

Chapter 1

Verle Doucette knew he was being stalked. Though he hadn't seen anything moving in almost ten minutes, he could hear the occasional snap of a twig or stirring of leaves through the dense cypress and tupelo forest on his right. The creature was keeping its distance, but always staying abreast of him.

He could see a clearing up ahead in the moonlight and stopped. He knew that was where it would strike, once he was in the open. He closed his eyes and listened. There was a faint rustling just ahead on his right, much closer than before. He took a deep breath and began moving slowly forward again, his senses fully alert.

As he reached the edge of the clearing he stopped again, his eyes searching the tangle of vegetation along the right perimeter. He couldn't see anything moving. He cocked his head and listened. He couldn't hear anything except the steady buzzing of mosquitos and chirping of grasshoppers. He realized he was just going to have to trust his instincts.

He paused another second to ready himself, then jumped into the clearing, landing in a sumo wrestler's crouch in the muddy water, facing to the right.

"Ha," he yelled, ready for the creature to bound out of the darkness at him.

Nothing happened. He slowly straightened up and stared curiously into the forest. A mosquito hovered close to his nose and he absently swatted it away with his left hand.

Suddenly he heard a low growl behind him. He carefully

turned and saw the dog, its head and chest close to the water and its hind quarters raised, ready to pounce. Before Verle could react, the dog lunged forward and jumped up, its muddy front paws hitting him hard in the chest and causing him to stagger back a foot. Then the dog's face moved closer and its long tongue shot out and began to bathe his face.

Verle began to laugh.

"Okay, you got me," he said. "You're the best hunter in the whole wide swamp, Blue."

The dog continued enthusiastically licking his face for another few seconds, her long, bushy tail furiously brushing the surface of the water as Verle rubbed the thick damp scruff of her neck. Then suddenly she stopped and dropped her front legs silently into the dark water. Her nose began to pulsate quickly as she stared into the blackness farther up the trail. Then she bounded away.

"Wait," Verle called, as he saw the dog disappear into the night.

Despite the fact that Blue had lived almost her entire life in the Atchafalaya Basin and was naturally cautious, Verle still worried about her. Though she'd proven herself more than capable of handling herself with the smaller predators that lived in the swamps and bayous, at forty-five pounds she was no match for the Florida Panthers and Louisiana Black Bears that were occasionally spotted there.

Verle unshouldered his shotgun and started after her, his heavy rubber boots slogging through the muddy water. Up ahead he heard Blue begin to bark, and broke into an ungainly run.

"Come here, girl," he called, trying to sound authoritative despite his anxiety and the immediate raggedness of his breathing. "Come on back."

In response, the urgency of the dog's barking increased. Verle stopped for a moment and concentrated. He knew too

well that the still, thick waters of the swamp could play tricks with sound. He turned to his left and began running again.

Twenty yards ahead a thick curtain of Spanish moss hung from the branches of a massive live oak, its lowest tendrils nearly touching the water. Blue's barking was clearer and sharper now.

Verle quickened his pace, despite the stabbing pain that had begun along the lower right side of his rib cage.

"I'm coming, girl," he managed to call through heavy, labored breathing.

As he reached the moss he ducked below it, then froze, still in a crouching position. Fifteen feet away, a nude woman lay on a moss-covered hummock at the base of a tree. Blue stood beside her, now silently staring at him.

Verle slowly straightened up and took a few hesitant steps. He could hear his heart beating quickly and loudly in his ears.

"Hello?" he said reflexively, although he already knew the woman wouldn't respond. If Blue's barking hadn't stirred her, his own timid greeting certainly wouldn't.

He stopped again, suddenly unsure that he wasn't dreaming. He'd seen this woman before, lying in that exact position: on her back with her pelvis and legs twisted toward him, her right arm out to her side with the hand resting just above the water, and her left arm draped languidly over her eyes and forehead. It was all so familiar.

Then he remembered where he had seen her before. It was in a painting called "Repos" by Wojciech Gerson that he'd seen at the National Museum in Warsaw many years ago.

"Okay," he said, taking a calming breath. "I'm not losing my mind."

Blue stared at him quizzically.

"It's all right, girl," he said reassuringly as he waded forward.

As he reached the hummock he scratched Blue behind her right ear for a moment, then placed the back of his right hand

against the side of the woman's neck. Her skin was cool and damp. Verle slowly withdrew his hand and searched the shadows around them. He couldn't see anyone else.

"I'm sorry," he said to the woman's body.

He stood staring at her for a few minutes as he considered what to do. He knew that if the woman had been killed, he should leave her there and hike the mile back to his truck to radio the police so that they could investigate the scene, but he also knew that before very long the inhabitants of the swamp would find her and there might be nothing left to investigate. Though the alligators had all moved into deeper water for the winter, there were still plenty of carnivores left who would welcome a free meal.

"Looks like we're going to have to carry her out of here," he said to Blue. "But I want you to stay close by me. You can't go running off, okay?"

Blue tilted her head and began to wag her tail. Then she began trotting farther into the woods to their right.

"No, not that way," Verle called.

Blue stopped and cocked her head at him.

"This way," Verle said, pointing to his left.

Blue hesitated for a moment, then came back and started in the direction he'd indicated.

"Good girl," Verle said.

Verle was slick with perspiration and his heart was thumping wildly in his chest. He'd kept his focus by counting the number of mosquitos who had bitten him over the last forty-five minutes.

He'd had to stop four times to rest, and each time the exertion of lifting the woman back onto his shoulders had become more difficult. He hoped he could make it back to the

road without having to stop again because he wasn't sure he could manage it again.

In the distance he thought he saw a brief flash of light through the trees. He stared at the spot and waited. The light flashed again.

"Hey! Over here!" he called out. "I need some help."

The light turned in his direction and began to move closer.

Verle let out a deep sigh and dropped to his knees. He lowered his right shoulder and gently laid the woman on the mossy ground.

"It's going to be okay," he said in a hoarse whisper.

The light was moving quickly toward them now. Verle could see it bouncing up and down through the trees.

"Right here," he called out.

Suddenly the fur on Blue's back rose into a pointed tuft and her tail lifted into the air. She let out a deep, low growl.

"It's okay, girl," Verle said. "They're going to help us."

Then the light was on Verle's face, momentarily blinding him. He moved his right hand in front of his eyes to shield them and looked between the fingers. He could just make out the shape of a man wearing a wide, flat-brimmed hat. The man had a pistol pointed at him.

"Don't move!" the man called out.

"Okay, officer," Verle replied quickly, his weariness suddenly gone as adrenaline coursed through his body.

"Now I want you to slowly take that shotgun off your shoulder and place it on the ground in front of you," the State Trooper said.

From the tone of his voice, Verle could tell that he was both young and nervous. Blue emitted another growl.

"Lie down," Verle said tersely.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the dog settle next to the woman's body.

Verle reached over his right shoulder with his left hand and grabbed the muzzle of the shotgun, then slowly slid the strap off

his shoulder and brought the rifle out in front of his body. He lowered it until the butt was resting on the ground, then gently laid it down. Then he straightened up and clasped his hands behind his head.

“Okay,” he said in a calming voice. “Now just do me a favor and lower your gun. My dog is very protective of me and I don’t want either of you getting hurt.”