



## Queen of the Swampwoods

I got a book about gators, talking about what they eat and where they live and what they gonna do. Daddy tell me there a lot more to a gator than any of them scientists is ever gonna know. He say they got a mystery and a magic in them, those gators do, and ain't something you can study up and put in a book. He tell me that when my great-great-grandmammy was nothing but a girl like me, she done be friends with the alligators. Sometime she even rode right up on top of them and ain't none of them take even one bite out of her. My great-great-grandmammy, she lived in a palace in the trees on the other side of the river. She been queen of the swampland.

Me? I'm just a little cricket girl. I ain't even supposed to go in the river. And I don't in the morning or evening, when gators' eyes sit on the surface of the water like fallen moons. But right now it's middle of the day, the sun hammering down on me, shimmering off the lazy river-top like firefly sparks. Sometime it's just too hot to follow the rules. 'Sides, I bet the gators all deep down under the water, keeping far outta heat like this. I take off my clothes and stand there on the edge in nothing but my underpants.

On the other side, big oak trees is stretching over the water like they're trying to reach they hands right to me, like they want me to come on over there and swing up into they branches. I swim across the river, all the way across, maybe I find my great-great-grandmammy's house up

in the trees and maybe my daddy and me, maybe we go live back up in there, real, real deep in the swampforest.

I scrunch up my nose, hold my breath, and jump in. The water feel real nice and cool. I swim with my eyes open, watching how the sunlight dripping through all the trees overhead cuts beams of light down through the green water. I swim straight for the other side, but after a while I get tired and I roll on my back and float, the river holding me like a mama, the sky stretching blue way up over my head. I kick my feet a little and circle my arms so I'm still moving toward the other side, slow and lazy. Once I'm good and rested, I flip over like a otter tumbling through the water. What I see make me scream so loud a big ole blackbird drop out of a tree and flap away.

Right there in front of me a whole congregation of gators be hidden up in the riverweeds, sunshine glinting and glaring off they scaly black backs.

One of them be twice as big as the others, the spikes on his head taller, and sharper, all twisted up in a circle. He got green moss furring his jawbones, and only one eye, just one golden eye. He lift his giant head toward the sky and the scales on his neck, they be like a hundred little squares of tile. He growl low, then he start puffing his throat in and out, in and out, and he let loose a bellow like a engine revving up out on the highway. His roar so loud, a whole flock of birds lift out the trees and light off into the sunshine.

I clamp my mouth shut, start dog-paddling slow and quiet back the way I come. But that gator, he turn his wrinkled gold eye on me. And he start crawling right over top the other gators, squashing down they snouts with his huge feet, still chuffing his throat and growling way deep down, so deep down it like the sound ain't coming out of him but outta the earth herself. He keep his eye trained straight on me, and by the time he nosing into the river, I ain't dog-paddling. I'm

swimming full out toward home, faster than I ever knew how, clawing through that water like a kitten scramble up my leg when it's scared of a storm. I glance back and sure enough that gator gliding smooth through the water, following after me. I don't look back no more. Every time a weed brush up against my belly, I think it's the gator's teeth about to sink into my skin. It like my guts tied into knots. My scalp gone cold and prickly.

I'm gonna get eat up by a alligator.

“Cricket!”

I'm flailing and thrashing through that water, but I hang still a second I hear my name.

“Cricket.”

It's my daddy coming down through the sawgrass, all jaunty, swinging his hips and singing like he got birds up inside his lungs. He got a fishing pole set over his shoulder and he carrying a plastic container of worms. I think he drop his pole and race out in the river and rescue me, but he just kick the cats out the way and sit down on the bank to get up his fishing.

I open my mouth to holler at him, and something cold and hard bump into my back, and all I'm doing is screaming, screaming and shrieking and howling there in the water with the biggest alligator I ever seen. I whirl round, 'specting to get chomped in his mossed-up jaws, but that gator, he ain't there no more. Nothing but a log, thudding up against me. That gator, he got to be hiding deep down under the green water, about to rise up and pull me under.

I'm swimming again, fast as I can, but my arms and legs all tired and it feel like I'm crawling. I get to where it shallow enough to put my feet down, I drag myself toward the bank, mud oozing between my toes, bubbles popping around my legs. I finally lift up outta that river, where my daddy tell me a thousand times not to be, and I crawl through the tangled-up weeds

and flop down on the bank right next to him. My breath coming so hard and fast I got to press my hands against my chest to hold it in.

“Cricket,” my daddy say. Just that. Just my name and I know I’m still dead meat.

“Daddy,” I say.

“What I been tellin you bout swimming in this here river all by yourself? What I been tellin you since you was nothing but a screamin baby spending all your time shittin in your pants and not wanting nothing but tits? What I tell you?”

“Not to.”

“Not to what, Cricket girl?”

“Not to swim.”

“That’s right, baby girl, that’s what I been tellin you. Specially now that you stopped all that shittin and screamin, I be ready to keep you alive a long time. A real long time. But you gotta help me out, here, you gotta listen.”

I nod. My daddy cock his head and smile, his teeth like pieces of chiclet gum in his dark, dark face. There he is, his brown eyes really there looking at me and I ain’t even no dead meat — not this time — cause he still just setting there and grinning straight at me.

“Put your clothes on, girl, you want the neighbors to think I raising a wild thing?” He laugh, cause we ain’t got no neighbors. When we travel up to the town, I seen the way other folks live, the folks that have neighbors all up and down they streets, not even spitting distance between them. I seen they houses. They got straight walls and clean windows and they done killed all the plants in they yards except some grass and maybe a tree. It ain’t like that where we live. At our place, it more like the plants is gonna kill us. Our house looks like a tired old man

with skin all wrinkled and dried up by the sun, walls bent like his crooked back. We got ferns creeping up the porch steps and trees growing so close they touch the roof.

All this time I been watching the river for that alligator, but it musta slunk on back to its side of the river. My daddy sitting right there next to me, my guts don't be tied up in knots and my breath ain't fighting its way outta me no more. I shake myself all around like I'm a dog, flinging water out of my mossy black hair, slinging riverdrops off my skin.

“Give me that pole, Daddy. I catch us a big one.”

He laugh again, that rumble laugh that start in his belly and grow into a flying thing as it come out his mouth. He hand me the fishing pole.

“Yeah, you catch us a big one, baby girl.”

I grab one of them worms and squish it onto the hook. I throw the line over my shoulder and I cast it far out into the river, then start reeling it back slow as one of my kittens creeping through the sawgrass after a lizard. When I feel a bite on the line it scare me so bad I shriek and Daddy holler, “Hook it, damn you, hook it!” and I yank up on that line and feel the hook catch in the fish's mouth. I reel fast now, leaning back with my toes rooting in the dirt, 'til I got that fish up in the air, dangling over the water and probably crying whatever way a fish cry.

“Wooeee!” Daddy shout and help me get the fish off the hook. “It a big one, Cricket. What kind a fish you got here, huh?”

“Dunno.”

“That ain't no kind a answer. I ain't raising you up to be shit stupid. What kinda fish?”

I got a bad itch up inside my nose and I scratch at it. Daddy slap my hand away and tell me to quit picking my nose like some kinda baby and to figure out fast what kinda fish this is or I gonna be wishing I had.

“Catfish,” I say. He squeeze his hand up into a fist and I think he about to hit me a good one, but he whack the fish instead. It go limp, the life knocked right out of it.

“Ain’t no catfish,” he say. “Catfish, they live on the bottom a the river and they got whiskers. This a bass, baby girl, a largemouth bass.” He thrust the fish at me and I grab it. He hands me a knife. “You too dumb to know its name, you clean it out.”

I walk downriver a ways and stab into that fish with the knife, split it open, and pull out all its guts. Then I trail it in the water, make it swim around until there ain’t no more blood coming out.

My daddy, he catch three more fish and we clean them out together. When the sun’s sunk down low in the sky so it look like the tree trunks and the green leaves and even the mops of Spanish moss are all turned to gold, my daddy and I — each carrying fish — start walking back to the house. We belly deep in the sawgrass when my daddy grab my shoulder and pull me right up against his bony hip. Them fish fall right out my hands.

A snake.

The biggest snake I ever saw, and he got his jaws cracked so wide open they look like they gonna break right in half. He swallowin a grownup deer right down his throat, his scales all bulged and swollen like a mama carrying a baby inside her. But that ain’t no mama. It’s a python, just like my daddy always been telling me about, saying one take a liking to me, I ain’t got no chance this side of heaven. Now that snake right there in front of me and it make me sick in my stomach, seeing a furry whitetail getting eat up by some big fat snake that ugly as sin and ain’t even supposed to be around in here. My daddy’s fingers digging into my skin and he turning me away, not letting me look no more. He drape his arm over my shoulders, the fish he holding

thumping against my chest, and he squeeze me soft against his side. Like he keep me safe forever.

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My daddy, he all right. He doing the best he can. That's what he say — he doing the best he able, everything he can. And I got to believe that, cause he my daddy.

But sometimes he disappear.

I don't mean he disappear like I can't find him, like he lost and I don't know where he at. There he is, sitting in his chair by the cracked window where strips of yellow light come in pieces through the dirt. He sitting right there, one of the kittens clawing at the underbelly of that swayback chair, but he ain't really there. His eyes is gone off some other place, some place I don't know how to get to. And I guess he can't always remember how to get back, cause sometimes I stand there and holler straight at his face and he don't so much as blink those faraway forgotten eyes of his.

When he get lost inside himself like that, I ain't got no daddy. I take up the animals and we go live in my teepee house out back of the haunted oak tree where once, a real long time ago, a white man strung up a black boy and killed him dead. The real house is a old shack Daddy found out here in the middle of the swampwoods. "Finders keepers," he say. That was before I was a remembering thing. I ain't got nothing in my mind but living in this place with a daddy and no mama. We got lots of cats. Used to we had a dog, a great big thing with long golden hair and titties all soft pink and swollen. I slept with my face buried in her underside, my head rising and falling with her breath, and I called her mama. She died.

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We frying up our fish now. Daddy toss them all together with cornmeal and eggs and plenty of salt. We got a giant witch's cauldron out back the house and Daddy start a fire up under it and set the oil to heating. When it real nice and hot, we throw the fish in.

“Look, they swimming again,” I say.

He think that real funny. He slap my back and open up a can of beer and take a great big swallow and then he pass it to me. “Go on and have you a drink, baby girl.”

I throw back my head and let it slosh down my throat. I ain't gonna choke. It's warm and a little bit sweet, kind of like soggy bread.

When the fish ready, we sit eating on the front porch with the kittens crawling all around us, rubbing up against my back, reaching up with they paws and batting at the plate. I give a white kitten a bite of my fish and my daddy swat the back of my head, tell me them cats can get they own food.

By the time we through eating, ain't no light left in the forest. We go inside and hold a match to the oil lamp and fire leap up inside it. My daddy shove three cats out of his old sway-back chair and then he settle in and prop his feet on the table. I grab my gator book and jump into his lap fast, before there any way he can get up inside that maze and disappear.

“What you wanna read this fool book again for?”

“I like it.”

“You like it all you want, baby girl, but it not telling you half the truth.”

I just nod my head and snuggle into his arms. I don't tell him what I know about gators, about what I seen.



Daddy ain't never told me where my mama gone. I don't know if she dead or alive. Don't matter. I ain't needing nothing or nobody but him. He kept me alive when I was nothing but a shitting screaming thing and then he taught me how to read. We ain't got but two books and my daddy say he so stupid he never even finish school. "But ain't nobody too stupid to read, Cricket." He tell me that when I was a real little kid, and he draw letters in the sand with a stick and show me how it all work. By now, seven years old, I reading just about as good as him.

Back then, back when I was more of a baby, my daddy didn't get lost up inside his own head so much. He was there with me more of the time. And when he there, my daddy *all* there. He got so much life rising up in him sometime he can't even keep it all in — he just got to throw back his head and laugh. Sometime he throw me up in the air and I can feel the breath of his laugh like heat outta his mouth as I fall back into his arms.

He disappearing a lot more these days, though. I think maybe I getting to be too big, taking up too much space. My daddy get lost in the darkness of his own eyes and I go out to my teepee house and mama them kittens, wait for my daddy to find his way outta the maze that's all up inside his head. He find his way out and he start hollering my name, like I the one been lost. I ain't gonna argue with him. I come flying up to the house and he grab me round the armpits and throw me up on his shoulders.

"We gonna kill us a chicken, baby girl," he say one time. "We eat up fried chicken tonight."

Then he run around trampling the ferns like he a chicken, a chicken with its head cut off, me still up there bouncing around so wild my own head like to fall off. He swing me on back to the ground and swat at my hiney and say, "Last one to catch a chicken is a rotten egg." And

we're off running together, him so tall his head just about crashing through the treetops and me no bigger'n the palmetto babies.

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My daddy, he stay with me three days. We got a storm blowing through. The wind so angry and the rain spitting at us so hard I think it's a hurricane, but my daddy say it ain't nothing but a plain ole storm. The first day is like any rainy day. But the next day the wind blowing hard enough I tell my daddy we got to bring in the animals. He laugh but he help me find my rain boots and then we go outside together.

It's middle of the morning but it's about as black as night out there and the wind's gusting so hard the palm trees is bowing to the ground. Even the places that's dry most of the time is sloshing wet now. I got to drag myself through the yard like I'm wading into the river, pushing against the wind the whole time. I clap my hands to my ears to block out the crashing thunder and I run around the yard, hollering for my baby cats. My voice get whisked off to the sky, disappearing like a bird straight into the storm.

I find the kittens in my teepee house. I can only hold four, so I squat down and waggle my fingers at the other ones and tell them, "You don't wanna get eat up by this storm, you come with me." The kittens in my arms, they all wet and squirmy and every time thunder shatters through the swampland one or another of them get so scared they like to scratch my arms off. The kittens trailing behind me try and climb up my legs but I ain't got no pants on and they tearing up my skin. I keep shaking them off and then calling them to keep up following me. I get back to my daddy's house and I just kick and throw them kittens inside.

My daddy's coming through the yard with chickens dangling by they legs from each of his hands. He toss them in the house and go back out to find the rest. When he come back with

the other three, I got the kittens all settled in with they food and I'm opening up some spam for us. He slam the door against the storm and light the lamp. We got the broken window boarded up to try and keep out the rain, but the roof leak so it don't even matter.

I hand my daddy a fork and we sit Indian-legged on the floor to eat up. We got the whole family together now. Four cats, eight kittens, five chickens, and my daddy and me. We ain't going to let no storm bother us. It's cozy in here with the wind battering against the roof and the thunder rumbling so loud it shake the walls and us just sitting together and eating, my daddy shoving kittens away from his food and laughing his belly laugh that roll out of him like some kind of happy thunder. When we're done eating he put out the lamp and lay back in the chair and I stretch out in his lap. It dark as night now and I fall asleep with my face buried in my daddy's chest.

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The storm gone quiet.

“What I tell you, Cricket, that weren't no hurricane.”

“Huh?” I'm squatting in the corner, trying to get one of the cats to come snatch the lizard tail I'm wagging around like it still attached to a body.

“Wasn't no hurricane, not that.”

“Huh.”

“Cricket, look at me when I is trying to talk to you. You care more bout them damn kittens than your own daddy, yeah? Come here, come on, let's get us outside and breathe some air that don't smell like shit and fur balls.”

We go outside. It's still raining a little, but ain't no wind blowing. The yard look like God come down and swung his arms all around. There's tree branches slung everywhere, piled on the

ground, sticking out of the ferns, some still dangling in the tree they broke from. A whole tree been uprooted and is laying next to our house, its leaves sweeping the wall.

Holding hands, me and my daddy walk through the forest down to the sawgrass out past my teepee. We're walking over to the river when the wind start picking up again. At first it's just a soft whistle through the treetops, kind of like our swamp starting to sing. But it's getting mad fast, that wind, gusting around like it's going to blow us straight into the clouds. And those clouds, they're careening back across the sky and everything's going dark again. The rain starts coming down so hard it feel like somebody's throwing gravel at my arms.

My daddy's fingers get tight around mine. "Cricket," he say. "You know what the eye of a hurricane be?"

"This ain't no hurricane. That what you say."

"Do you know?"

"Yeah."

"What it be?"

"Dunno."

"We gonna hurry on back to the house, baby girl. Let's run, me and you."

We're still holding hands and we start racing back through the swampforest. The ground so wet it's sucking at my feet like it want to pull me down and hold me there for the storm to come eat me up. When we get up to the house, the wind's banging the door open and shut, open and shut. Daddy slam the door and shove the chair in front of it.

"Get under the mattress," he say.

"Huh?" I just standing in the middle of the room now, feeling like I'm in the river cause my rain boots is filled up with water. The cats and kittens and chickens is pacing round like wor-

ried old women, mewling and clucking and acting like they all scared of this little storm. Thunder crash so loud it shake the whole house.

“Get under the mattress!” He shout it like he mad all a sudden. I just keep standing there looking at him and he holler, “You need a whipping to make you listen to me? Get your damn self under the damn mattress.”

“Come under with me.” In the glow of the fire lamp his eyes go soft, sweet. He turn and he smile at me, the most faraway forgotten smile I ever seen and I’m still just standing there in the middle of the room but now I’m crying, crying hard and loud as that storm out there, my tears so fat they sliding off my cheeks and rolling all the way down my body ’til they sloshing round in my boots with the rest of the rain.

“Yeah, baby girl,” he say, “yeah I come under with you.”

So me and my daddy, we lay down on the floor and he pull the mattress up over us and he wrap his arms around me. As the wind beat against our house and the rain come down like it going to flood us out and the thunder shatter through the forest so wild it make my teeth chatter, my daddy keep on holding me tight and he start singing to me, soft and sweet like he could be a mama, and I can’t see him, can’t see how his eyes is looking, but I can hear him fighting against the maze in his head, fighting not to disappear up into himself. He don’t want to be lost. He want to be right here with me.

But he going.

He going to slip away like a fish that arc up into the air and then drop right back into the water. I can hear it in the notes falling out of his song, the words getting lost in the rumble of the storm that maybe really is a hurricane.

When I wake up, there ain't a storm no more. Ain't no daddy, neither. I crawl out from under the mattress and I got blue skies overhead of me, cause the roof blown straight off the house and sunlight is tumbling in. I go outside to find my daddy.

Everything is tore up. A big piece of the roof is laying on the ground. Trees crisscross the yard, they roots waving at the sky instead of planted in the ground like they supposed to be. Chickens is roosting in them broke up trees, probably just trying to keep they feathers dry. I get my rain boots on and then I look all around the yard, hollering for my daddy. He ain't nowhere near the house and he ain't in my teepee and he ain't fishing in the river, which is so swole up with rainwater it's spilling over its banks. My daddy's raft ain't tied up alongside the bank no more.

I'm wearing nothing but my underpants and I walk into that swelled up water until it's past my belly button. The river's cold and it's moving fast — a tree limb rush by and whack me in the back. A split second I think it's a gator, think I'm gonna get eat up before I even find my daddy, but I see quick it's just a branch. I climb up onto some cypress knees sticking up from the water. I holler loud as I can. I cup my hands round my mouth and shout and scream. My daddy told me that when I was a baby, I screamed 'til I was blue in the face. I bet my face done turned blue now, cause I shout and holler and bellow my lungs out for my daddy 'til there ain't no more air left inside me.

I think about that maze up inside his head. Maybe he get so lost in there he start wandering round our swampland, trying to find his way out. He lost so bad this time, he get on that raft of his and take it on across the water to where the swamp go back deep, real deep — deep as any maze in his head.

I'm gonna go find him. I'm gonna find my daddy.

Up at the house I get on some clothes. All them kittens is sleeping together in a ball on the mattress and I gather them up and tell them they got to come with me, I take care of them out there in the swamp. I show them I got a can of sardines in my pocket and they follow after me. Them kittens get fussy about the way the ground all wet, so I open up the sardines and they follow that smell, no matter about the water. When we get to the river I drop the can on the ground and while they fighting over sardines, I find me a real long stick for a rafting pole.

All them kittens mewling around me, I push my raft into the river, digging my stick down deep to push against the current. This water moving so fast I ain't even got time to watch out for gators. A branch smack straight into us and one of the cats fall in the water. I grab her by the scruff and toss her back up on the boat. I got my face scrunched up, concentrating, and all my muscles is balling together in my back, working hard as they can, fighting to get across the river.

“Shut up and stop cryin,” I tell the kittens. “I get us across.” I do it, too. Ain't sure how, but I push us through that rushing water, past tree limbs that's trying to squash us, past two balls of ants that's floating on the surface, maybe right over the tops of alligators moving way down under the water. We hit land and I squint my eyes hard at all them windtossed riverweeds, searching for the congregation of gators was hidden up in there before. Ain't one of them here now, so I grab the kittens and toss them high on the bank, then I drag the raft on shore.

It's pure jungle over on this side of the river. Kudzu and tater vines hang so thick on the trees they like curtains of green. I tear my way through all the leaves and vines and spiderwebs with a short fat stick. The kittens is dragging behind me and sometimes I got to kick one or the other to keep them coming along. Sometimes I let a couple of them latch they claws in my shirt and hang onto me like possum babies.

Every now and then I stop walking and drop my stick, lift my hands to my mouth and holler loud as I can.

It's like the swampjungle swallow up my voice. Ain't no daddy answering back, ain't even the soft whisper of my own echo. I grab my stick up again and slash at the vines, tearing my way deeper into the forest, into the towering trees and creeping weeds that wind all around me like what the maze in my daddy's head must look like.

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I'm deep in the swampland now. This place so thick with plants it seem like it twilight all day long. Everywhere is weeds crawling on and on into the darkness, and piles of thorns clawing at me, and vines coiled round the trees like snakes. The kittens ain't with me no more. They give up a long while back and hightailed it out of here. I bet they sitting on the raft all snuggled up together thinking how smart they is for getting out of the deep swamp before they get eat up by python snake or a big fat alligator.

I think about my great-great-grandmammy, how she been friends with the gators and rode on they backs way deep into these swampwoods, way out to her palace up in the trees where she been the queen. Me? I'm just a kid, a little cricket kid who can't even find her daddy.

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I see his feet first. Sticking out of the ferns. *He be sleeping. Look at him out here sleeping in the woods like he don't know no better'n a baby.*

“Daddy.”

I take a step closer, moving so I ain't barely ruffling the leaves under me.

“Daddy?”



Ain't no sound he make to answer me. For a while I just stand there, staring at his toes. He ain't got no shoes on and the pink bottoms of his feet is all crisscrossed with black lines. He yell at me I come in the house feet that covered in dirt.

It's about starting to get dark. We ain't gonna have time to get back to the house before the sun sink down into the water. We gonna have to spend the night sleeping out in the swamp-forest.

“Daddy.”

I step closer to him. He still ain't moved. *He real tired. He come out this far he got to get a nice long sleep.* But I ain't waiting no more. We got to get home.

“Daddy.”

I stamp through the ferns up past his feet and his body laying there on the ground, his face pressed down in the mud, his arms reaching out above his head. My daddy, he got blood puddling in the mudwater under his wrists like his arms the neck of a chicken. It's the same knife, laying there next to him, the same knife he use to open up chicken necks. Same knife he use to slit a fish and pour out the blood.

“Daddy!”

I squat down and I rock a little, back and forward and side to side. I wrap my arms up around myself and keep on rocking cause I'm my own mama, and now I'm my own daddy, too.

I ain't squatting now. I ain't sure what I'm doing. Just screaming, that's all I know, just screaming like the sound of it going to tear out my throat, like it going to rip my body into a thousand pieces 'til I'm so small I fly away like gnats in the wind. Screaming like I got a hurricane up inside me. Like I am the hurricane. Don't matter how loud I scream. My daddy, he ain't gonna hear me. I want to lay up next to his side, snuggle close and feel the up and down of his

breathing chest, the tick-tock of his beating heart. But all that blood is everywhere, the dirt red and sticky with it spilled out of him and there ain't no place for me next to my daddy no more. I sink back to the ground, far out of reach of those stretching blood-spilling arms.

All this time the sun been traveling down into the earth and the swampforest been getting darker and darker, shadows passing by and falling over me like ghosts moving into the night. I wonder how the kittens is without me to be they mama and give them food. I wonder when I'm going to eat again. Maybe I ain't never gonna eat again. Maybe I just stay here with my daddy 'til the end.

There come a rustling in the weeds where he laying. Sound like a real big, real heavy creature. I squint open one eye. A huge black thing crawling toward me and I think maybe my daddy be awake now and he hold my hand and take me back across the river, back home again. My eyes is wide open. And if it's my daddy, he don't look the same no more. This creature sneaking through the shadows and ferns, his eyes is glowing in the flitting darkness, and he got spikes along his back, scales thick and hard like armor, yellow-white teeth jutting from his jaws.

Gator.

The gator, big as he is, he just sitting there, there between my daddy and me. My breath go tight up inside me. My heart feel like it tripping and stumbling all over the place. I ain't knowing what the gator gonna do to me, just sitting there the way he be. I keep my eyes trained on him and I can see breath moving his sides in and out, in and out — big heavy breaths, moving, a heart beating *thud thud thud* cause he alive, this great beast crawling out of the swamp got life huge inside of him and all his blood safe up inside that armor skin.

Then another big swamp daddy crawl up beside him. He even bigger than the first, jagged teeth hanging out his open mouth. They coming from all around now — five, six, ten of them —

silent as the shadows they creeping out of. I pull my knees up against my chest, wrap my arms round my shins like I gonna be protected I make myself real small. They circle up round me, so close they breath is hot on my skin. And they eyes is glowing bright as firelight even though there ain't no moonlight down in the thickness of this jungle.

My insides is all knotted up like when I got chased through the river. I'm trembling all over, like a baby leaf getting shook up in the wind.

But the alligators ain't moving in on me, just staying circled round. They press close up together, make a gap wide enough I catch a glimpse of my daddy laying there in the mud.

Into that space step a giant alligator with green-mossed jaw and just one eye, glowing bright as the sun, glowing so bright the light of it glint off the crown of spikes on his head. He raise his tail — like lifting up a tree trunk — and thump it down one, two, three times. He open his jaw wide, wide. Snap it shut. Then he look straight at me, that golden wrinkled eye old as the magic that's all folded up in the water and sawgrass and kudzu-hung trees of this place.

I stare straight back into his old, old eye.

I stand up.

Over the long back of the gator I see my daddy's body, laying there in the ferns. Still as a cat that ain't never going to pounce.

The gator, he thump his tail again and keep on staring straight at me. Breath's spilling outta his nostrils and I take my own breath, a long deep breath, and I let it whistle out slow through my teeth, all the while watching his old old golden eye. I step forward. He lift up his head and bellow so loud I feel the rumble of it in my own chest and I open up my mouth and I holler into the dark dark night, scream and shout into the blackness of the jungle with this alligator daddy, king of the swamp.

We go quiet and a screech owl answer back as it flap off into the trees. I reach out my hand, spread my fingers, hover my palm over the alligator's wide-open mossy jaws, over teeth sharp and jagged like broke up bones. He roar again, that gator do, the rush of his breath burning my hand. I don't move. I howl back, howl so everything in me be part of the noise, and I'm louder than him.

He bow his head.

I look round at all the other alligators and then, real slow, I move up to the big daddy's side. I grab hold of his spines, and pull myself onto the wide fierce back of that gator, the biggest gator I ever seen, who got scales black hard and strong, and a heart beating steady up inside his ribs. He thump his tail again, then he lift up onto all four of his legs. I sit up straight and tall. He move away from where my daddy be, back into the forest, not taking me to my house over the other side of the river, but deep deep into the swampland, to my palace in the trees.