking for?" Suwannee asked, lightheade d and giddy. "Poor kid."

She leaned forward, morbidly curious. The girl was pretty- had been pretty, anyway. She was overweight, but Suwannee would bet anything she had a string of boyfriends.

The fingers were missing off her right hand.

"Ouch, sweetie, I know how you feel." Suwannee smirked and held up her mutilate d hand.

Four toes were gone off the remaining foot. Only the second toe remained. "Too bony," Suwannee muttered. "Well, maybe he could use it for seasoning."

The girl wore a necklace, a big round pendant dangli ng between her breasts. Suwannee leaned forward, trying to make out the design.

The girl's hand flew up, smacking Suwannee in the temple, the fist strengthened by the loop of chain clutche d within.



Suwannee hit the ground rolling. She rolled over her wounded hand. The wave of pain finished the job the girl started, rendering her unconscious.

## Chapter Ten

*The dead girl hit me.*

“Well, that means she isn’t dead.” Suwannee’s own voice jarred her back to consciousness. She stayed still, relished the comfort of the rough plank floor. Grit dug into her cheek, her arm, her belly, but she wasn’t hurting, and she was nice and warm.

Bleeding from her stump, though. She felt the blood pooled around her hand and wrist, cool and tacky.

“My stump.” She tittered, then laughed outright. “My stump!” A thought hit her, sobered her. “Is a finger considered a stump? Stub, maybe.”

Suwannee sighed and blinked in the semi-darkness. Night was falling, and mosquitoes had swarmed the room while she was unconscious. A cloud of them buzzed her face, coated her arms and her legs like prickly hairs.

The window. She was supposed to try to get out the window.

But the dead girl had hit her.

That meant the dead girl wasn’t dead. Suwannee had to lay still and think about it to wrap her brain around the sequence.

She turned her head. The girl was still in the same place. Her hand was in her lap, and her head was straightened up a little. Her eyes glimmered in the fading light.

“You’re still alive.” Suwannee labored on to the side, then finally into a sitting position. The room whirled around her like, making her feel drunk. Suddenly she was freezing. She cradled her injured hand to her chest.

“Hey, I think we’ve been looking for you,” she said to the inert form. The eyes

shifted, just a little, just enough to let Suwannee know the girl had heard her.

"...die."

Suwannee scooted forward. She hadn't caught the girl's words.

Her voice was barely a whisper. "Die."

"Yeah, we're probably going to die."

The remainder of the girl's left leg twitched. Dark blood streaked with pale fluid trickled out and dripped like syrup to the floor. Suwannee shuddered, imagining the agony the girl had to be in.

No, she was probably beyond the actual agony.

She shook her head. "I...die. Now."

Speaking took an obvious toll on her. Her eyelids fluttered.

Suwannee understood. "You want me to...kill you?"

The girl's eyes fluttered open and she smiled. Yes, Suwannee decided. She had been beautiful.

The girl tilted her chin up, just a millimeter. "Glass."

Suwannee picked up a sizable wedge of glass from the floor. "It's mercy, right?"

The girl smiled again. Two tears rolled down her cheeks. "Hurts."

"I wish we'd been able to find you," Suwannee whispered, struggling to her feet and taking a trembling step forward.

She kept smiling, even when Suwannee put the sliver of glass to her throat. "Mercy," the girl breathed.

Suwannee braced herself to stab in, to draw the wedge across the soft, fleshy neck.

"Mabel!"

She dropped the wedge of glass and tripped over her own feet in her haste to turn around. The girl in chains moaned, a mournful echo of the winds in the trees.

The freak stood in the doorway, hands on his hips. "I've come to bring you your pudding, and I find you teasing sweet Gloria."

"She wanted to play," Suwannee said.

The troll frowned. "Play?" He shook his head. "Your mouth-things, again. They

make my belly-box wiggle.”

Suwannee felt another sliver of glass under her hand. She palmed it, slicing her hand in the process. She shoved it into the key pocket of her jeans.

He advanced into the room. “Now, Mabel, your pudding is growing cold. Come to the table, now.”

He reached down and grabbed a handful of her hair. Suwannee howled in pain. He snatched, dragging her a few steps. She tried to pull away, but he only tightened his grip and started pulling her along once more.

Suwannee’s head thunked to the floor when he let her go unexpectedly. Light flashed behind her eyes.

Then he had her by the hair again, hauling her up, dumping her into the shaky chair. A tin cup of murky water sat next to a bowl with long strips of red, raw meat swimming in a cloudy brown liquid.

Suwannee moaned and started rocking again. What was he trying to feed her? He leaned over her, one hand on the table, the other on the back of the chair. She wanted to cry, but dehydration had left her tear-less. Her eyeballs tingled and burned with the effort.

The swamp freak grabbed a handful of her hair and shoved her face into the bowl. She snorted a snoot-full of the foul liquid up her nose. Suwannee thrashed madly, whacking her injured hand on the table. Another gush of hot blood soaked the make-shift bandage around her hand.

Then red-hot pain seized her earlobe.

She screamed into the bowl and managed to rear her head up enough to suck in a breath of air. She howled again.

Something like electricity rolled through her. She wasn’t going down, not without a fight. The pain continued to jag through her ear, arching down her neck and through her head.

The blast of energy gave her a moment’s strength. Just enough to fling herself backwards, earning not only a vicious gash across her cheek from the man’s knife, but

bowling him over. The knife flew out of his hand and skittered beneath a low shelf occupied by a couple dozen dolls in dingy finery.

Suwannee eyes met the man's. Race you, Suwannee thought.

They dove for the shelf, for the knife. In the jungle, the man had element of surprise and knowledge of his turf. Here, Suwannee had the upper hand.

She was fighting her life.

*For my baby's life*, she thought when she hit the floor belly first in a home-base slide for the knife. The man landed on her, knocking the air out of her lungs. He looped his hands in her hair and jerked backwards, ripping out a handful of hair and a chunk of scalp to boot.

Suwannee howled a battle cry and fought him off, kicking him in the groin and the gut. He doubled over, gagging and retching.

The floor under the shelf was thick with grime and dirt. Living things scuttled away from her searching hands. Something stung her wrist, her arm, her wrist again. Unseen creepy-crawlies scurried up her arms. A cockroach as big as her hand clambered up her face and into her hair.

She shuddered all over but she didn't have time to have a heeby-jeeby fit.

Her hand closed around the blade of the knife. The crusted-on filth made it easy to hold on to.

The man recovered enough to grab her ankles and yank her away from the gap under the shelf. She flipped over on her back and held the knife out in front of her with both hands, like a sword.

She hadn't expected him to have a club.

The wide, thick length of solid oak swung down. When it connected with her skull, she heard the *thunk* and watched the blackness descend. Her eyes closed easy, like she was just drifting off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Foul, gamy-tasting stuff in her mouth. She tried to spit it out, but a rough hand clamped over her lips.

“You won’t grow up big and strong if you don’t eat your pudding, Mabel, dearest.”

The slimy, warm mess slid down her throat. It felt like raw chicken.

*Fear factor*, she told herself. *This is just Fear Factor. It’s just freakin’ Fear Factor.*

He took his hand away. Suwannee’s stomach heaved, but she knew he would force her to eat it once more if it came back up.

With her jaw in his vice-grip, he squeezed her cheeks until she opened her mouth. He crammed in another bite. Something hard scraped over her tongue and she gagged. Horrible thoughts of bone or other unpleasant pieces of something followed the hunk of flesh down.

Finally the bowl was empty and Suwannee was reeling.

She felt the weakest stir deep within her belly. She almost smiled. *So you’re still there, huh?*

She felt a prick at her hip. That confused her. She frowned. The man grabbed the tin cup and held it to her lips. She tried to turn her head, but he planted his palm on top of her skull and held it still. The foul, tepid water pushed past her lips, down her throat, into her already raging stomach.

He finally let the cup fall to the floor. It clattered against the plank floor with an ear-ringing sound.

Suwannee slumped over the tabletop, the crust of unimaginable origins digging into her cheek.

Too hard to hold on. Her mind slipped away, flying on eagle’s wings to a place she was happy.

## Chapter Eleven

The trail narrowed so they had to walk single file through the thick scrub. Derry winced when a long curling Spanish Bayonet leaf speared him in the arm. Up ahead, Michael stalked through the brush without a single sound. Derry lost sight of him for a moment.

It was creepy, Mike going all native on him. Way too creepy. He'd started his panther talk again. Derry, an avid fantasy, sci-fi, and horror reader, had a huge imagination but this time, Michael's wild tales of turning into a panther took the cake.

What creeped him out the most were his graphic stories of hunting. Eating animals while their blood gushed into his mouth, while they kicked and struggled for their lives.

Stalking humans. Michael never said who he stalked, but Derry had a good idea.

*Suwannee*. Dime to a donut, he'd had something to do with her disappearance. A cowardly trill of fear raced down Derry's spine. He knew he was on Michael's list. It would only be a matter of time until his number came up.

*Shut up! That is your brother! He isn't going to kill you.*

"Hope not, anyway." Derry startled a big black bird out of a nearby scrub oak. It squawked and flapped away, settling into a tree not much farther away.

If Michael tried anything, Derry's barely-used knife wouldn't be much use. Michael...knew things. Dangerous things, like how to hurt people. He'd proven it with how he treated Suwannee during their tumultuous marriage. Since he was a teen, he had a crazy glow in his eyes.

Derry stopped and looked around for his foster brother. Listened for him, even though he knew without a doubt he'd never hear anything if Michael didn't want him to.

The birds were singing again, and the frogs kicked up such a ruckus with their croaks and squeaks and peeps that Derry could barely hear himself think. Usually, the critters hushed and hid until the unknown passed through their territory.

*He left me.*

"Mike! Where are you?" The bird he'd startled earlier took flight. A single black feather drifted down and landed at Derry's feet.

He knelt and picked it up. Suwannee would like it.

What was that?

A white triangle stuck up out of the loose dirt and debris on the trail. He pawed through the pine needles until he unearthed the small rectangle.

A driver's license. Learner's permit, to be precise. "Marianne Ichabod."

That name wasn't familiar. Chances were some tourist had dropped it.

No, that couldn't be. Only a few groups a year actually came down the trails. While he couldn't quote the names from the books, the only people who came down the trails in the last few years had been the same bird-watching, nature-preserve groups. He knew who they were. No one under eighteen was allowed at all, and Marianne Ichabod was only fifteen.

He studied the pale chubby face and the long black braids. He was sure he'd never seen her before. If she'd been on the trails, it hadn't been through Swamp Baby.

The license was newly issued, barely three weeks old. Farther ahead, he saw something else. He slipped the license into his pocket.

A few yards down the trail, nearly obscured by pine needles, was a shoe. Derry picked up the fragile, strappy thing. No way anybody'd been down the trail in these!

The woods seemed dark all of a sudden. Derry dropped the shoe and scanned his surroundings. The shadows seemed alive, writhing and shifting. The frantic music of the frogs had softened. One by one, each sounded a last note and fell silent.



Derry felt eyes boring into his back. He whirled. Nobody he could see.

*Get back to the boat.*

He took a step in the direction he'd come and faltered. The trail was gone! Obliterated.

He'd just gotten turned around. Derry took a deep breath and smacked at a mosquito on his arm. The sound was flat in the heavy, moist air.

After a moment of refocusing, he turned around once more. The trail continued, but in the wrong direction.

Oh yeah, he was *really* turned around. Nothing was familiar. Fear clustered in his belly. He'd been in Scouts as a kid. His dad had dragged him and Michael out on camping trips until they were teens. Michael took to it like a duck to water, but Derry hated every second of it.

Despite that, he had still picked up the basic skills. He knew enough about the Florida wilderness to lead hikes and nature walks. He could navigate the rivers decently.

With the little bit of knowledge he had, he should have been able to pick out landmarks. Something familiar to show him the trail.

*Just focus.*

He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Think now.*

Just follow the trail. Ultimately, it led back to the Swamp Baby. All the trails through the woods that surrounded Hertley's Swamp did.

He started walking, every sense attuned to the feeling that something just wasn't right. He hadn't heard the frogs or insects in way too long.

After a few hundred yards, he tugged his water bottle out of his pack and guzzled half of it. Sweat poured off him. Already, his shirt was soaked through and his pants chafed horribly. The mosquitoes buzzed his head like dive-bombers, thankfully not daring more than that. He'd coated himself liberally with repellent on the boat after Michael had steered through a cloud of stinging yellow flies.

The straps of the daypack rode sharp on his shoulders. He shrugged, trying to adjust them without having to take it off. Already his shoulders ached and he was ready to quit.

*If you quit, you're screwed. Nobody but Mike knows you're out here, and you can bet he ain't gonna send out a search party. Admit it, man. He's gone a little nutso.*

Derry angled his jaw in a determined set and shook his head. He marched forward purposely. Mike had just gone on ahead. Waiting up the trail somewhere.

Something horribly like a hand grabbed his ankle. Derry did a face-plant in to the loose sand and pine needles.

"Ahhh!" He hollered a weak, womanly yell and thrust himself forward, panicked.

He fumbled at his waist for the knife, but he couldn't get a good grip on it and ended up dropping it as soon as he'd yanked it from the sheath.

Snatching it up, he faced his attacker.

The forest remained as still and silent as death. Nothing rushed out from the scrub.

Something had tripped him. He could still feel the clammy, skin-like texture on his ankle just above his low-cut sock.

There it was. A brownish hump of a tree root sticking up out of the trail.

A little odd. There weren't any trees for several hundred yards.

Derry crawled forward. The closer he got, the more obvious it became that the thing on the trail wasn't a root.

He'd tripped over a hand. A real human hand. Desiccated and mummified, but a hand none-the-less. Derry stifled the urge to gag and used the tip of his knife to flip it over so the slightly closed fingers pointed at the darkening sky.

It looked...gnawed on.

Derry thought about the license in his pocket and the shoe he'd found farther back on the trail.

"Oh, God."

Something made a sound in the brush not too far away.

He froze and gripped the knife tightly. "Anybody there?"

Branches crackled and he could hear furtive, shushed sounds. Wild fear pushed through his veins like a drug, numbing him and exciting his senses at the same time.

He smelled it then, the smell of rot and disease and filth.

*Run, idiot!*

Derry surged to his feet and took off down the trail. In high school he'd been a dork, but he'd been the only dork on the track team. He even beat Michael once in a while.

He fairly flew over the rough path. He was so consumed by his speed, by the motions of his pumping legs and the way the wind felt on his face, that he didn't see the low live oak branch hanging low over the trail.

He glimpsed a gray blur, then heard a *boom*.

Derry's world collapsed in a flash of light inside his skull.

\* \* \* \*

Something stank. No, that was an understatement. Something positively *reeked*. He gagged and tried to turn away from the source of the smell.

He opened his eyes. A *thing* with bushy hair discolored by grown-in filth stared into his face. Bloodshot eyes and broken, black teeth. Only half a nose. Derry stared at the cavity where the left nostril should have been.

The ferocious pounding in his head grew worse, obscuring everything for a moment. When the clouds faded from his vision, the person who'd been in his face was gone.

Time had passed, he realized. He must have passed out. *What happened?*

*I hit my head.*

He remembered running. Something in front of him. A single, world-shaking blast of pain in his head. *I ran into something.*

His forehead felt abraded, raw. Gingerly, he touched it. His fingers came away damp. In the dim light, he made out a dark stain on his fingers. Blood. With careful fingers he probed his forehead.

He'd gashed it pretty good. The wound had clotted. A good thing, he guessed. He

had a fear of bugs or something laying eggs in a wound. Thanks, National Geographic.

A wave of dizziness washed over him when he tried to stand up. He forced it away, nearly losing his lunch in the process.

His vision seemed blurry. Concussion, probably.

Around him the woods were still. Not silent, though. The bugs and frogs had started their cacophonous night symphony. It reverberated through the woods, as loud as thunder.

Abruptly, the noise died.

Derry staggered backwards to the oak tree, whose offending branch he'd snapped off with his head. He marveled at the limb, lying on the ground not too far from him. A piece had broken off when it fell and lay near his feet.

*It'd make a great weapon*, logic insisted. He picked it up. It was solid, heavy. Maybe four feet long and easily five or six inches thick.

Quietly, the night singers began their raucous, yet harmonious concert. Derry shouldered the branch and started down the path. It was getting dark, and he wanted to be as close to the Swamp Baby as possible.

As soon as possible.

More and more light faded from the sky as he walked. The shadows got deeper and deeper until they melded with the thick darkness creeping along the trail.

Derry bit his bottom lip, feeling like an utter failure and a complete idiot. Coming out in to the woods with Michael had been a stupid, stupid thing to do. He *knew* something was going on in Michael's head!

His own head pounded relentlessly, making him weak and nauseous with the pain. Even as he walked, his eyelids threatened to close. All he wanted was a nice comfy bed and a DVD of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

And Suwannee. By his side. Forever next to him. When they were both home safe, Michael or no, he was whisking her far away from Hertley's Swamp.

Far away from the rivers and the woods. And the rotten mummy hands in the woods.

His mind kept wandering. One second he was thinking about Suwannee and the future, the next he was reliving the last sci-fi-con he'd attended. Or the RPG that he was playing online. He had a character that...

He sat down hard on the ground. He closed his eyes and propped his head up on his hands. Maybe he had some Tylenol or something in his pack. God above, his head hurt.

Suwannee always made sure the survival packs were stocked. He found the bottle, heard the rattle. Oh, thank Kirk!

Plucking the cotton out, he dry-swallowed five and stuck the bottle deep in the bag, hoping it wouldn't make too much noise. Bears lived in abundance in the swamp. Last thing he wanted was to attract the attention of one.

He plodded on, dragging the branch along with him. He swore he heard whispers in the woods.

After a long time, the sharpest edge of pain faded.

Yay.

The corner of the driver's license dug into his upper thigh whenever he took a step. He put his fingers in his pocket and brushed them over the smooth surface over and over again. Distracted by the feel of the laminate, he didn't see the root sticking up until it was too late. He crashed into the ground.

Darkness wrapped around his head, muffling his sense.

*Oh well. Maybe it's for the best,* he thought on the way to complete senselessness.

## *Chapter Twelve*

*Dope.*

Michael raced through the woods, leaping over the low scrub and fallen oak boughs with the grace of his patron cat. Derry wouldn't make it a day, out in the woods by himself. It had been so easy to slip away.

The wind whispered through the palmetto fronds. One of the spiky green fronds brushed against his cheek.

Kneeling, he placed his palms on the shadow-cooled earth and listened for Spirit-Mother.

The voice he heard in his soul wasn't hers.

Frowning, he rose and walked in the direction the gentle, sweet voice had pointed him. The scrub thinned out a few dozen yards from the river. The thick, springy mat of pine needles crunched softly under his feet. The trees ended and he stepped out into bright sunshine, nearly blinding in its river-reflected brilliance.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for. The voice from the earth spoke in instinct and emotion.

The gnarled oak tree jutting out over the river drew him close. When he placed his hand on the rough bark, a bolt of raw energy shot through him, searing his soul, doubling him over.

He flopped face-first into the dirt around the tree. Agony rippled through him. Clutching double handfuls of dirt, he hollered out for Spirit-Mother.

The hands that stroked his hair back from his forehead were warm and balmy, not the empowering, cool hands of his Mother.

He forced his eyes open. His vision focused and blurred. "Who are you?"

She spoke a language he didn't understand. Her tone held both disappointment and expectation. His eyes finally realigned and he saw her clearly.

She was young, not much more than a teenager. Long black hair fell in a curtain around her head, brushing the dusty ground. She wasn't pretty, but something drew him to her. Her eyes were big and dark, red-rimmed like she'd been crying for a long time.

Very gently she placed her hands over his heart. Bizarre tingles raced through his body.

The maiden's face twisted in disappointment. Huge tears rolled down her face. After a moment she backed away from him and began to sob soundlessly into her hands.

The wind gusted off the river. Spirit-mother's essence sang in the trees and vibrated into his being from the soil beneath his knees.

The crying woman vanished in a spray of bright light.

"A foolish child who thought she was worthy of my power," Spirit-mother said as she materialized.

"Who is she?" Michael asked.

"One who fancied herself worthy of my gifts. She failed in her task." Spirit-mother paused. "My faith in you isn't misplaced, is it, my son?"

"No, Mother."

"You will kill the woman?"

Indecision bit into Michael's belly like a beast. "Why do I have to kill Suwannee? I love her."

"She will rise up and destroy me!" Thunder and wind punctuated her words. Lightning struck a tree at the edge of the woods. The flash speckled Michael's vision with a thousand points of light.

“Suwannee wouldn’t destroy anything. She would understand- she would do what you asked of her, too!”

Spirit-mother shook her head, her long black hair drifting around her face with a life of its own. “She must be a sacrifice, Kotza. Her blood must not spread further. The life that runs through her veins must be destroyed.”

“But she’s my wife.”

“Then I will be your death!”

A wave of air hit him like a brick wall, smashing him into the thick trunk of the tree. Pinned there like a butterfly specimen, he cried out as the rough bark dug into his skin.

Spirit-mother whipped and frothed through the air. Her ethereal form melded into a lacy, shifting mass. Her terrifying face formed and pressed through the gelatinous white blob, mouth open in a wide howl. Her eyes were deep black holes.

Fear raced through his being. Spirit-mother’s body reformed, taller, thinner, with claw-like fingers and a predatory sneer. She growled with the sound of a thousand angry cats. The unseen pressure holding him to the tree vanished. He flopped to the ground once more.

Spirit-mother snatched him upright, holding him three feet off the ground.

“No, no,” he gasped.

With an unearthly howl, she swept *into* him. Everything around him dissolved into a ball of light and fire.

\* \* \* \*

Spirit-mother had no origin. She had been part of the swamp for hundreds of years, an entity with an insatiable hunger. Time changed her little, only enough to make her desirable to each generation.

Her victims’ passions fueled her. Theirs became hers.

Their hatred, their fear, their abhorrences and their loves became her tools. She snared them with their own doings. By the time they discovered she was not a life-giver, it was too late.



They became her minions. The panther served no purpose to her, other than it amused her.

Michael swam in her depths, seeing the truth. Sorrow racked his bones and he dropped like a stone to the shadowy bottoms of her being. It was like being wrapped in gauze and immersed in water. *I'm in her womb*, he thought.

The medallion around his neck burned. He cursed at Spirit-mother, shredding the warm, fleshy, tissue-like cocoon that surrounded him. More layers replaced the ones he decimated. Eventually, when his body screamed with exhaustion and grief, he lay still.

*"Good, my son."*

Her voice came from everywhere.

"Leave me alone!" he screamed. "I won't kill her, you hear me? I know what you are now."

*"No, Michael. You do not, and you never will. You must kill her, or I will strip you of everything I have given you."*

A vacuum of agony sucked every ounce of energy from Michael's body. He lay in a shivering, whimpering lump. He felt...normal. Instantly he mourned the loss of the power that thrummed through his cells. The call of the panther fled his mind, leaving him empty inside.

\* \* \* \*

*"She did this, my son. Your beloved Suwannee stole me from you. What you believe is love is nothing but an illusion."*

Michael forced himself to sit up. The weakness wasn't real. Devoid of the gifts Spirit-mother had endowed on him, he was as vulnerable as any other man.

*"Why must you reject my gifts, Kotza? I offered you power men only dream of. I only asked for an offering. I must have her blood."*

"Why hers? You can have Derry."

Images swamped his mind in waves. *An Indian man with long gray hair in braids, leaping into the river, with panthers swarming the banks and diving into the river. The tree,*

the one by the river, glowed like a film negative into Michael's head. *A plug of dirt near the base of the tree pulsed like a beating heart.*

The vision swept like a fast pan of a camera, making Michael dizzy and nauseous. *This time, it focused on a young woman with a definite resemblance to the old man in the river. She stood staring out of a doorway, a worried expression on her pretty, tear-stained face. Impressions of death imprinted on Michael's mind from hers. The girl's sister was dead. Murdered.*

Michael lost himself in the young woman's mind.

*She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and slipped into the thick scrub around the cluster of tiny native dwellings. She ran through the forest, stopping only to listen and search the ground for tracks.*

*She found what she was looking for. A few moments later she burst through the last line of scrub into the clearing surrounding an ancient gnarled oak tree, so big in circumference that six of her holding hands couldn't span its girth. The earth around the mighty roots held a multitude of footprints. The young woman knelt and plucked a single ruby-red bead from the dirt.*

*Her sister had been here.*

*As she rose, she heard a soft whimper.*

*Her heart leapt within her chest. It couldn't be...*

*She circled the tree until she found the deep, wide crevice. Small bones littered the roots beneath the dark hole. Biting back her fears, she reached inside.*

*Her fingers touched something warm and soft. Since she'd woven the blanket herself, the texture was familiar. She groped further until she found a purchase on the solid object. Drawing it out, she sighed.*

*"Oh, Silas. Sweet one."*

*The baby's face was bruised and bloody. Broken blood vessels stood out like starbursts on his skin. His eyes were swollen shut, shaded purple by dark bruises. He breathed in shallow, scratchy gasps.*

*How can he be alive? The young woman thought.*

*The birds twittering in the trees fell silent and a cool wind whistled through the wood. There was no malice in the air, just a warning.*

*She ran, as fast as she could, clutching the new born to her chest. He tried to cry, but his voice was nothing more than hoarse whimpers. The only place the baby would be safe was the white settlement, the home of his father, Laughing River's white lover. The Spirit-mother preyed on the tiny Indian settlements, so Silas would never be safe with his mother's kin.*

*When she entered the settlement, the young folk of the town taunted her. She ignored them and continued to her destination. Josiah Wells opened the door at her knock. His eyes were red-rimmed. When he saw Silas, he took the infant and held him close.*

*"Take him far away from here," she whispered.*

Michael snapped out of the young woman's perspective hard enough to give him a headache.

*"You see, my son, I have been denied my sacrifice. Suwannee's blood will appease me. Her blood will sate me. Her blood will give me strength and I, in turn, will give you strength."*

Michael closed his eyes and processed the vision he'd just seen. Laughing River's son had been the sacrifice, but the offering had failed. Spirit-mother wanted Suwannee because...

He groaned inwardly. *Because she satisfied the blood debt.* Silas, the lost sacrifice, must be one of her ancestors. Silas's family had passed down the story of the vengeful Indian maiden to keep him and his from the swamp and away from Spirit-mother.

The sense of being in the womb faded and Michael sucked in a double lungful of water. What the hell?

He was in the river! He struggled to orient himself, then struck out for the surface. Bursting through just as his lungs began to ache, he found himself staring into the yellow eyes of a panther. The beast was old, his fur gone from most of his hide. What was left was ragged and graying. Its remaining ear hung in shredded tatters against its head. It crouched on the bank, ready to leap into the water.

On its chest it had a big, dark patch of fur.

*Medallion*, Michael thought. His had become part of him, melded to his skin. As long as he didn't think about it, he could resist the urge to tear it off.

The panther growled, a low, rusty sound. It might be old, but its teeth and claws were still sharp.

“Kotza.” Spirit-mother appeared behind the big cat. “Your wife, or your life?”

Tensing, the panther prepared to spring.

“Michael.”

He stared into the deep, black eyes of Spirit-mother. “You’ll make it all right?” he whispered.

She breathed on him and all his power came flooding back, like blood into a numb limb. Pins and needles cramped him up and he dipped below the surface again.

He struggled to shore. The panther and Spirit-mother were gone.

But the power surged through his veins once more!

Part of him regretted the task ahead of him. The rest of him, the majority, reveled in it.

“I’m coming, Suwannee,” he said, flexing his fist, marveling in the pull and stretch of his muscles and tendons. Raising his face to the slight breeze, he sniffed deeply of the air. Sorting through the myriad of odors on the wind, he found hers. “I’m coming.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Suwannee wondered what the freak had done with her finger. And her earlobe.

He'd tied her up again and left her on the floor of the room with the dying girl, lying on her right side. The sliver of glass dug deep into her thigh. She felt a warm spot on her hip from where it had cut her and she'd bled.

She'd wet her pants. Worse than that, even. Deeply ashamed of the mess she'd made of herself, she cried into the dust on the floor. She had no tears left. No saliva. Her throat felt like the dusty floor she lay on, and a constant cramp had gripped her stomach. Every so often the intensity would strengthen or lessen.

*Contractions.*

No. No. *No.* A knot that threatened to choke her filled her throat, her chest. No. She would not lose this child. Michael had made her get rid of three other babies, even if he'd had to beat it out of her.

This one wasn't going anywhere. Suwannee pulled her knees up as far as she could. With her arms tied behind her, it was the best she could do to cradle the barely-there life within her.

"Not this way, God," she whispered. If she miscarried now, she'd most likely die as well. She could lose too much blood.

Suwannee paused. "As if I haven't lost enough blood already. I can barely see straight I'm so weak and dizzy."

The other girl's chains rattled.

Suwannee tilted her head, trying to catch a glimpse of the girl. The room was too dark. Outside the window, the trees shielded too much of the sky and the moon. Barely any light came in.

Light flared under the door. Suwannee wiggled as close as she could and tried to see underneath. There was a good inch and a half between the floorboards and the bottom edge of the door. She had a good view of the freak's bare feet.

Her heart nearly stopped. More feet, these clad in boots with no toes, and long, sharp toenails curling over the tips of bare splayed toes.

More bare feet, these as gnarly and crusty as the toes of the newcomer's, and the freaks.

Suwannee listened hard. They spoke with the same strange, wispy tones as the freak that had taken her. The conversation seemed to be in English, but as she listened closer, they spoke in weird, twisted phrases. The feet moved closer and she squiggled away from the door.

The door opened and the three freaks came in. They all looked identical, except one was definitely a woman. She wore no shirt. Her breasts hung to her fleshy belly, flat and saggy as old paper bags.

None of the three paid any attention to Suwannee. Focused on the girl in the chains, they walked on soundless feet across the room. Suwannee tucked herself into a ball as best she could. A mighty cramp tightened her belly and she nearly cried out.

She ground her teeth so hard she felt a back molar crack. That pain, added to the rest of it, almost undid her. A squeaky whimper worked out of her throat.

They still didn't notice her.

Thank God for small favors.

Her kidnapper produced a key from a pocket and fumbled with the chains around the girl's wrists. The female freak lifted the girl's limp, fingerless hand and sniffed what remained of the palm.

She licked the bloody stubs.

Suwannee waited, but she didn't gag. Hey, progress!

Oddly, she didn't feel one way or the other about the perverse act she'd just seen. She knew without a doubt that the trio would do even worse to the young woman.

The shackle came off the remaining ankle. The girl sagged sideways.

Suwannee watched the trio pick her up by her arms and remaining leg and haul her out of the room, her head dangling.

*I'm next. And when they cut me open, they'll see the baby, and it'll be some sort of delicacy.*

Sighing, Suwannee closed her eyes. Sleep claimed her, a surprisingly peaceful and easy slumber.

\* \* \* \*

Bright sunlight and cheery birdsong poured into the little room. Morning. *I slept all night? Wow.*

"I'm alive. Double wow." Suwannee didn't have any strength. Her lungs moved of their own accord.

So this is what dying felt like.

*It's not so bad. Sort of peaceful. If they'll just leave me alone until it's over, I'll be in good shape.*

Even the contractions had stopped. Her left hand had gone numb long ago, but fresh lightening-bolts of pain etched through it periodically.

*Probably not a good thing, in the long run.* Suwannee chuckled to herself. *Not that there's going to be a long run anytime soon.*

A palmetto bug crawled across the floor a few feet away. It crawled past her and under the door.

"Lucky bug." Her speech slurred and she couldn't focus her eyes. Her lips were cracked and her tongue felt heavy in her mouth.

*Sleep is nice.* She closed her eyes. Sleep wouldn't come. Her fingers worked the rope behind her, slowly, with barely enough strength to test the hold of the knots.

One knot came undone, and the rope fell from her left wrist.

Nearly five minutes passed before she realized what had happened.

Sitting up was nearly impossible. She managed, though, and only blacked out twice.

*Get out. No more of this playing around. If you're going to die, you're going to die fighting.*

The window was an eternal distance over her head, but somehow, she managed to hook her stiff fingers over the rotten sill. As she heaved herself to her feet, she felt the weight of every square inch of gravity pressing down on her. She wasn't going to make it...

Then she was up, leaning on the wall, and everything was all right. Sort of. She wasn't unconscious, but the way her vision kept flickering, that state of being wasn't far off.

Now, how to get out of the window? As she'd discovered, the window was too high to just shimmy out of. She would have to lift herself up or find something to stand on.

The room shifted to the left. *No, wait, it's just me falling.*

She caught herself on the wall. Blinking in the gloom, she spotted something in the corner. A box!

Finally, something worth smiling at! Careful to let her weight rest on the wall, she inched toward the box. If she could bend over and get it without passing out, she'd be in good shape.

God, she was so thirsty! She would even drink the brackish water the freak had tried to give her the night before!

She decided to crouch rather than bend over. Sliding down the wall, she lowered herself until the fingers of her right hand caught under the top of the wooden box.

Dragging it the short distance was a hard chore, one that just about was the end of her. She whacked her mutilated hand on the wall and saw stars from the pain.

Immediately afterwards, she noticed how *hot* the hand felt. And how swollen beneath the sodden, soiled makeshift bandage it was. The strip of her tank top practically dripped with foul-smelling bodily by-products oozing from the wound. Flies swarmed around her hand when she sat still enough.

When she had the box in position under the window, she paused for a long moment before climbing on. The drop to the ground was going to be a good distance. And hard on her, especially in her condition.

She crawled up on her knees first, then rose to her feet. She peered out the window, making sure none of the freaks were around.

The smell of wood smoke wafted through the air. Images of hamburgers and hot dogs danced in her mind. Her stomach rumbled.



The piercing sound of a scream tore through the haze in her mind. Startled, she clutched the sill. What was that? *Who* was that?

The girl, maybe? Suwannee wasn't so sure. The girl had been half an inch from death. Surely not enough life in her for that sort of scream!

*It's not going to be me*, Suwannee vowed. She boosted herself halfway out the window. Gritting her teeth she wiggled her hips through.

She fell the rest of the way, head first, then her legs flipped around at the last minute and she landed on her back, *hard*.

Before the brilliance overtook her, she smelled the sweet aroma of cooking meat.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

A hand clamped over Derry's mouth and jerked him into the scrub. He struggled wildly for a moment, then recognized Michael.

He broke away. "Geez, Mike! What's the big deal? You left me out there!"

Michael seemed unapologetic. He shrugged. "I had to be the panther to find her. You seem to have made it okay."

About midnight, the bug repellent had worn off and Derry had been sweetmeats for the taking. For every square inch of skin, it seemed, it he had a dozen bug bites.

Bare-chested, headless of the swarms of mosquitoes and yellow flies, Michael looked every bit of his Seminole heritage. Derry stifled a wave of irritable jealousy.

"Well, did you find her then?" He rubbed his tired eyes with a dirty hand. His head ached like someone taken a shovel to it.

"Yeah."

The bottom of Derry's stomach dropped out. "Well, where is she? Is she okay?"

Michael shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't see her, actually."

"Then how do you know she's there?" Derry put his hands on his hips, exasperated, hurting, and just plain ready to go home. He should've called the authorities the minute he knew Suwannee was missing.

Michael tapped his own nose and smiled a weird, mysterious smile. "The panther, buddy."

"You're crazy."

Michael's eyes darkened and Derry regretted his words. He took a step back. "Do you want to die, Derry? Brother."

"I just want to find Suwannee and get out of here."

Michael was suddenly a stranger. Derry'd never seen that look on his face before, or that hard set of his jaw. "I could kill you in an instant."

"Mike."

The taller man began to circle Derry, moving in a slow, sinuous manner that made Derry think, just for a second, that maybe there was some truth to the cat tale his brother kept spinning. Derry fought the urge to turn his head and follow Michael's progress. He stood stock still, hands fisted so tightly they hurt.

"She doesn't care if I kill you," Michael said, his voice low and husky. "I could. I could tear your throat out. Rip out your guts. String 'em from the trees like ribbons."

Derry went cold. He wished he still had his branch, but he'd dropped it when Michael grabbed him.

Michael leaned over his shoulder and whispered in his ear. "She wants revenge."

*Humor him. Just don't make him mad!* "Who wants revenge, Mike?"

"Spirit-mother. They want Suwannee to suffer like her father and brother did. She belongs to this swamp, Derry."

"Mike, listen to yourself."

Michael's face broke into a huge grin. "That's exactly what I'm doing! For the first time in my life, Derr. The swamp's been calling me, too, but I never listened. I always thought it was just some creepy story to scare kids. I never knew there was *truth* in it."

He paced away from Derry, his hands moving rapidly as he talked. "And then I found that necklace, and she gave me the power."

"Who? What power?" Dang it, the knife was on the ground, several feet away. Closer to Michael. Dang it, it was no good over there.

"I told you already. My mother. My Spirit-mother. The spirit of the swamp. And I've already told you about the panther. You're starting to get on my nerves, Derry."

Derry took a deep breath. "Okay, sorry, sorry. Why don't we go get Suwannee and head back to the boat. Then we'll go home and talk this out."

"You don't get it, Derry. Spirit-mother won't let me take Suwannee home. I have to kill her."

Michael had to be joking. Without taking his eyes off the other man, he shook his head. "You can't just kill Suwannee."

Michael bent over and picked up the knife. The action brought him way too close to Derry. "All I have to do is this..." He reached out and put the tip of the knife to Derry's throat.

His gut convulsing from fear, Derry stepped back. A tree blocked his retreat. Michael loomed over him, one hand braced on the tree trunk next to his head, boxing him in. The knife pricked his skin.

"Come on, Mike, this isn't funny."

"Man, I don't want to hurt you. You're my brother. You've always been there for me. You're not part of this. Her ancestors started this by taking what was rightfully Spirit-mother's." Michael's face softened and he gazed into Derry's eyes like a teacher trying to make a young student understand. "She can't rest in peace until the very last drop of blood that runs through Suwannee's veins soaks in to the ground at the hallowed place."

Michael's eyes became steel again. "You got a choice, Derry. Be my brother. Help me. Or you can be Suwannee's bitch, and die right here." The point of the knife dug in deeper, splitting skin. Derry bit his lip to stifle a less-than-manly sound that tried to escape.

Michael hummed the tune from *Jeopardy*.

Thinking fast, Derry realized he could save Suwannee if he agreed to Michael's insane scheme.

"And I know I can count on you not to be a hero," Michael said with a mean smirk. "You're better off just reading about them." He poked Derry's slight paunch with the knife. "So what do you say, Derr? Brothers?"

Suwannee...*this is the only way I can save you.* Did he even have a chance against Michael? A foot taller, the same weight, but where Derry's was just flab, his was pure muscle. Michael was a sure winner in any sort of physical confrontation.

*I will not let Suwannee die out here.*

"Brothers," he muttered. Michael grinned and stepped away from the tree. He reached around Derry and snagged the water bottle out of the pocket on the side of his backpack. He took a long gulp, then passed it back. "Wash that blood off your face."

Derry hated himself for jumping to Mike's orders. Again. Since they were kids, it had been Mike's way or the highway. "Now, let's go find Suwannee."

\* \* \* \*

The stench reached them before too much longer. Derry gagged a couple of times before lifting the neck of his shirt up over his nose. Michael grimaced once in a while, when the wind was strong and blew in his face.

"This isn't your hallowed ground, is it?" Derry asked.

"No. The sacred place is in the heart of the swamp. Right now, we're only about three miles from the Swamp Baby, as the crow flies."

"How do you know that?"

Michael shrugged. "Just do."

They moved onward as silently as they could. As the trail narrowed and went around a sharp corner, Michael sniffed the air like a dog.

Derry didn't need 'panther-sense' to smell meat cooking over an open fire, but somehow the smell was off. Nevertheless, his stomach gurgled and growled.

Michael went first, edging forward around the tight corner. Poking his head back, he whispered, "Come on."

Derry followed him, wishing Michael had given him back his knife. Michael saw something ahead and froze. He paled and looked away, positively green in the face.

"What?" Derry asked. Michael pointed through a gap in the trees. Through it, they could see into a clearing of sorts, with an old-fashioned cracker house, the kind with two separate buildings connected with a dog-trot, a shelter made from debris, and a

cave created by the roots of a fallen tree. A fire burned close to the other edge of the clearing, and three bushy-haired, filthy people stood around it, staring at the thing roasting on a spit above the flames.

The thing on the spit had an oddly familiar shape. Although the heat had shriveled and contracted the muscles, the legs looked too long and muscular to be a deer, yet too small to be a bear. Arms stretched beyond a head...

Oh, God, it was a human. A person. No, no, it couldn't be! He looked again. Oh God. Derry hunched over, gagging and heaving, and vomited on his shoes. Michael jumped back from the splatter.

When he'd emptied his gut, he looked up, weak and wan and so, so, so ready to go home. "That's not her, is it?"

For the first time, Michael looked unsure of himself. "No. No. That one's too fat to be Suwannee."

Derry felt a morbid desire to glance that way again, but he refrained. He spit a few times, trying to clear his throat of thick, bitter bile. His chest ached.

He remembered something. "Mike." He pulled the driver's license out of his pocket. "Her, I bet."

Michael shrugged. He still looked sick, and Derry felt triumphant. Something had shaken Mike's confidence, and he'd been there to see it. Heck, he'd been there to puke on his brother's boots.

They huddled close together behind the shield of trees. "Do you think there are more than those three?" Derry asked.

"I'm pretty sure that's it."

"And you're sure Suwannee's there?"

"Yep."

They could hear the crackling of the flames as fat and oil dripped from the blackening carcass. Derry sucked in a deep, rancid breath, hoping to quell the urge to puke again. They watched the forest-dwellers for a long time, cavorting about the fire. One, obviously a woman, paired off with one of the others, also, obviously a man.

"Oh, that's nasty," Michael said, scowling.

"You're still looking."

Michael kicked him lightly with the side of his boot. "Hey, the other one's walking off." He chuckled softly. "Hey, Derr, looks like they wouldn't mind a threesome."

"That's sick, man. Real sick. What are we going to do about Suwannee?"

"Oh, crap. Oh, crap. Crap, crap." Michael lurched forward, gripping the trees. "They got her now--"

Derry jumped to his feet. Images of the disgusting transients violating sweet Suwannee sickened him. Enraged him.

The one who carried her didn't intend to ravish her. The other man finished with the woman and hurried to help the other one stretch Suwannee out on the ground. Derry couldn't see much about her from across the distance, but she didn't look real good.

"Come on. Let's just go. We can take those three." Derry itched to burst out of the woods. Suwannee was out there, his Suwannee, and Michael was content to sit and watch.

"Stop it! We only see three, but there might be more. And what do you mean 'we' can take them? I might be able to, but you..."

"I can do what I have to do. Give me my knife." He held his hand out.

The two filthy men had Suwannee on the ground, arms stretched above her head, legs extended. One held up a long, wicked knife, poised to slit Suwannee's throat.

"Damn it, Mike!"

Derry ripped away from Mike's halting grasp and tore out of the woods, hollering at the top of his lungs. The three forest horrors stopped, stunned. The woman scurried into the tree root cave. Michael was right behind him, cursing him.

Shooting past Derry, Michael gave him a hard shove that sent him tumbling head-over-heels. He reached the men, and took one down with a hard kick to the head. The other man, the one with the knife, danced backwards. He was surprisingly lithe.

Derry recovered and hurried to Suwannee's side.

Recoiling in horror, he could only stare at her.



## *Chapter Fifteen*

Derry dropped to his knees at Suwannee's side. He barely recognized her. Her face was swollen, obscured by a mask of blood and who-knew-what. The long blond hair that usually glittered white in the sunlight hung in blood-matted clumps.

"Derry," she managed to whisper. He stripped off his t-shirt and poured the remainder of his water bottle over it.

"Yep, I'm here." Gently, ever so gently, he swabbed her face, softening the thick crust of filth and dried blood. She stretched her jaw, reopening a gash along her cheek. The blood was the thickest on that side of her face. He saw the source and suppressed a wave of nausea.

"Dear, God, Suwannee. Your ear."

"He cut it off my ear..."

"Shhh. It's okay. It's just the lobe that's gone. Oh, God..."

Michael and the freak crashed into them, rolling over them in a tangle of bare skin and filthy, ripped clothes and flailing knives.

Derry held on to Suwannee, trying his best to shield her from the kicking feet and flying fists.

Suwannee grunted when an elbow, a knee, a head, dug into her chest and her stomach and smacked into her face. Michael finally wrestled the smelly freak away.

Reluctantly, Derry laid her back on the ground.

She raised her hand. Her finger was gone! The flesh around the stub was black and swollen, crusted with blood and dirt. Flies buzzed around her hand. The telltale smell of infection seeped out. "He cut my finger off, Derry."

Cut it off, or chewed it off. The edges were jagged and torn. Derry felt like he was about to fall over. Gulping hard, he tried to not throw up. He lost the battle and twisted to the right to puke in the sand.

It took him a few gasping moments to recover. When he finally did, he pulled another bottle of water out of his bag.

"Can I have...a drink?" Suwannee whimpered.

He slipped an arm under shoulders and helped her sit up enough to take a few swallows of water. Suwannee pressed her forehead against his bare chest, sighing.

She yelped when he poured the water over her mangled hand. When she tried to draw her hand away, he held tight to her wrist. "I have to clean it, Suwannee."

Michael squatted next to her. He was covered in blood and filth. "Got him. Crap, Suwannee. Looks like you wrestled with a gator and lost."

"He cut off my finger."

"I see that. What'd he do with it?"

"Prob'ly ate it. They ate her, while she was alive and they made me eat something raw."

Derry met Michael's eyes. Michael wasn't seeing either one of them. He was staring off into space. Derry held Suwannee close. The smell coming off of her was enough to make his eyes water, but she was *alive* and that was all that mattered.

"Stay here." Michael rose and stalked toward the decrepit house.

Derry waited until he was out of hearing. "Suwannee, listen to me. Michael's gone crazy. He wants to kill you, but I'm not going to let him. I swear it, Suwannee. No matter what I say or do, I will not let him hurt you."

Fear and confusion wrinkled her brow and filled her bloodshot eyes, but she nodded. Michael came out of the house with a shovel.

"Mike, we need to get her back to the boat. She's hurt bad."

"In a minute. We're not in any hurry."

"Mike! She's had *body parts* cut off with a rusty knife. She needs to see a doctor, like, yesterday!"

Michael eyed him with a cool, level gaze. "She doesn't need a doctor, Derry. You know that."

The time for Michael to snap out of his delusions was way overdue. "Mike, you can't be serious about...that. This is Suwannee. Your ex-wife, my best friend."

Suwannee moaned and her injured hand fluttered in the air for a second. Gently, Derry caught it and set it on her stomach.

"I promise," he whispered, reminding her.

Then the shovel clanged into his head with a sound like a gong, and he fell over Suwannee's body. For a long, numb moment he felt her good hand clutching his hair.

He felt her chest heaving for air, then a heavy darkness settled over him.

\* \* \* \*

Michael took both his brother and his ex-wife another mile into the woods, deeper into the maze of cypress trees, shallow canals and creeks, and thin underbrush. The mosquitoes swarmed like black clouds. Though they didn't bite him, they buzzed his ears and zipped into his mouth and nose and eyes.

He took Suwannee first. He didn't want any more of those weird, cannibals wandering out of the woods and taking her. If they got Derry...

Well, Derry was expendable.

He was still there when Michael got back. He needed Derry to be there when he killed Suwannee. Derry had to see, had to understand the curse that he lived under.

But he was still his brother, and despite his annoyance with the wimp, Michael still loved him. He wanted him to see and understand and forgive him.

Suwannee was evil. Death ran in her blood, thanks to her murderous ancestors. All his life he'd heard the legends of the Indian maiden and her bastard baby. How she had run from a lynch mob with her innocent baby into the swamp and found a lonely death amid the quicksand, gators, snakes, and mosquitoes. The woman's father, an Indian

medicine man, had cursed the family of the white man who'd fathered the babe and then renounced his own seed.

The medicine man invoked the power of the panther to exact his revenge. One day, the panther would chose a worthy man to finish the work began long ago.

"He chose me," Michael told the trees. His mind was a muddle. The legend he knew by heart, and the truths Spirit-mother had shown him mingled and melded into a senseless jumble of facts and fiction.

"No, I chose you." She brushed her weightless hands over his head and his thoughts cleared. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Are you worthy of me, Kotza? Do you want the gift I offer you?"

Suwannee's blood was the key to his salvation, no matter what the legend. If Silas was her ancestor, then she was the sacrifice Spirit-mother had been deprived of so long ago. "Spirit-mother," he whispered. "I will obey."

"Oh, my son. Prove your worth to me." Spirit-mother told him how to redeem himself. How to claim the power of the panther. The handle of the knife felt warm in his grasp. He caressed it lovingly.

He propped Derry up against a tree in the clearing that his spirit-mother had told him was the heart of the swamp. Derry was still unconscious, only the loops of rope he'd used to hold him to the tree keeping him upright. Suwannee was out cold, most likely knocking on death's door as it were.

He felt a moment of pity for her. She'd been a decent wife, most of the time.

She moaned and her head turned to the side.

Michael grabbed the shovel and started digging. He figured he'd need a hole about a foot and half deep, and maybe four feet long. He could curl her up in it, when the time came.

Not too deep, Spirit-mother said. She waited close by, head hanging low, her long black hair billowing in a breeze Michael couldn't feel. In the shadowed daylight, she looked even more ethereal.

Somewhere far away, a baby wailed. The sound rose and fell like a siren. Spirit-mother's head bowed further.

*I want the babe.*

The clearing glittered with flashes of light, despite the sun. The pendant weighed heavily on his chest, hot against his skin.

"What babe?" he asked. Spirit-mother drifted closer.

*Hers.* She pointed a long finger at Suwannee.

"Suwannee doesn't have a baby," Michael replied. He couldn't see clearly. He squinted, trying to make the smudges disappear.

Derry was awake, hollering at the top of his lungs. His voice echoed and magnified, shattered into a dozen separate sounds.

Michael ignored him. When he was done with Suwannee, he would deal with his brother. He knelt next to his ex-wife. Her chest moved in shallow dips and rises. She didn't stir when he called her name. He nudged her shoulder. No response.

Spirit-mother said something about a baby.

Did she mean Suwannee was pregnant?

By *who* was his next question. Derry?

No, he was pretty sure whatever was between them hadn't gone that far.

It must be his. There had been that drunken, almost-violent one night stand nearly six months ago. They'd used no protection, and they'd both walked away with bruises and battered egos.

Three other times Suwannee had gotten pregnant. It had been the reason they'd married. That baby had been stillborn, and it had nearly killed him as well. That was when things started going bad for him, he realized.

The other two times she'd gotten pregnant, he couldn't bear the thought of another baby replacing the one he'd put so much love and effort and preparation into. She'd aborted the first one. For a short time he'd considered letting her have the second one, but one night he'd hit her a little too hard in the gut and she'd miscarried.

*Bastard*, the sharp little voice in the back of his head taunted.

Suwannee's belly rose, just high enough to make him wonder if she was indeed harboring a secret. Quickly, he unbuttoned her jean shorts and spread the fly as wide as he could.

He put his hand on slight hill of her stomach.

"You are pregnant," he whispered. Spirit-mother wafted around to Suwannee's other side and knelt, her voluminous nightgown spread around her.

Michael looked up in to her eyes. Black as night, as evil as all hell, she gazed back at him. These weren't the eyes of the benevolent spirit he'd followed around so willingly. Michael stepped back, for a sudden moment, unsure. The spirit's eyes moved down, slowly, to the knife stuck through his belt.

"I want the child."

He frowned at the billowing figure. "I don't want to hurt her like that again. I took all the other ones."

Spirit-mother's voice dropped into a low, dangerous murmur. "Do you deny me, my son?"

"No. Never." The medallion burned into his chest. His heart clenched painfully in his chest.

"Give me my sacrifice."

Michael's hand closed around the handle. Smooth wood, cool to the touch, it fit his hand. He slid it out of his belt.

Derry's shouts for help became a wordless yell. He strained at the ropes, fighting them for all he was worth.

The silver blade caught the afternoon sunlight and reflected it on Suwannee's pale skin.

He turned the blade toward her belly. The tip touched, followed by the angled upped edge. The deep serrated notches bit into Suwannee's skin. Bright red blood welled up along the blade. Suwannee moaned and her hand moved weakly.

Derry bucked hard. Out of the corner of his eye, Michael saw a loop of the rope swing free.

“Give it to me now!” Spirit-mother’s beautiful, melancholic features twisted in rage. She leaned close to Michael’s face.

Something in him kept him from plunging the knife deep into Suwannee’s gut.

She had been a good wife. A good woman. Even during their worst times, she’d stood by him until it hurt so badly that she couldn’t stand it any longer.

The mist coalescing and dissolving around him wasn’t his Spirit-mother! The voice softened and the wispy tone that teased him in his dreams drifted around him like perfume.

“I’ll take the panther from you!”

No! He couldn’t lose that part of himself! He loved the freedom, the release. The thrill of the hunt and the kill. The dark cloud that hovered over Suwannee and influenced her every move couldn’t be allowed to threaten his rightful gift, his destiny.

But...doubt niggled at the back of his mind. Digging in like the claws of some bird of prey.

He pushed the edge of the knife in until he couldn’t see the upper hump of the serrated notches.

Suwannee stirred, whimpered. Her knees bent upwards. Her uninjured hand brushed over her hip.

*Someone stop me*, he cried out silently.

Another part of him swore to kill anyone or anything that got in his way.

He glanced up at Derry. The other man still struggled with the last loop of rope. His hands were free, but he was still tethered to the tree. Between struggles with the rope, he chunked clods of dirt at Michael.

Spirit-mother leaned over Suwannee and sniffed her bleeding belly, almost like a lover sampling perfume on a beloved’s body.

Her insistent black eyes met his and sucked him into her dark void. He saw Suwannee for what she truly was – evil, out for destruction. In time, she would destroy all Michael held dear.

Then for a moment he saw something else. Spirit-mother, hovering like a

carnivorous cloud over the weeping young woman huddled on the ground beneath a huge, dead oak tree. The crying woman lifted her face and Michael saw a beautiful Indian woman. Their eyes met beneath the penumbra of Spirit-mother's form. Through her tears she smiled a tiny, secret smile.

Spirit-mother's mist touched his face. "Would you give up the panther?"

He shook his head. "No. Never."

"I must have a sacrifice."

Michael plunged the knife into Suwannee's belly.

Spirit-mother howled and the world exploded into pure light.



## *Chapter Sixteen*

The last loop of rope fell slack and Derry jumped up just in time to see Suwannee's good arm lash out.

A great gout of blood splashed over Suwannee in a wide arc.

Derry froze mid-stride. Michael's eyes went wide and he let go of the knife. His hand grasped at his own throat. Blood continued to gush from the great ear-to-ear gash. Suwannee laid still, one hand flung out. Something glittered in the grass a few inches from her hand.

Michael fell forward. Derry lurched to his feet, crossing to Suwannee's side in mere steps. He kicked Michael's body away.

The knife fell out of her stomach. Barely any blood welled out of the wound. Derry was pretty sure that wasn't a good sign. Suwannee moaned and her eyes fluttered weakly.

"I'm here, sweetie," he mumbled. "I don't know what I'm going to do now, but I'm here."

Michael gasped and his hand clutched at the ground. Derry lashed out with his foot, kicking his foster brother in the side.

He left Suwannee's side long enough to roll Michael into the shallow grave. Michael gasped for air again, a big red bubble forming in the new smile he sported beneath his chin.

Derry scooped Suwannee up and gazed around the clearing, praying for some sort of direction. Closing his eyes, he listened hard.

Water. He sniffed the air. Over the scent of fresh hot blood, he smelled the faintly stagnant smell of the river.

*Please, don't tease me, God,* he thought, setting off in the direction he thought he should go, only staggering a little under Suwannee's weight.

There wasn't a trail, so the trek through the woods was tough, even as sparse as the brush and pines were. Vines formed trip-wires and lassoes, and he had to stop every few steps to make sure Suwannee was breathing.

Arms numb, shoulders aching, Derry glimpsed the river through the trees ahead. "Suwannee, the river," he grunted.

Her eyes remained closed, her lids nearly translucent. She was too pale. Too limp. "Hang on, Suwannee, sweetheart. Please, just hang on."

Her pale-coral lips parted. Despite the bloodstains and the gruesome wounds, she was still beautiful.

Rain had been scarce in the area lately, so the water level was low. The stink of rotten fish clogged Derry's nose, saturated his skin.

Never before had he found the smell so welcoming.

*Salvation is at hand,* Derry thought. Sooner or later, a boat would zip past. It wouldn't take much to get someone to stop.

He trudged down the riverbank for an hour, half-dead from exhaustion. His arms had long since gone numb, and his shoulders felt disjointed. The muscles of his thighs trembled and his abs were on fire.

His head throbbed. Things kept crackling and rustling in the woods.

The feeling of being watched pervaded his senses.

A nauseating roll of fear made him shudder and nearly drop Suwannee. What if there were more of those weird swamp cannibals?

What if Michael wasn't dead? What if he was stalking them now?

Derry caught his second wind and pushed on, plunging into the river once to keep from having to walk back into the woods when the river dipped into a narrow, shallow canal. The water came up to his waist.

"No alligators, please, God."

The water sloshed against Suwannee's backside. Whimpering softly, she shifted ever so slightly in his arms, her eyes fluttering open.

"Derry..."

"Hold on, sweetheart." On the far bank, he lowered her to the grass so he could climb out. Halfway up the bank, he thought he heard something.

Was it coming from the woods? It sounded like a growl, almost.

No, it seemed to be coming from upriver.

He paused. Listening so hard he felt like he was straining something in his head, he identified the sound.

A boat!

The low buzz got closer and closer. Even Suwannee's glazed eyes were open, watchful. Around the bend in the river, a small fishing boat appeared. Derry launched into action, jumping and hollering and waving his hands. Grabbing a drifting palmetto frond out of the river, he thrashed it wildly in the air over his head.

One of the two men in the boat pointed in his direction. Relief soaked through his being.

"Help me! I need help! Please!" Derry jumped up and down, babbling, crying. "Please!"

The boat kept on going.

All of his hopes crashed down around him in an avalanche. He dropped to the ground, broken-hearted.

Suwannee would die if she didn't get help soon. The fact that she'd barely bled when Michael stabbed her frightened him. If she'd lost that much blood, there wasn't much hope for her.

"Derry." Her voice wasn't much louder than the rustle of the palmettos leaves behind them.

"I'm here."

She groaned and her muscles clenched. Her uninjured hand clutched her belly. Her mouth moved, but the roar of an approaching motor drowned out her voice.

Derry scrambled to the river's edge.

A sleek white boat was heading right for them! He started hopping and hollering once more, frantic.

*That's not just any boat.*

It was a Volusia County Sheriff's Office boat. The pilot cut the engine and trolled closer.

"Some boaters said you might need help."

Derry couldn't speak for the sobs that tumbled out of his mouth. He managed to point at Suwannee. Seeing her, the men leapt into action.

One man started barking orders into the radio while the other man jumped out of the boat and hurried ashore.

"What happened?" He dropped to his knees next her and snatched blue rubber gloves on to his big meaty hands.

Derry gulped in a big breath of air. "The cannibals in the swamp kidnapped her and cut off her finger and her ear and then my brother who thought he was a shape-shifting panther stabbed her and tried to bury her alive..."

"Whoa! What kind of drugs you on, boy?"

Derry dropped to his knees and started bawling again. It was so close to being over, but he'd never thought that anybody would believe him.

"I got hit in the head," he finally mumbled, pointing to the huge swollen lump and clotted gash on his forehead.

"Uh huh."

Suwannee grunted. Her shoulders hunched, and she cried out in pain. A minute amount of blood pulsed from the wound in her belly.

The officers worked fast, loading Suwannee into the boat first, then letting Derry step in.

“We got an ambulance waiting at the Swamp Baby landing,” the pilot said over the roar of the motor.

The boat sped along the river, Derry hoped they were leaving the horror of the past two days behind.

Michael had still been gasping for air when he gathered Suwannee into his arms and left the clearing.

The boat hit someone’s wake and bounced, making him grit his teeth against the pain in his head. His headache had come back double.

To his surprise, the Swamp Baby docks were less than half a mile upriver. True to the deputy’s word, an ambulance glittering with red and white lights waited at the foot of the dock.

A couple of passing boats stopped to watch the circus of activity. Overhead, an eagle glided across the sky, dipping a wing along the curve of an air current.

When the boat pulled up to the dock, Derry had the shakes so bad one of the cops had to help him over the narrow space between the boat and the planks. He was exhausted, more of heart and spirit than in a physical sense. Perhaps he’d recover from the knock on the head and the cuts and bruises and bug bites, but if he lost Suwannee, he’d never recover.

The paramedics bundled Suwannee into the waiting ambulance. Part of Derry went with her.

“You hurt?” the gruff deputy asked.

“I hit my head pretty hard out there.”

“Judging from that goose-egg you got, probably wouldn’t be a bad idea to have it looked at. I’ll drive you. We can have a talk in the car.”

\* \* \* \*

“So what happened, boy?”

“Her and her ex-husband got into a fight.” Had it been yesterday? Day before that? It could have been a year ago, for all Derry could recall. “They got into a fight and then she disappeared. Nobody heard from her in two days. Kinda weird for her.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. So I went to her house and there was this god-awful mess in her house. She’s always been scared the swamp would get her.”

“The swamp?”

“Yeah. Listen, can we talk later? I can’t concentrate real well...well...right now.”

Maybe it was shock. Or the blow to the head. Utter exhaustion. But all of a sudden, everything he’d held together so well over the past two days crumbled and scattered to the four winds. Groaning, Derry slumped over in the back seat and cried into his arms. All his pain and agony and suffering...

Oh God, and Michael.

He’d watched Suwannee slash his brother’s throat, and he’d felt like cheering her on.

He’d kicked his dying brother in the gut. Felt like laughing while his life’s blood watered the grass.

The deputy grunted, “Don’t throw up in my car, now.”

As much as he hated Michael, no matter how wrong and evil he’d been, he was still the kid Derry had grown up with.

*Don’t feel bad for him, Suwannee’s summery voice whispered in his head. He deserved every single thing he got. And more.*

Did he, though?

Derry closed his eyes.

When the deputy pulled up at the emergency entrance at the hospital, he had to call for a stretcher to get Derry inside.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

The cottony muddle that wrapped tight around Suwannee's mind began to unravel, one thread at a time.

She hurt.

All over.

Her hand was heavy, bound in something. Her stomach hurt with every breath, every twitch.

Dark as hell. No light anywhere.

*Am I dead?*

*No, stupid, your eyes are closed.*

Suwannee forced her dry eyes open. It was still dark, but she could make out the room around her. A sink and a mirror to her left. She turned her head to the right and whimpered from pain.

Just a window, glowing blue from the moon.

A chair and a crappy painting hung on the wall in front of her. Two doors. One must lead to a bathroom, the other an exit.

She felt so empty. Alone. Light shone from beneath the exit door. There must be life out there.

Slowly, nearly crying from the pain, she sat up and put one foot on the cold, vinyl-tiled floor.

"Suwannee!"

The loud, harsh whisper startled her. She froze.

"Suwannee!"

"W-what?"

A warm hand closed around her ankle.

She stifled a scream and tried to yank her foot away.

"It won't be the swamp that gets you, Suwannee," the voice hissed in her ear. Hot, rank breath caressed her face. "It'll be what comes out of the swamp." Warm, wet drops fell on her hand. Blood.

"It won't be your physical injuries that hurt the worst," the voice said, snaking around to her other side. "But the agony of loss." Pain unlike any she'd ever felt blossomed deep in her belly. A hot rush of fluid soaked the bed beneath her, gushing from her with such force that it splashed to the floor.

Blood. So much of it. So dark, the scent so strong. Over her screams she heard the wailing of a baby.

From somewhere, she heard, "She's hemorrhaging!"

*"The agony of loss."*

She clutched her belly, seeking the firm little bump.

Nothing but soft skin. She yanked her gown up. A deep bloodless gash smiled at her. The baby had to be there. Had to be.

She plunged her hands deep into her own belly, searching through her slippery, hot entrails. "Where is it, where is it?"

Slimy things slid out of her, drooping down her legs and plopping into the blood on the floor.

When she'd tugged and ripped everything from within her body, she squinted into the empty cavity.

There was nothing left. She was empty. Once again, she was empty.

She threw her head back and screamed her agony to the heavens.

\* \* \* \*

She couldn't move her hands.



Again. Four out of six times she'd woken up in restraints. Out of the dimness, Derry spoke.

"You had another nightmare."

Suwannee tugged at the cloth restraints.

"If you're all the way awake, I'll take them off."

Odd question.

"I'm awake, Derry."

"Good." He moved over her in the darkness, just a silhouette in the room. "Want me to turn the light on?"

Suwannee shook her head. "No."

He sat back down. The cheap vinyl of the chair squeaked under his weight. Yesterday, he'd looked positively gaunt.

"Wh-when are they going to let me out?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

"How long have you been here?"

"They called me around seven."

"Seven? I don't remember being asleep that early."

A long quiet silence pervaded the small hospital room. Derry sighed. "You weren't. That's the scary part."

Suwannee frowned, the stitches in her cheek pulling with sharp little stings. Every night since Derry had carried her out of the swamp, she'd had terrible, violent nightmares.

She'd almost killed herself twice.

The night after the emergency c-section, she'd ripped out the staples holding her together and almost bled to death before the nurses got to her.

The next night, she'd done the same thing.

Nearly every time she fell asleep it happened.

The baby had been dead for five days, yet she still searched for the tiny girl-child.

"I'm sorry, Derry."

He shifted in the chair again. The wan moonlight that made it through the industrial vertical blinds over the window glinted off his glasses when he leaned forward. "Nothing to apologize for, sweetheart." He assured her as he smoothed her hair back from her forehead.

"I'm just...I can't let the baby go." Suwannee peered into the shadows where Derry sat. "Can you let me out of these things now?"

"No."

"Why not? I'm awake."

"I can't."

"Derry?"

"I've got you right where I want you."

The dark form at the side of the bed elongated and thinned, morphing into a shadow she knew well.

"Michael?"

He had something shiny in his hand.

A scalpel.

Suwannee started screaming. A hand clamped over her mouth so hard her lips mashed against her teeth and split. Blood flooded her mouth.

Her ankles were bound to either corner of the bed. She bucked and writhed, but Michael straddled her thighs and leered down at her, his teeth shiny in the filtered moonlight.

The scalpel fell to the rolling tray table long enough for him to grab the wide roll of spongy-adhesive tape and bite a length off. He clapped it over her bloody lips.

The scalpel bit into her sternum, grating on bone. The blade was dull and he had to hack through. The pain lifted her off the bed, arching against his weight.

*It hurt, it hurt, it hurt!*

Michael guided the blade over her stomach to her navel. "Always hated your belly button," he grumbled. With vicious slashes and jabs, he obliterated the feature.

Suwannee choked on a mouthful of blood and vomit. It backed up her throat and burned her nasal passages. With every breath, she sucked the foul mess into her lungs.

Michael leaned over her, hands on either side of her shoulders. "You can't get away from me, Suwannee. You can run to the ends of the earth, but I'll be right behind you all the way."

He sat up and fingered the bloody blade. "Remember, it's not the swamp that you should fear."

Biting his bottom lip, he reached out with the scalpel with the skill and grace of a surgeon. The rounded blade rested against Suwannee's throat. Spasms shuddered through her body, fed by her desperate craving for oxygen.

He paused. "This is more appropriate."

Something in his hand caught the faint light from the window. A shard of glass.

The one she'd slit his throat with?

He touched the point to her throat.

"It's not the swamp you should fear," he whispered again, leaning close as he drew the wedge of glass across her neck. "It's what comes out of it that's worse."

Blood erupted in an impossible geyser from her torn neck and everything went red.

\* \* \* \*

She couldn't move her hands.

This time, bright sunlight lit the sterile room.

Someone sat at her side, head down on the edge of the bed. *Derry*.

Then he sat up, and it was Michael, and he had the scalpel in one hand and the tape in the other.

\* \* \* \*

*It's not the swamp you should fear. What comes out of it is much worse....*

The hospital room was missing two walls. Palmettos and pines encroached into the dingy, vine-encrusted walls. Suwannee huddled in the far corner under the sink, too terrified to close her eyes against the terrors climbing out of the muck and slime beyond the walls.

Nameless things came at her, dark shapes with groping hands and hungry mouths. No matter how loud she screamed or how hard she fought, she couldn't escape them.

*...it's what comes out of the swamp...*

The dark ones swarmed, tearing hunks of flesh from her arms and legs and belly.

*It's not the physical pain –*

It's the agony of loss.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

Three weeks and four days had passed since Derry saved Suwannee from the swamp.

There were days he doubted he had actually succeeded.

As he watched Suwannee through the observation window, despair gripped his soul. She wasn't...there.

After the first two surgeries, the emergency C-section to remove the dead twenty-four week old fetus from her uterus, and the one to try and save her hand, she'd been okay.

Two days after making it out of the swamp, something in her snapped. Bloody, violent nightmares plagued her sleep.

On the third day in ICU, she'd had a nightmare so vivid she'd ripped the staples out of her belly and tried to...

Derry shuddered to think about what she'd been trying to do. A nurse, responding to alarms from the million monitors attached to Suwannee caught her with her good hand two knuckles deep in her own belly.

The day after that, she tried again.

On the fifth day, Suwannee had escaped her glass-walled cubicle and hidden in a maintenance closet. A janitor found her when he saw the puddle of blood spreading from beneath the door.

Since then, she'd been restrained and sedated.

Despite the pharmacopoeia of sedatives that dripped into her veins, she still twitched and moaned. When she opened her eyes, they were wild with fear. She was only aware of whatever awful thing lurked in the dark corners of her mind.

Taking a deep breath, Derry pushed the sliding door open and stepped inside.

Her eyes were wide open, staring blindly at the television bolted to the wall high on the opposite wall. The screen was blank, but her eyeballs jumped and tracked as if she were watching an action-packed TV show.

Occasionally, her lips would part and she would try to form a word.

He sat in his usual spot in the chair next to her bed and took her right hand. The doctors hadn't been able to save the left one. A bacterial infection developed, eating at the healthy skin and muscle until the wisest course of action had been amputation. Only about two inches remained of her forearm from the elbow down.

Maybe losing the arm and the baby in less than two days had caused her to crack.

Nobody could tell him for sure that she wouldn't snap out of her psychotic state.

"I miss you," he murmured. "Everything's empty without you."

He sighed and stroked the back of her hand. His money was running out, and soon he would have to head back to Hertley's Swamp.

But only long enough to put the Swamp Baby up for sale, and terminate his lease on his apartment. He'd get Broken Drum to take care of Suwannee's house until she got better. He knew of a dozen river tours that wanted the Swamp Baby. He'd make a pretty penny off the place, and be able to live off what he made for a good while.

As soon as Michael's body was found, Suwannee would benefit from his life insurance policy. Derry knew it would be enough to cover a couple of years of medical care, if necessary.

"Hey, Suwannee," he murmured, leaning forward to plant a kiss on the smooth left side of her face. The right side had that dreadful gash. Her right earlobe had been hacked off as well, thanks to the freaks out in the swamp.

Fish and Game had found the strange little settlement near the edge of the swamp. They found the remains of the girl that had gone missing earlier in the month, and of many more victims.

The bones of Suwannee's father and brother were among those in the cracker cabin. The blanket-wrapped skeleton of an infant had been found, as well as piles of charred bones. *No telling how many victims*, the officer in charge told the press.

One of the murderous swamp cannibals had been alive when the officers converged on the camp. She'd been shot during the scuffle, but had lived. She was somewhere in another hospital.

Suwannee gasped softly. Her eyes were searching the room, alert for the first time in weeks.

"Suwannee?"

"Derry?" She reached out and touched his cheek. "Is it really you?"

"Yeah. Are you...awake?"

"I think so. I get lost sometimes."

She reached out for Derry and he pulled her into his arms. "Don't lose me, okay?" she mumbled against his shirt.

"What, sweetheart?"

"The agony of loss..."

"Suwannee, I don't understand."

But she was gone again. The blank, misty look seeped into her eyes. She sank back against the hard mattress. Her white-blond hair fanned out on the pillow.

A moment later she started screaming.

\* \* \* \*

After the transfer to the mental health facility, Suwannee's condition changed little by little over the next week. She came out of the catatonic state but dropped over the edge into something that was deeply intense, frightening even.

She still tried to claw her healing belly open once in a while. The nurses had taken to winding several Ace bandages around her midsection. The layers of thick fabric slowed her down enough for the nurses to get to her in time to talk her out of it.

"The baby's still there," she insisted. "Way down inside me. They only think they got it out."

She started picking at the mending stump of her left arm. The ingenious nurses devised another complicated bandage.

"It'll grow back, Derry," she told him once.

Not sure what to say, since the slightest thing would set her off on a verbal rampage that would last for hours and hours, he just nodded and said, "Okay."

She demanded notebooks and pencils.

The nurses said crayons were okay, but only the big fat kindergarten kind. And she couldn't have them in her room. Only in the rec room.

By the end of the week, the rabid chattering tapered off and she would sit for hours at the table in the wide recreation room, rocking back and forth as she colored every single millimeter of paper in front of her with a black crayon. Derry and her doctor watched through the observation window as sheet after sheet of waxy black paper fell of the table and on to the floor.

"What does she do when she's colored all the paper?"

The doctor pulled a thin stack of papers out of the file folder. He passed them to Derry. He recognized the design etched in the thick wax.

"It's the panther medallion. Michael wore it all the time."

"She says the swamp's spirit is taking over her soul. She won't sleep unless she'd drugged to the point that she won't dream. She says she doesn't want to see what the spirit-mother is going to make her do when she reaches her heart."

Derry sighed and leaned his head against the window. "I really thought I was saving her, Doctor Murphy."

"Post-traumatic stress syndrome," Murphy drawled. "With the right therapy and medication, it can be resolved."



"I thought that was just depression and mood swings."

Murphy shook his head. "Every case is different. The disorder has a broad spectrum of effects. Sometimes it's as simple as nightmares or depression, other times it can result in homicide or suicide. Suwannee's manifesting psychotic delusions."

Suwannee hunched over the tabletop, her back to the window.

Nobody realized anything was wrong until Derry spotted the bright red stain spreading along a fold of her robe. He cried out a warning and rushed to the door.

Alerted by Doctor Murphy's shout through the intercom, the on-duty nurse dashed to Suwannee's side and reached out to snatch the stick away.

The nurse cried out and jerked away. Blood dripped down her arm from a deep gash across her palm.

Doctor Murphy swiped his keycard through the slot and slung the door open. Derry got to Suwannee first.

She had a scalpel. He couldn't read what she'd carved into her thigh through the blood welling from the wounds.

"Where'd she get that?" he demanded. "Suwannee, give that to me." He held out his hand. Who in their right mind had left such a dangerous object within Suwannee's reach?

She gave him a withering glance and moved to place the blade on his palm. Quick as lightening, she swung the scalpel down, straight through his palm.

The pain hit a second after he realized there was a *scalpel* through his *palm*.

He grimaced and clutched his wrist, backing away from Suwannee. "Suwannee! Why?"

She moved toward him, horrified. "I didn't mean it, Derry. It wasn't me!"

He backed away. The wound sent red-hot bolts of pain all the way up his arm, grinding home the truth. *She wasn't the Suwannee he knew and loved.*

Nurses converged on her. She surged through them and put her hands on his shoulders. Time slowed down and Derry's hopes finally surrendered to the unyielding pull of despair. "I'm so sorry, 'Nee. I couldn't save you. I couldn't save you."

He closed his eyes and turned away from the woman he loved with his whole heart. With every one of her screams, his heart shattered into more fragments.

*"Wait, Derry, it's not me."*

A blur of activity separated them. For a second, she sounded like herself!

*"Wait..."* He made it to her, almost, then more green-clad staff surrounded him, practically lassoed him with too-caring arms and ushered him to an elevator, then to one of the exam rooms on the lower levels.

\* \* \* \*

Despondent, he sat through X-rays, the extraction of the scalpel, and agonized probing of the entry and exit wounds.

The extraction and minor surgery was quite possibly one of the most mind-numbingly excruciating things he'd ever gone through. It didn't hurt, really, since the doctors had done an excellent job of deadening his hand.

*But the pressure!* The tugging, the grimaces and muttered curses from the doctors as they struggled to remove the scalpel. The force behind the stab had driven the elliptical blade completely through his hand, leaving the handle protruding from his palm.

*"Could have been worse,"* the doctor said.

Finally the eerie sensations in his hand ceased. His doctor held up the scalpel to show him.

*"I've already seen it,"* Derry commented dryly.

The metal instrument clanged into a matching metal bowl. Derry winced.

At last he was able to relax against the hard bed while the doctor worked at repairing the split muscles and flesh. He gazed around the room, his other arm across his forehead, searching for anything to distract him from the thoughts and images of the needle dipping and weaving through his torn flesh.

*"Where did she get it?"* he asked. *"I'm pretty sure you don't have much use for scalpels on that floor."*

The doctor paused. *"She might have gotten it when the nurse took her outside. There's dirt caked on the handle and there's rust on the blade."*

"So she found it outside?"

"I believe so."

The sensation of the needle ducking into his skin made Derry want to shudder. He closed his eyes and thought about Suwannee.

\* \* \* \*

She'd had been herself for a few seconds. Her eyes had been clear, alert. *Seeing* him for the first time in four weeks.

"What's happening to Suwannee?"

His doctor shrugged. "They're just calming her down."

"She's been through a lot. I don't want them making it worse."

"She'll be fine. I'm pretty sure they'll put her in isolation for a while."

After receiving a tetanus shot and a prescription for antibiotics, Derry headed for his motel. Tomorrow he had to head back home.

Dread circled in his gut. Hertley was the last place he wanted to be.

His cell rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, Derry. This is Detective Marlow."

The detective in charge of the case. In charge, basically, of finding Michael's body.

"What's up?"

"Now, you said you left Michael's body about two miles downriver, maybe a quarter-mile inland?"

"Yeah. You can't miss the spot. It's a big clearing with a hole in the middle. Did you find it?"

"We're pretty sure we did. I'm going to need you to come out with us and make sure it's the right place."

Derry frowned. "You didn't find Michael?"

"There's a hole, but no body."

"Maybe those *people* got him." Fear clutched Derry's belly and climbed up his spine. His hands shook so hard he dropped the cell phone. It clattered against the console and landed in the passenger side foot-well.

"Hold on," he called. Hating the way his voice cracked like a teenager's, he guided the car across two lanes of traffic to the motel parking lot.

He fumbled for the slippery little phone. "Sorry. Dropped the phone."

"Figured. Anyway, we roused out the derelicts more than a week ago. We found two more camps in the swamp. Trust me, those were a hundred times worse than what you saw." The detective paused. "I still get sick to my stomach, thinking about it."

Derry couldn't form his questions. How could Michael not be in the grave? He was dying when Derry and Suwannee escaped. The amount of blood that gushed out of his throat was a sure sign Suwannee had slashed his jugular. Derry squeezed his eyes shut. He still recalled the vivid spray of blood that had soaked Suwannee and turned the dust around her into a dark, thick mud.

Derry was no doctor, but he didn't think anybody could survive losing that much blood. "You think there's any chance he...survived?"

The detective was quiet for a long time. "It's more likely something carried him off. We found big paw prints around the hole and in the clearing."

"A bear or something? Mike was a big guy."

"We're thinking more along the lines of a panther."

Derry hung up the phone and dropped it into the passenger seat. He slumped low in the seat and rubbed his face with his uninjured hand.

*Panther.*

No way. Michael's delusions about turning into a panther couldn't be true. It was absolutely preposterous to be entertaining the idea!

Maybe things were at work that Derry didn't understand. His spiritual beliefs kept him a skeptic, but one that could be convinced. He believed in forces of good and evil, of darkness and light and curses and blessings, but nothing formal or organized.

What if Michael had transformed into a panther?

Derry groaned out loud, feeling stupid for even forming the coherent thought.

He stared out the windshield, eyes glazed and aching from not blinking. After a long moment of rambling, incomplete thoughts, Derry turned the car off and got out. He went into his room and flopped down on the bed.

“People *don't* turn into animals!” he growled at himself. “Not real people. Why am I am even thinking this could be true?”

He pounded his fist into the mattress once, twice. “So there’s a panther out there in the swamp. No big deal. It’s actually a good thing. They’re endangered. The more panthers, the better.”

*Not if it’s got a taste for human flesh.*

The swamp cannibals. Sickened at the memory, Derry rolled over and buried his face in the pillow.

Swamp cannibals and panthers and scalpels, oh my.

“You’re stupid,” he said to himself, angrily. “I’ll never be able to help Suwannee if I’m as crazy as she is.”

Man-eating panthers. Shape-shifting, crazy ex-husbands. At least the cannibals were all gone.

Derry squeezed his eyes shut and started counting to himself. It was an old trick that worked. But the time he got to one hundred and fifty, he was drowsy. At two-twenty-five, the slight tingly floating sensation of falling asleep and knowing it enveloped him. At two-thirty-eight, he lost count and succumbed to the dreams pushing at his consciousness.

He dreamed of Suwannee, happy, healthy and whole. Laughing, even. Laughing with him. Her smiles and hugs and kisses were just for him.

He woke up a few hours later with tears drying on his cheeks.

Suwannee was gone. Her worst nightmare had come true. He hadn’t been able to keep the promise he made to her.

He had lost her to the swamp, after all.

## *Epilogue*

Derry's arrival back in Hertley was quiet. Very low-key. Not at all what he expected it to be.

No one stopped him in the diner or on the street to ask questions in hushed, amazed voices.

No one wanted to know about the swamp cannibals.

No one asked how Michael died.

In fact, people were too quiet.

Scared, even. He wondered what was going on, then decided he didn't care. He would be in town for a week, maybe less. As soon as he contacted the businesses interested in buying the swamp baby, the quicker he would be out and away.

He needed to go by Broken Drum's, to let the drunk old man know how Suwannee was doing. The old coot loved Suwannee more than life itself, in his odd way.

The familiar road unrolled before him. A deep wave of sadness rippled through his abdomen. How many times had he driven down this road, with the wonderful reward of seeing Suwannee at the other end?

She was gone now.

Taking a deep breath, he turned the car down Suwannee's narrow driveway. Nothing had changed, yet everything was different.

*She's gone.* In his mind, Suwannee laughed, a high, clear sound that made a sharp pang ripple through his core.

Derry parked the car in his usual spot, beneath a big oak close to the house. He glanced up as he always did. Ten feet over his head, a dirty length of rope coiled around a thick branch. The remains of a tire swing, Suwannee had told him once. Her dad used to push her on it when she was little.

Palm against the rough bark, he swore he could hear her giggling like she had in high school, way back when.

Way back before the swamp had taken over her life.

Before Spirit-mother, whoever she was, slipped into her mind.

The squeal of rusty metal snapped him out of his reverie. He blinked the vision of Suwannee's sweet face out of his mind and looked toward Broken Drum's trailer. The old man was hobbling across the big field toward him. Nearly an acre separated his dwelling from Suwannee's.

A shiver of movement drew Derry's attention to the woods a couple dozen yards to Broken Drum's left side. Squinting into the shadows, he couldn't make out the long, sinewy form edging closer and closer to the borders of the gloom and sun.

The wind blew, a hard sudden gust that flung sharp particles of grit and dust into his face.

When he recovered and looked toward Broken Drum again, he froze in astonishment. Not ten feet from an equally frozen Broken Drum was a panther.

The beast was long and tan, crouched, ready to pounce. Its long tail whipped through the air. One step at a time, it moved forward until it was a paw's reach from Broken Drum.

"No!" Derry hollered.

The huge cat launched itself into the air.

Derry lunged one step forward, then realized there was nothing he could do to save Broken Drum from a panther. A *panther*.

He reeled back against his car, groaning aloud.

*Cell phone*. Where was the damn thing? He could call for help! Somebody would show up. Fish and Game, the sheriff, *somebody*.

Barely visible over the tall stalks of grass, the panther moved in quick jerky motions, shoulders and flanks bunching and flexing as it—

Derry choked back bile as it *ate* Broken Drum.

He fumbled at the door handle with one hand. One fingernail bent backwards and he cried out at the sudden pain.

Everything around him *shivered*. Vertigo undulated through him in nauseous waves, driving him to his hands and knees.

Then...then it was gone. Broken Drum's wild hollering carried across the acreage to him.

The vertigo was gone, and the panther was gone. Not a flicker of it anywhere.

Whoa...what?

Derry pulled himself up, using the car like a crutch. Broken Drum stood in the center of the field, waving his arms and yelling at the clouds.

Where is the panther? Terrified, Derry scanned the clearing.

He'd have to talk to Broken Drum later. Things were getting too freaky. Before long, he'd end up in the room right next to Suwannee's at the behavioral center.

The old coot was high-stepping through the tall grass, in such a rush he could barely keep on his feet. He burst through the last few feet of straggly grass.

"You saw it! You saw the panther!" He collapsed at Derry's feet, gasping for breath. The alcoholic fumes and the ungodly stench of body odor assaulted Derry in waves. With his back against the car, he didn't have anywhere else to go.

"You're bleeding." Four long gashes, claw marks, marred Broken Drum's wrinkled left cheek.

The old man put a hand to his face. His fingertips came away bloody. "It's him," he breathed, smearing the blood across his fingers with his thumb. "He came back, Derry."

Rocking back and forth, he grabbed Derry's pants' legs and stared up at him, his eyes lit by a fierce fire deep within. "It's *Michael*, Derry. He's back, and he wants Suwannee."



"No, Michael's dead. Suwannee killed him and I dumped him in his grave myself. He's dead." Hot tears prickled at Derry's eyes and he just wanted to get away from the crazy old man.

An emotion akin to fear set him on edge and made all the hair on his body stand on end. Something was terribly wrong with the town of Hertley's Swamp.

"He ain't dead anymore. The Spirit-mother brought him back and he's taking her revenge on Hertley."

His grip on Derry's legs tightened. "Derry, I seen all this before. In my dreams. I wrote 'em all down. You're gonna have to find Laughing River."

"Come on, let me go, Broken Drum. I don't have much time." Derry tried to shake the old man off, but he clung like a tick.

"He don't want you dead. You're his brother. He won't kill you."

Broken Drum let go and managed to rise. He lifted a ball chain necklace from beneath the collar of his dirty shirt and eased it over his head. "You keep this. I ain't gone be here when you get back. When it's time, you use this to get my dream diaries out of my safe."

"Drum, you need to lay off the liquor for a little while. Or drink more of it. Whatever. You're starting to sound crazy." The weird light in Broken Drum's eyes unnerved Derry. Even though the old man was staring right at him, it seemed like he was staring off over his shoulder.

"Suwannee believed me," Broken Drum said. "She didn't never get the whole story, but I dreamed it. When you come back and I ain't here, you get them notebooks and you do what they say."

Big tears ran down his lined, leathery face. A sob hitched in his throat. "You do it for Suwannee."

Derry wondered why he felt like the old man was saying goodbye.

Then he knew. *He is, I guess. I'm not ever coming back here.*

"Hey, Drum, I'll call you. If you ever need anything, just give me a yell. You've got my number." Derry put his hand on Broken Drum's slumped shoulder.

The old man startled him when he wrapped his wiry arms around him in a bear hug. "The boy's long gone, Leander. You got to be a man for her. The task ahead of you ain't gonna be easy."

Derry frowned but patted Broken Drum's back. He couldn't shake the uneasy feeling. "Drum, listen, you don't have to stay here."

Broken Drum drew back and nodded. "I got my own work to do here." He pressed the small key into Derry's hand. "Don't you lose that."

"I won't. But..."

Broken Drum heaved a shaky sigh and clapped his hand against Derry's shoulder. "You been a good friend, Derry."

"Stop it. You act like you're about to die. Suwannee will need you when she gets out of the hospital." Acutely, Derry wanted to leave. The very air in the yard was off. "I have to go to the Swamp Baby. You call me if you need anything, okay?"

Broken Drum nodded, the look in his eyes faraway.

"Promise you will, for Suwannee's sake?" Derry asked.

"Suwannee. Yeah. For her."

Derry opened the car door and paused. "Drum?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't know if she's going to be all right."

Broken Drum bowed his head. "She talks to me at night. I hear her in the wind."

Derry squeezed his eyes shut. Suwannee had said the same things to him. "She's in a hospital four hours away. It's your imagination."

"Her soul's stuck in the swamp, Derry. Spirit-mother's holding her tight because Suwannee's so strong."

All the talk of Suwannee's soul and her strength wore down Derry's self-control. He couldn't take another minute of this place, of this man.

"I need to go, Drum. Call me if you need me."

He slid into the car and slammed the door. He left Broken Drum standing in the driveway, surrounded by a cloud of pale dust.

\* \* \* \*

Despite his irritation and anxiety, Broken Drum's words weighed heavily on Derry's shoulders. He dropped the key into the ashtray. The old man had kept talking about leaving. Where was he going to go? He had no family, no money, no home except the land that Suwannee let him live on. The land was paid off, but it would only be a matter of time before the state claimed it for unpaid taxes. A lawyer had explained everything to him at length.

More than a little frustrated, Derry headed for the Swamp Baby. He needed to get the phone numbers of the buyers out of the pavilion.

The road was bumpier than usual, since Michael wasn't around to grade the drive with his own tractor and sled. Derry's battered old Honda strained and roared with the effort of rising and cresting the deep dips and potholes.

He finally made it to smoother ground and pulled up outside the low post and rail fence that sectioned the parking lot from the yard.

Everything looked so terribly normal.

The two big multi-passenger airboats were pulled up on the grass, with the smaller one between them. The pavilion was closed up, the panels smacking the walls with dull thumps in the tugging breeze. He started across the grass.

Movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned in time to see a fleeting black shadow in the woods. Immediately, terror groped at his heart and adrenaline shot through his veins.

A moment later he heard the familiar squealing cry and looked up. Just an eagle. The shadow had belonged to the bird. Derry griped at the odd way shadows could flit through the trees. Every time he saw it, it made him edgy.

He got the key for the back door out and had it ready. On edge already, he didn't want to waste any time. One good scare was enough for the day.

At the pavilion, he jammed the key in the door and stepped inside, hitting the light switch. No lights flickered to life.

Of course not. The utility bill hadn't been paid for the month.

Derry hated stepping into the dark, hot building, but he had no choice. He had to get the Roll-a-Dex with the phone numbers.

It was under the counter. He fumbled for the flashlight that always sat on top of the file cabinet closest to the door. His fingers closed around the rubberized grip and he felt some of the painful tension ease from his shoulders.

The beam clicked on when he pushed the button, bright and steady. The rest of the tension oozed from his muscles. Much better. The light spread to the deepest corners, even if it was just enough to give the wooden walls a faint glow.

He hurried to the counter and grabbed the Roll-a-Dex. As he walked he flipped through idly, the flashlight pointed at the far wall. The reflection off the light wood gave him enough light to make out some of the names on the cards.

The light flickered for a second, like something had passed in front of the beam. Derry froze, eyes scanning from one side of the room to the other. He heard no sound, saw no movement. With no furniture other than a couple of chairs, there was nowhere for him – or anything else – to hide.

He was alone.

Still uneasy, he sprinted for the door. He needed to be out in the sun, the shadow-burning light. He crossed the threshold with one mighty step and slammed the door behind him.

*Don't forget to lock it.*

He turned back to lock the door. His hands shook like autumn leaves. He couldn't get the key into the hole.

"Always been such a weak little loser."

Hollering in fright, Derry plastered himself against the wall.

He was still alone.

*Michael had spoken to him.*

"It's the heat," he said to himself. "Screw the lock..."

His car was ten yards away. He'd make it. He was all alone, for miles and miles.

Derry wasn't so sure that was a good thing.

He was halfway in his car when he heard the warning growl, a low, throaty sound. Instinct caused him to jerk the door shut just in time.

A long, tawny beast slammed against the driver-side door with enough force to rock the small car. All claws and teeth, the animal howled and snarled as it slashed at Derry, invincible behind the glass.

The thing might not be able to get to him, but it still scared the crap out of Derry. Every time it flung itself at the door, he jumped and pressed farther into the seat.

In frantic, umbrageous attempts, claws scrabbled at the car, raking through the pain job and the metal with ear-splitting squeals that ground on Derry's nerve.

The panther, desperate to get at him, slammed its hard skull against the window over and over again. Derry managed to inset the key into the ignition. The engine roared to life.

The animal vaulted on to the hood of the car and glowered at him through the windshield. Derry paused, one hand on the gearshift. He heard the rumbling growl through the thick glass.

"Michael," he whispered.

The panther tossed its head back. Derry caught a glimpse of a silvery line, a ridge of discolored fur along the throat.

He jammed his foot down on the accelerator. The animal's eyes popped open wide in surprise. It tried to cling to the hood with its claws, but Derry made a sharp turn in the big parking lot. The panther slammed against the windshield, then rolled off. He swore if it tried to chase him he'd run it over, endangered species or not!

Derry put the brakes on, waiting for it to reappear. After a good thirty seconds, Derry wondered if it was going to pop back up.

Maybe it had decided the automobile was a formidable opponent.

He twisted around in his seat so he could see out all the windows.

The panther was gone. As if it had never existed.

Derry sat back down in his seat, breathing hard, gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands.

After another long minute, he crawled into the backseat for a better look outside.

No sign of the enraged panther. If it had been real, it wouldn't have given up so easily. Derry maneuvered back into the driver's seat. Warily, he opened the door. He didn't push it out. He just wanted the sound, to maybe draw the animal out so he could see it.

The birds sang a happy little song and the wind blew the scent of the river into his face.

He pushed the door open a few inches, enough for him to crane his head out.

No rabid panther lunged for his throat. He put one foot out.

Still safe. A little more confident, he put one foot on the ground.

Then the other foot.

He stood up, ready to drop back inside.

He turned toward the back of the car and found himself facing something out of his worst nightmare. Hands crusted with dirt and blood grabbed him by the shirt and threw him to the ground with jarring force. The impact knocked the air out of his lungs.

He gasped for breath. A shadow fell over him.

"You're dead," he stammered. "Michael, you're dead."

"Your instincts suck, brother."

Derry wasn't sure if he meant his instincts about Mike's supposed death, or for letting himself be thrown to the ground.

"She killed you. I watched her."

Michael advanced. Derry scrambled backwards, using his arms and heels to shove himself along. Michael was coming up *fast*.

The wound across his throat was grisly, raw. It was infected and boiling with maggots and flies. Derry gagged and squeezed his eyes shut.

Michael's weight dropped on his chest hard enough to make his chest crack painfully. The dead man leaned down and scowled into his face. "It's not over, brother. I can't rest until the swamp tastes her blood. I *won't* rest. She'll be mine, forever. And you'll watch me take our revenge. And you'll live. Do you know why?"

Something clicked in Derry's head, something Suwannee had said. "*The agony of loss.*"

Michael smiled, a smile that chilled Derry's blood. He stared down into Derry's eyes, mesmerizing him. "Good, good. I'm going to take something from you one day. You'll wish you were dead, it'll hurt so bad. It won't be the physical that hurts the worst. It'll be the agony of loss."

Derry clenched his eyes shut. The crushing weight on his chest lifted. He sat up, alert for whatever Michael was going to do next.

But Michael was gone. Derry saw a fleeting shadow slip through the trees and vanish.

Bird, maybe.

There wasn't a single bird in sight.

The End