

PART 1

The Marsh



Prologue

1969

Marsh is not swamp. Marsh is a space of light, where grass grows in water, and water flows into the sky. Slow-moving creeks wander, carrying the orb of the sun with them to the sea, and long-legged birds lift with unexpected grace—as though not built to fly—against the roar of a thousand snow geese.

Then within the marsh, here and there, true swamp crawls into low-lying bogs, hidden in clammy forests. Swamp water is still and dark, having swallowed the light in its muddy throat. Even night crawlers are diurnal in this lair. There are sounds, of course, but compared to the marsh, the swamp is quiet because decomposition is cellular work. Life decays and reeks and returns to the rotted duff; a poignant wallow of death begetting life.

On the morning of October 30, 1969, the body of Chase Andrews lay in the swamp, which would have absorbed it silently, routinely. Hiding it for good. A swamp knows all about death, and doesn't necessarily define it as tragedy, certainly not a sin. But this morning two boys from the village rode their bikes out to the old fire tower and, from the third switchback, spotted his denim jacket.

1.

Ma

1952

The morning burned so August-hot, the marsh's moist breath hung the oaks and pines with fog. The palmetto patches stood unusually quiet except for the low, slow flap of the heron's wings lifting from the lagoon. And then, Kya, only six at the time, heard the screen door slap. Standing on the stool, she stopped scrubbing grits from the pot and lowered it into the basin of worn-out suds. No sounds now but her own breathing. Who had left the shack? Not Ma. She never let the door slam.

But when Kya ran to the porch, she saw her mother in a long brown skirt, kick pleats nipping at her ankles, as she walked down the sandy lane in high heels. The stubby-nosed shoes were fake alligator skin. Her only going-out pair. Kya wanted to holler out but knew not to rouse Pa, so opened the door and stood on the brick-'n'-board steps. From there she saw the blue train case Ma carried. Usually, with the confidence of a pup, Kya knew her mother would return with meat wrapped in greasy brown paper or with a chicken, head dangling down. But she never wore the gator heels, never took a case.

Ma always looked back where the foot lane met the road, one arm held high, white palm waving, as she turned onto the track, which wove through bog forests, cattail lagoons, and maybe—if the tide obliged—eventually into town. But today she walked on, unsteady in the ruts. Her tall figure emerged now and then through the holes of the forest until only swatches of white scarf flashed between the leaves. Kya sprinted to the spot she knew would bare the road; surely Ma would wave from there, but she arrived only in time to glimpse the blue case—the color so wrong for the woods—as it disappeared. A heaviness, thick as black-cotton mud, pushed her chest as she returned to the steps to wait.

Kya was the youngest of five, the others much older, though later she couldn't recall their ages. They lived with Ma and Pa, squeezed together like penned rabbits, in the rough-cut shack, its screened porch staring big-eyed from under the oaks.

Jodie, the brother closest to Kya, but still seven years older, stepped from the house and stood behind her. He had her same dark eyes and black hair; had taught her birdsongs, star names, how to steer the boat through saw grass.

“Ma’ll be back,” he said.

“I dunno. She’s wearin’ her gator shoes.”

“A ma don’t leave her kids. It ain’t in ’em.”

“You told me that fox left her babies.”

“Yeah, but that vixen got ’er leg all tore up. She’d’ve starved to death if she’d tried to feed herself ’n’ her kits. She was better off to leave ’em, heal herself up, then whelp more when she could raise ’em good. Ma ain’t starvin’, she’ll be back.” Jodie wasn’t nearly as sure as he sounded, but said it for Kya.

Her throat tight, she whispered, “But Ma’s carryin’ that blue case like she’s goin’ somewheres big.”

The shack sat back from the palmettos, which sprawled across sand flats to a necklace of green lagoons and, in the distance, all the marsh beyond. Miles of blade-grass so tough it grew in salt water, interrupted only by trees so bent they wore the shape of the wind. Oak forests bunched around the other sides of the shack and sheltered the closest lagoon, its surface so rich in life it churned. Salt air and gull-song drifted through the trees from the sea.

Claiming territory hadn't changed much since the 1500s. The scattered marsh holdings weren't legally described, just staked out natural—a creek boundary here, a dead oak there—by renegades. A man doesn't set up a palmetto lean-to in a bog unless he's on the run from somebody or at the end of his own road.

The marsh was guarded by a torn shoreline, labeled by early explorers as the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” because riptides, furious winds, and shallow shoals wrecked ships like paper hats along what would become the North Carolina coast. One seaman's journal read, “rang'd along the Shoar . . . but could discern no Entrance . . . A violent Storm overtook us . . . we were forced to get off to Sea, to secure Ourselves and Ship, and were driven by the Rapidity of a strong Current . . .

“The Land . . . being marshy and Swamps, we return'd towards our Ship . . . Discouragement of all such as should hereafter come into those Parts to settle.”

Those looking for serious land moved on, and this infamous marsh became a net, scooping up a mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors, and fugitives dodging wars, taxes, or laws that they didn't take to. The ones malaria didn't kill or the swamp didn't swallow bred into a woodsmen tribe of several races and multiple cultures, each of whom could fell a small forest with a hatchet and pack a buck for miles. Like

river rats, each had his own territory, yet had to fit into the fringe or simply disappear some day in the swamp. Two hundred years later, they were joined by runaway slaves, who escaped into the marsh and were called maroons, and freed slaves, penniless and beleaguered, who dispersed into the water-land because of scant options.

Maybe it was mean country, but not an inch was lean. Layers of life—squiggly sand crabs, mud-waddling crayfish, waterfowl, fish, shrimp, oysters, fatted deer, and plump geese—were piled on the land or in the water. A man who didn't mind scrabbling for supper would never starve.

It was now 1952, so some of the claims had been held by a string of disconnected, unrecorded persons for four centuries. Most before the Civil War. Others squatted on the land more recently, especially after the World Wars, when men came back broke and broke-up. The marsh did not confine them but defined them and, like any sacred ground, kept their secrets deep. No one cared that they held the land because nobody else wanted it. After all, it was wasteland bog.

Just like their whiskey, the marsh dwellers bootlegged their own laws—not like those burned onto stone tablets or inscribed on documents, but deeper ones, stamped in their genes. Ancient and natural, like those hatched from hawks and doves. When cornered, desperate, or isolated, man reverts to those instincts that aim straight at survival. Quick and just. They will always be the trump cards because they are passed on more frequently from one generation to the next than the gentler genes. It is not a morality, but simple math. Among themselves, doves fight as often as hawks.

Ma didn't come back that day. No one spoke of it. Least of all Pa. Stinking of fish and drum likker, he clanked pot lids. "Whar's supper?"

Eyes downcast, the brothers and sisters shrugged. Pa dog-cussed,

then limp-stepped out, back into the woods. There had been fights before; Ma had even left a time or two, but she always came back, scooping up whoever would be cuddled.

The two older sisters cooked a supper of red beans and cornbread, but no one sat to eat at the table, as they would have with Ma. Each dipped beans from the pot, flopped cornbread on top, and wandered off to eat on their floor mattresses or the faded sofa.

Kya couldn't eat. She sat on the porch steps, looking down the lane. Tall for her age, bone skinny, she had deep-tanned skin and straight hair, black and thick as crow wings.

Darkness put a stop to her lookout. Croaking frogs would drown the sounds of footsteps; even so, she lay on her porch bed, listening. Just that morning she'd awakened to fatback crackling in the iron skillet and whiffs of biscuits browning in the wood oven. Pulling up her bib overalls, she'd rushed into the kitchen to put the plates and forks out. Pick the weevils from the grits. Most dawns, smiling wide, Ma hugged her—"Good morning, my special girl"—and the two of them moved about the chores, dancelike. Sometimes Ma sang folk songs or quoted nursery rhymes: "This little piggy went to market." Or she'd swing Kya into a jitterbug, their feet banging the plywood floor until the music of the battery-operated radio died, sounding as if it were singing to itself at the bottom of a barrel. Other mornings Ma spoke about adult things Kya didn't understand, but she figured Ma's words needed somewhere to go, so she absorbed them through her skin, as she poked more wood in the cookstove. Nodding like she knew.

Then, the hustle of getting everybody up and fed. Pa not there. He had two settings: silence and shouting. So it was just fine when he slept through, or didn't come home at all.

But this morning, Ma had been quiet; her smile lost, her eyes red.

She'd tied a white scarf pirate style, low across her forehead, but the purple and yellow edges of a bruise spilled out. Right after breakfast, even before the dishes were washed, Ma had put a few personals in the train case and walked down the road.

The next morning, Kya took up her post again on the steps, her dark eyes boring down the lane like a tunnel waiting for a train. The marsh beyond was veiled in fog so low its cushy bottom sat right on the mud. Barefoot, Kya drummed her toes, twirled grass stems at doodlebugs, but a six-year-old can't sit long and soon she moseyed onto the tidal flats, sucking sounds pulling at her toes. Squatting at the edge of the clear water, she watched minnows dart between sunspots and shadows.

Jodie hollered to her from the palmettos. She stared; maybe he was coming with news. But as he wove through the spiky fronds, she knew by the way he moved, casual, that Ma wasn't home.

"Ya wanta play explorers?" he asked.

"Ya said ya're too old to play 'splorers."

"Nah, I just said that. Never too old. Race ya!"

They tore across the flats, then through the woods toward the beach. She squealed as he overtook her and laughed until they reached the large oak that jutted enormous arms over the sand. Jodie and their older brother, Murph, had hammered a few boards across the branches as a lookout tower and tree fort. Now, much of it was falling in, dangling from rusty nails.

Usually if she was allowed to crew at all it was as slave girl, bringing her brothers warm biscuits swiped from Ma's pan.

But today Jodie said, "You can be captain."

Kya raised her right arm in a charge. "Run off the Spaniards!" They

broke off stick-swords and crashed through brambles, shouting and stabbing at the enemy.

Then—make-believe coming and going easily—she walked to a mossy log and sat. Silently, he joined her. He wanted to say something to get her mind off Ma, but no words came, so they watched the swimming shadows of water striders.

Kya returned to the porch steps later and waited for a long time, but, as she looked to the end of the lane, she never cried. Her face was still, her lips a simple thin line under searching eyes. But Ma didn't come back that day either.