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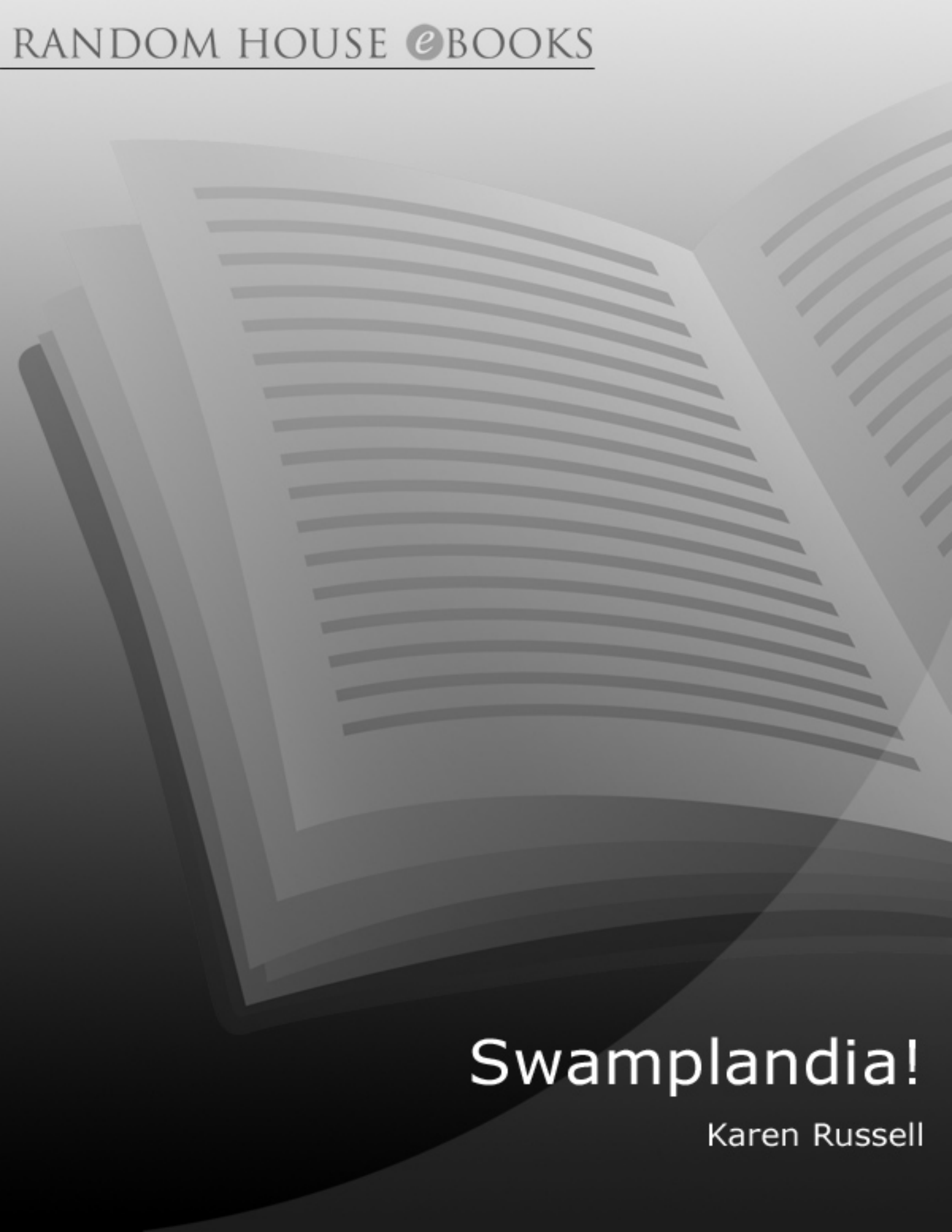

Swamplandia!

Karen Russell

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About the Author

Karen Russell has been featured in the *New Yorker*'s debut fiction issue, was chosen as one of *Granta*'s Best Young American Novelists in 2007 and was recently named one of the 20 under 40 by the *New Yorker*. Her short story collection, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, was universally acclaimed and was longlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award in 2007. *Swamplandia!* is her first novel. She lives in New York.

ALSO BY KAREN RUSSELL

St Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves

SWAMPLANDIA!

BY KAREN RUSSELL

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

For my family

“I see nobody on the road,” said Alice.

“I only wish that *I* had such eyes,” the King remarked in a fretful tone. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it’s as much as *I* can do to see real people, by this light!”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

CHAPTER ONE

The Beginning of the End

OUR MOTHER PERFORMED in starlight. Whose innovation this was I never discovered. Probably it was Chief Bigtree's idea, and it was a good one—to blank the follow spot and let a sharp moon cut across the sky, unchaperoned; to kill the microphone; to leave the stage lights' tin eyelids scrolled and give the tourists in the stands a chance to enjoy the darkness of our island; to encourage the whole stadium to gulp air along with Swamplandia!'s star performer, the world-famous alligator wrestler Hilola Bigtree. Four times a week, our mother climbed the ladder above the Gator Pit in a green two-piece bathing suit and stood on the edge of the diving board, breathing. If it was windy, her long hair flew around her face, but the rest of her stayed motionless. Nights in the swamp were dark and star-lepered—our island was thirty-odd miles off the grid of mainland lights—and although your naked eye could easily find the ball of Venus and the sapphire hairs of the Pleiades, our mother's body was just lines, a smudge against the palm trees.

Somewhere directly below Hilola Bigtree, dozens of alligators pushed their icicle overbites and the awesome diamonds of their heads through over three hundred thousand gallons of filtered water. The deep end—the black cone where Mom dove—was twenty-seven feet; at its

shallowest point, the water tapered to four inches of muck that lapped at coppery sand. A small spoil island rose out of the center of the Pit, a quarter acre of dredged limestone; during the day, thirty gators at a time crawled into a living mountain on the rocks to sun themselves.

The stadium that housed the Gator Pit seated 265 tourists. Eight tiered rows ringed the watery pen; a seat near the front put you at eye level with our gators. My older sister, Osceola, and I watched our mother's show from the stands. When Ossie leaned forward, I leaned with her.

At the entrance to the Gator Pit, our father—the Chief—had nailed up a crate-board sign: YOU WATCHERS IN THE FIRST FOUR ROWS GUARANTEED TO GET WET! Just below this, our mother had added, in her small, livid lettering: ANY BODY COULD GET HURT.

The tourists moved sproingily from buttock to buttock in the stands, slapping at the ubiquitous mosquitoes, unsticking their khaki shorts and their printed department-store skirts from their sweating thighs. They shushed and crushed against and cursed at one another; couples curled their pale legs together like eels, beer spilled, and kids wept. At last, the Chief cued up the music. Trumpets tooted from our big, old-fashioned speakers, and the huge unseeing eye of the follow spot twisted through the palm fronds until it found Hilola. Just like that she ceased to be our mother. Fame settled on her like a film—"Hilola Bigtree, ladies and gentlemen!" my dad shouted into the microphone. Her shoulder blades pinched back like wings before she dove.

The lake was planked with great gray and black bodies. Hilola Bigtree had to hit the water with perfect precision, making incremental adjustments midair to avoid the gators. The Chief's follow spot cast a light like a rime of ice onto the murk, and Mom swam inside this circle across the entire length of the lake. People screamed and pointed

whenever an alligator swam into the spotlight with her, a plump and switching tail cutting suddenly into its margarine wavelengths, the spade of a monster's face jawing up at her side. Our mother swam blissfully on, brushing at the spotlight's perimeter as if she were testing the gate of a floating corral.

Like black silk, the water bunched and wrinkled. Her arms rowed hard; you could hear her breaststrokes ripping at the water, her gasps for air. Now and then a pair of coal-red eyes snagged at the white net of the spotlight as the Chief rolled it over the Pit. Three long minutes passed, then four, and at last she gasped mightily and grasped the ladder rails on the eastern side of the stage. We all exhaled with her. Our stage wasn't much, just a simple cypress board on six-foot stilts, suspended over the Gator Pit. She climbed out of the lake. Her trembling arms folded over the dimple of her belly button; she spat water, gave a little wave.

The crowd went crazy.

When the light found her a second time, Hilola Bigtree—the famous woman from the posters, the "Swamp Centaur"—was gone. Our mother was herself again: smiling, brown-skinned, muscular. A little thicker through the waist and hips than she appeared on those early posters, she liked to joke, since she'd had her three kids.

"Mom!" Ossie and I would squeal, racing around the wire fence and over the wet cement that ringed the Gator Pit to get to her before the autograph seekers elbowed us out. "You won!"

My family, the Bigtree tribe of the Ten Thousand Islands, once lived on a hundred-acre island off the coast of southwest Florida, on the Gulf side of the Great Swamp. For many years, Swamplandia! was the Number One Gator-Themed Park and Swamp Café in the area. We leased an

expensive billboard on the interstate, just south of Cape Coral: COME SEE "SETH," FANGSOME SEA SERPENT AND ANCIENT LIZARD OF DEATH!!! We called all our alligators Seth. ("Tradition is as important, kids," Chief Bigtree liked to say, "as promotional materials are expensive.") The billboard featured a ten-foot alligator, one of the Seths, hissing soundlessly. Its jaws gape to reveal the rosebud pink of a queen conch shell; its scales are a wet-looking black. We Bigtrees are kneeling around the primordial monster in reverse order of height: my father, the Chief; my grandfather, Sawtooth; my mother, Hilola; my older brother, Kiwi; my sister, Osceola; and finally, me. We are wearing Indian costumes on loan from our Bigtree Gift Shop: buckskin vests, cloth headbands, great blue heron feathers, great white heron feathers, chubby beads hanging off our foreheads and our hair in braids, gator "fang" necklaces.

Although there was not a drop of Seminole or Miccosukee blood in us, the Chief always costumed us in tribal apparel for the photographs he took. He said we were "our own Indians." Our mother had a toast-brown complexion that a tourist could maybe squint and call Indian—and Kiwi, Grandpa Sawtooth, and I could hold our sun. But my sister, Osceola, was born snowy—not a weak chamomile blond but pure frost, with eyes that vibrated somewhere between maroon and violet. Her face was like our mother's face cast forward onto cloudy water. Before we posed for the picture on that billboard, our mother colored her in with drugstore blusher. The Chief made sure she was covered by the shadow of a tree. Kiwi liked to joke that she looked like the doomed sibling you see in those Wild West daguerreotypes, the one who makes you think, *Oh God, take the picture quick; that kid is not long for this world*.

Our park housed ninety-eight captive alligators in the Gator Pit. We also had a Reptile Walk, a two-mile-long

boardwalk through the paurotis palms and saw grass that my grandfather and father designed and built. There you could see caimans, gharials, Burmese and African pythons, every variety of tree frog, a burrow hole of red-bellied turtles and lachrymose morning glories, and a rare Cuban crocodile, Methuselah—a croc that was such an expert mimic of a log that it had moved only once in my presence, when its white jaw fell open like a suitcase.

We had one mammal, Judy Garland, a small, balding Florida brown bear who had been rescued as a cub by my grandparents, back when bears still roamed the pinewoods of the northern swamp. Judy Garland's fur looked like a scorched rug—my brother said she had ursine alopecia. She could do a trick, sort of: the Chief had trained her to nod along to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Everybody, without exception, hated this trick. Her Oz-nods terrified small children and shocked their parents. "Somebody, help! This bear is having a seizure!" the park guests would cry—the bear had bad rhythm—but we had to keep her, said the Chief. The bear was *family*.

Our park had an advertising campaign that was on par with the best of the aqua-slide attractions and the miniature golf courses; we had the cheapest beer in a three-county radius; and we had wrestling shows 365 days a year, rain or shine, no federal holidays, no Christian or pagan interruptions. We Bigtrees had our problems, too, of course, like anybody—Swamplandia! had been under siege from several enemy forces, natural and corporate, for most of my short lifetime. We islanders worried about the menace of the melaleuca woods—the melaleuca, or paperbark tree, was an exotic invasive species that was draining huge tracts of our swamp to the northeast. And everybody had one eye on the sly encroachment of the suburbs and Big Sugar in the south. But it always seemed to me like my family was winning. We had never been defeated by the Seths. Every Saturday evening (and most

weeknights!) of our childhoods, our mom performed the Swimming with the Seths act and she always won. For a thousand shows, we watched our mother sink into black water, rise. For a thousand nights, we watched the green diving board quaking in air, in the bright wake of her.

And then our mom got sick, sicker than a person should ever be allowed to get. I was twelve when she got her diagnosis and I was furious. *There is no justice and no logic*, the cancer doctors cooed around me; I don't remember the exact words they used, but I could not decode a note of hope. One of the nurses brought me chocolate duds from the vending machine that stuck in my throat. These doctors were always stooping to talk to us, or so it seemed to me, like every doctor on her ward was a giant, seven or eight feet tall. Mom fell through the last stages of her cancer at a frightening speed. She no longer resembled our mother. Her head got soft and bald like a baby's head. We had to watch her sink into her own face. One night she dove and she didn't come back. Air cloaked the hole that she left and it didn't once tremble, no bubbles, it seemed she really wasn't going to surface. Hilola Jane Bigtree, world-class alligator wrestler, terrible cook, mother of three, died in a dryland hospital bed in West Davey on an overcast Wednesday, March 10, at 3:12 p.m.

The Beginning of the End can feel a lot like the middle when you are living in it. When I was a kid I couldn't see any of these ridges. It was only after Swamplandia!'s fall that time folded into a story with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. If you're short on time, that would be the two-word version of our story: *we fell*.

I was thirteen years old when the end of Swamplandia! began in earnest, although at first I was oblivious of the dangers we now faced—Mom was dead, so I thought the

worst had already happened to us. I didn't realize that one tragedy can beget another, and another—bright-eyed disasters flooding out of a death hole like bats out of a cave. Nine months had gone by since Mom's passing. The Chief had not done anything to alert the tourists, beyond a small obituary that ran in the *Loomis Register*. Her name was still listed in every Florida guidebook, her face was on our billboards and gift store merchandise, her Swimming with the Seths act was just about synonymous with Swamplandia! itself. Hilola Bigtree was the lodestar that pulled our visored, sweaty visitors across the water. So then I had to break some pretty bad news:

"We lost our headliner," I told them, gesturing vaguely, as if Hilola Bigtree were of no specific relation to me. But not to worry, I was quick to assure them—"I'm Ava Bigtree, I'm her understudy, so you'll still get to see a world-class alligator-wrestling show …"

The tourists would frown down at me, or briefly touch my shoulders.

"That man over there, in the feathers? He said the wrestler was your mother?"

I held very still. I shut my eyes as whole shuddering flocks of hands descended. Wings brushed the damp hair off my cheeks. When some other kid's mother asked me how I was doing, I'd say, "Well, ma'am, the show must go on." I'd overheard Kiwi saying this to a group of mainland teenagers in a tone like flicked ash. If a tourist knelt to hug me, I'd try to smile. "Be kind to the kind people, Ava," the Chief said. "They are going to want to talk to you about her."

But you know what? No one really did. Not after I told them what had killed her. I think they were hoping to hear that Hilola Bigtree had been attacked by her gators. They were after a hot little stir—bones crushed, fangs closed around a throat, and an unlucky vent of blood. It was interesting to watch the tourists' reactions when I said the

words “ovarian cancer.” Cancer was banal enough that they were forced to adjust their response.

“Cancer? How awful! How old was she?”

“Thirty-six.”

The tourist ladies said, “Oh!” or “I’m *sorry*,” and squeezed me harder. Most of the husbands drew back a few steps: cancer, I could tell, did not impress these guys in the least.

Most tourists sat through the show after we announced Hilola Bigtree’s death, but a few asked for their money back. Those who had traveled the shortest distances always seemed for some reason to be the angriest, the Loomis bingo and jai alai set—these ladies behaved as if our mother’s death had somehow cheated *them*. “This was our Tuesday outing!” these blue-haired women whined. They had paid good money to see Hilola Bigtree do her Swimming with the Seths act; they didn’t take a forty-minute ferry ride to eat corn dogs with some big lizards and some extremely sorry-looking children!

Death was just another kind of weather to these ancients, the Chief explained to me and my sister. As ordinary as a rain delay. “If they make a big stink, girls, you comp their Gator Tots.”

I came to hate the complainers, with their dry and crumbly lipsticks and their wrinkled rage and their stupid, flaccid, old-people sun hats with brims the breadth of Saturn’s rings. I whispered to Ossie that I wanted to see the register for Death’s aeroplane. Who was boarding the plane in such a stupid order?

The Chief made up a “shut-your-crone-face” conciliation package that we were supposed to give the outraged senior people seeking refunds. The conciliation package contained: a foam alligator hat designed to look like it was eating your head, a crystal flamingo necklace, fifty green and amber Seth toothpicks in a collector case, and a souvenir flip book of our mother. If you turned the pages

quickly enough, Mom moved like a primitive cartoon: first she dove, then her body tore a green seam down the center of the artificial lake. But my sister and I figured out that if you flipped in the opposite direction, just as fast, our mom zipped backward. Then the Pit bubbles flooded inward to form a smooth and undisturbed lake, and Mom landed on the diving board, her high dive reversing itself in a shimmering arc. She flew like a rock unbreaking a window. Glass fused, and then you were at the little book's beginning again. Who could complain after watching that?

For some reason the tourists seemed depressed by this trick. More than one Hilola Bigtree flip book ended up in the park's mesh trash cans. Within a month of her funeral, people were calling the Chief to cancel their annual passes, and many more of Swamplandia!'s regular visitors simply stopped coming.

Mom wasn't the only Bigtree wrestler we were missing. Grandpa Sawtooth had vanished that year, too. He was still alive, but the Chief had exiled him to the mainland about a month before Mom died. The Chief had installed Grandpa Sawtooth in an assisted-living facility called the Out to Sea Retirement Community—a temporary thing, the Chief had assured us kids. Just until we "tied up some loose ends" on our island. We missed Grandpa but he didn't miss us. During his last days on the island he had more than once gotten lost inside our house. He still knew our names, sometimes, but he could not match them to our faces; his memory winked on and off with the weird, erratic energy of a lightbulb in a torment. We had seen Grandpa Sawtooth exactly once since his move: a few weeks after he got "settled in," we spent twenty-two minutes in his cabin at the Out to Sea facility. Through Grandpa's porthole you could see the abridged ocean, lassoed in glass, and a low stone seawall. Inside the retirement boat, no music played, no living lizards curled tails along the walls, and the lights were halogen. The Chief kept promising us another trip to

Loomis to visit him: “As soon as I muck out the Gator Pit, kids …” “As soon as I get a cage and rigging done on that airboat …” By December, we’d stopped asking.

I remember clearly the first time I saw the face of our enemy—it was on a Thursday in January, ten months and two weeks after Mom’s death. A huge thunderstorm had rolled over the islands that afternoon, and the living room was unusually dark. I had been lulled into a half-awake state by an *I Love Lucy* marathon on channel 6. Grandpa’s rabbit-eared TV was crackling like water, and I kept dozing off on the couch and getting my senses all tangled, dreaming that the storm had moved inside. Then the TV screen went entirely black, and a baritone voice intoned: “The World of Darkness comes to Loomis!” I was glued to the set: plaid-vested schoolchildren lined up to enter the gaping doors of what appeared to be a giant amusement park. The camera followed them down a narrow walkway—the “Tongue of the Leviathan!” an announcer called it. The Tongue appeared to be a sort of thirty-foot electric-traction escalating slide, covered in sponge and pink mesh, visibly slick; it gulped whole grades of kids into the park. The camera zoomed forward to give a teaser glimpse of the interior of the Leviathan: a scale model of a whale’s belly, lit up by a series of green lights on a timer, so that it looked to my untrained eye like some kind of alien cafeteria. Then the TV flashed to a keyhole peek of riders disappearing down the Tongue. For a few seconds the screen went black again and the TV speakers burbled with “cetaceous noises of digestion.” Then schoolkids screaming “We love the World!” on somebody’s cue disappeared down a neon tube.

“Christ Jesus,” said the Chief, “how much do you think this piece-of-shit commercial cost?” Swamplandia! had never done a TV spot.

The World of Darkness was located in southwest Loomis County, just off the highway ramp. The camera pulled back to reveal imbricating parking lots, a whole spooling solar system of parking lots. On its western edge, the Leviathan touched a green checkerboard of suburban lawns. A moat of lava lapped at the carports, the houses at the World's perimeter looking small and vexed. The World of Darkness offered things that Swamplandia! could not: escalator tours of the rings of Hell, bloodred swimming pools, boiling colas. Easy access to the mainland roads.

"Can the World of Darkness really do that, Chief?" I asked my dad. "Move right into the middle of a city?"

The Chief had stopped watching. He was draining a Gulch brandy and cola in the deep crease of our couch. "Don't let me catch you falling for that bullcrap, Ava. Who is going to pay a day's wage to slide down a damn *tongue*? That's about the stupidest thing I ever heard of. You go touch your Seth's belly scales and remind yourself who's got the *real* leviathans …"

One Tuesday in late January, just a week or two after the World of Darkness's grand opening, the morning ferry failed to show. On an ordinary weekday, the double-decker ferry departed from the Loomis County Ferry Port at 9:05 and arrived at our park's landing a few minutes after ten o'clock. This orange boat linked Swamplandia! to the mainland; we had no bridge system and no road access. So the ferry was our lifeline, the only way for tourists to get to our park. The twenty-six-mile trip took forty minutes in good weather, and could take as much as an hour and a half in rough water. The service was a vestige from the frontier days, when it connected a handful of drifters and homesteaders scattered throughout the Ten Thousand Islands to the mainland. The majority of the Ten Thousand Islands were still uninhabited, and there were just four

stops on the original thirty-five-mile loop: Swamplandia!, Gallinule Key, Carpenter Key, and the Red Eagle Key Fishing Camp. Our nearest neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Gianetti, had an avocado farm on Gallinule Key, a fifteen-minute airboat ride to the south.

The Chief was on all fours when I found him. He was in the empty stadium, making some adjustment to the Pit pump. He was wearing a mainland T-shirt that said ALABAMA CARDINALS—this was from his "civilian" wardrobe. Without his radiant ropes and beads and feathers, you could see his pale scalp through a scrim of scant black hair. Color had ripened in twin spots on his stubbled cheeks, which made him look a little like a haggard Shirley Temple.

The Chief had to drain and clean the Pit every ten days because the Seths were undainty eaters; we fed them a commercial diet, which we ordered from Louisiana breeders, mostly chicken and fish but occasionally more whimsical proteins: frozen nutria, muskrat, beaver, horse. The Seths regurgitated bones and feathers. Once, after a hurricane, we pulled the bars of a tiny rib cage out of the leafy deep end—they were a crumbly, dark-honey color. Forensic arguments erupted over green peas and meat loaf at our own table:

"A Key deer, Sammy!" shouted Grandpa.

"Na-uh, Pops," the Chief disagreed. "My guess, those bones belong to a dog. Some poor mutt went for a swim … pass the gravy, honey?"

On Live Chicken Thursdays, a very popular and macabre attraction, the Seths jumped five feet out of the Pit to snatch the cloud-white hens suspended above them, tied by their talons to a clothesline. The Seths drowned and ate these chickens in an underwater cyclone called the Death Roll while tourists snapped photographs. Live Chicken Thursday was a Bigtree tradition dating back to 1942. The ritual was Grandpa Sawtooth's brainchild. I think my family traumatized generations of children and old women. And

we girls must have inherited our forebears' immunity to gore, because Ossie and I could eat PB&J sandwiches during a Death Roll, no problemo.

"There now." The Chief gave a satisfied grunt as clear bubbles shot forth again, some clicky mechanism having reset itself. He knelt over the edge of the Pit. A few Seths swam calmly around the underwater platform that the Chief just had been standing on; his tool belt was still jerked up beneath his soaked armpits.

"Chief!" I said, bounding over. "Dad, the ferry never showed …"

He looked up with a blind, irritated glare—the sun was behind me but I was too short to block it. His arms were gloved in filth up to the elbows.

"Ava, you can't see I'm busy? Gus Waddell called from the docks. The ferry isn't coming today because Gus Waddell didn't have any passengers."

"Do you want me to go check the TV, to see if something bad happened on the mainland?"

"Ava Bigtree," he said. "You are making me truly crazy. You can watch TV if you want."

After cleaning the pit, the Chief disappeared into the Isolation Tank to do some work with a recalcitrant bull gator, a one-eyed, indiscriminately nasty fellow that kept biting not only the other alligators but also any driftwood or pond lily that floated up against his blind spot, attacks which were scary but somehow also very embarrassing to watch. I hung around inside the empty stadium. It was a hot day, and the Seths slid through periphyton, a brownish-orange algae that reproduced explosively in the Florida heat and could draw its pumpkin lace across the entire Pit overnight. Everything else was pretty still.

"The gators are not your pets, Ava," the Chief was always reminding me. "That creature is pure appetite in a leather case. A Seth can't love you back."

But I loved *them*, the dark tapering mass of them; I feared them, too, their alien eyes and sudden bursts of speed. Chief Bigtree hung wooden memos bragging on them all over our park, many of them accurate:

ALLIGATORS CAN RUN FASTER THAN ARABIAN HORSES ON LAND!

THE ALLIGATOR IS AN ANACHRONISM THAT CAN EAT YOU!

A SETH IS A 180-MILLION-YEAR VETERAN OF OUR PLANET!

"There's no show today, you dummies," I told the alligators over the railing. I rained out a bag of marbles and watched the planetary spin of them off the Seths' black shoulders. The Chief said I could do this because the Seths used these marbles as *gastroliths*—they used them to grind up prey in their gizzards the way chickens use grit. And gastroliths allow crocodilians to float better—to settle their weight in the water. Our gators were born knowing exactly how much weight to swallow to find and keep their balance.

I checked my watch: on an ordinary day, we would be five minutes into our show by now. My dad would have waded into the Pit water, carrying a gator harness that he made out of old airplane cables. He would have selected a sparring partner, "a big respectable sucker," and slid the rusty harness over the Seth's snout. The Seth, dripping and black, would fight like a fish inside that harness while the other gators continued switching through the sludgy Pit, slow and pitiless inside their Seth-oblivion.

Once the Chief hauled his Seth onto the stage, the real fight began. The Seth would immediately lurch forward, yanking the Chief back into the water. The Chief would pull him out again, and this tug-of-war would continue for a foamy length of time while the crowd whooped and wahooed, cheering for our species. To officially win an alligator wresling match, you have to close both your hands around the gator's jaws. That was the hard part, getting your Seth's mouth to shut. Mom said that we girls were at

a natural disadvantage because our hands were small—they could barely span a piano octave.

But one curious fact about Seth physiognomy is this: while a Seth can *close* its jaws with 2,125 pounds per square inch of cubic force, the force of a guillotine, the musculature that opens those same jaws is extremely weak. This is the secret a wrestler exploits to beat her adversaries—if you can get your Seth's jaws shut up in your fist, it is next to impossible for the creature to open them again. A girl's Goody ribbon can tie off the jaws of a four-hundred-pound bull gator.

But we didn't just tape up the Seth's jaws and declare ourselves the victors—our Bigtree show was special because we did tricks, too, and practiced some of the more dangerous holds. Before she died, Mom was in the middle of teaching me her advanced moves. The Chin Thrust, for example, a Bigtree standard. To do the Chin Thrust, you make a latch out of your chin against the purselike U of a Seth's jaws, tucking its broad snout against your throat like a botched kiss. Another good one was the Silent Night, where you covered the alligator's eyes with your hands, fastened its snout with the tape, and then enlisted the help of Mom or the Chief or Grandpa to flip it onto its back. This was a sorcery that "put the alligator to sleep." Years later, I would learn that we were disrupting the alligators' otoliths, tiny sacs that connect the inner ear with the brain. We blacked them out.

If you are an animal lover, I can tell you what the Chief told us: that it was never a fair fight; that even taped and flipped, even "sleeping," its legs churning toward an ultimate befuddlement and stillness, the alligator had all the real advantages; that an alligator can hoard its violence for millions and millions of years. A Seth could trick you into thinking it had died with a days-long freeze, a mortuary pose on a rock, and then do a lickety-split lunge and snatch an unwary turtle or a tiny ibis. The Seths had a

ferocity that no wrestler could snuff for very long. The first and last time I'd tried to do a Silent Night, the alligator managed to right itself and bruised my entire right side with its thrashing tail, and Mom told the Chief that I was still too young to perform the trick. I felt older now, though. Looking out at all the vacant stands, I felt like I had better become ready.

What the tourists paid to watch, the Chief always said, was an unequal fight. A little seesaw action: death/life. The Chief had long ago taught me a Bigtree strategy called "peacocking weakness." All the best Seminole wrestlers used this strategy, too. The true champions handicapped themselves, the Chief said, blindfolding their eyes or binding their dominant hand. *Weakness* was the feather with which you tickled your tourists; it was your *weakness* that pinned the tourists to their seats. They saw the puny size of you versus your alligator. They saw that you could *lose*. If you exploited this fact, you could float the outcome of your battle into the air over the stadium, like a balloon. During the really *scary* family shows, the electric, something-goes-awry times, I would picture it up there just like the Chief had said, our fate, a translucent black balloon wombling between the palm trees.

"You got to remind the mainlanders that your alligator is a no-shit dinosaur, Ava," the Chief used to lecture me. "Those bored, dead drylanders. They act like they think they're watching robots up here!" He'd shake his head. "Prove to them that you can lose, so you can surprise people, honey, and *win*."

Now I wondered: Would we ever do a show like that again? What if yesterday had been my last-ever chance to wrestle? To surprise the mainland people? I leaned over the railing to the Gator Pit. The little bag felt weightless and I realized that I was almost out of marbles. *Oh for heaven's sake, Ava Bigtree, don't be so melodramatic! Of course you will wrestle again. Today is a fluke; of course the tourists*

will be back! I tried to give myself a lecture in my mother's stern voice. Then I used her same voice on the gators, who were blinking up at me so stupidly from the Pit:

"Eat up, you fools, because no one is coming," I hissed. Blue and gray marbles caught in their scales like stubborn bubbles. The big yellow shooter rolled around one Seth's scaly shoulders like a dollhouse sun. They all sank into the water and turned into gastroliths.

"Ava? What are you doing?" Ossie's voice erupted through the speaker hooked up to the ticketing booth. "Ha-ha—did you lose your marbles?"

Two weeks passed. The Chief discovered that we couldn't even sell out the once-a-day wrestling show. We started performing for whoever showed up, whenever they came (we were still getting a few confused Europeans, clutching these expired travel guides with hydrangea-pink spines and greeting my father with *¿Qué?* and *Quoi?*). The Chief and I cut twenty minutes from the show, but you could feel the tourists' pity first and then their distraction, their attention wandering the skies of the open stadium like kites. Without Mom and Grandpa Sawtooth the whole show felt horribly incomplete to me. "The tourists can't tell," the Chief assured us, but it seemed like even the expressionless Seths had to know that something was missing. One Thursday when the Chief was in a black mood and caught a tourist yawning during his wrestling demonstration, he groaned loudly and released the Seth back into the water with a slap: "Ta-da," he growled, standing up. "That's all, folks."

We were still calling this thing the Bigtree Wrestler Spectacular.

I started to miss the same tourists I'd always claimed to despise: the translucent seniors from Michigan. The ice-blond foreign couples yoked into thick black camera straps

like teams of oxen. The fathers, sweating everywhere, with their trembling dew mustaches. The young mothers humping up and down the elevated walkway to the Swamp Café, holding their babies aloft like blaring radios.

Where had all the families gone? The families were gone. All at once, it felt like. Families had been our keystone species of tourists on Swamplandia! and now they were rarer than panthers. Red-eyed men with no kids in tow started showing up at the Saturday shows. Solitaries. Sometimes they debarked the ferry with perfumed breath, already drunk. Sometimes they motored over from the Flamingo Marina in Loomis County on their own junker boats, and always they seemed far more interested in the cheap beer and the woodsmoke black racks of the fried frog legs than our tramway tours or our alligator wrestling —somehow Swamplandia! seemed to have earned a truckstop reputation as a good place to "get obliterated" on a weekend night. One guy I found urinating on the side of our gift shop—the actual wall, even though the public bathrooms with the vault toilets were just a five-minute walk down the trail! I hated them. When we had a crowd of these red-eyes, the Chief would not let me wrestle and performed the whole show himself. The Chief liked most every tourist with a wallet but he cooled on these guys. He blamed the World of Darkness for them, too.

"We'll get the families back," the Chief promised us one night after a particularly scary set of individuals had mobbed up to see our show. These guys drank so much beer that Gus and Kiwi had to help them back onto the ferry; I'd caught one of them throwing up into the bushes behind the musuem. Another one had cozied up to the ticket booth window and whispered strange jokes to my sister, leaning into his elbows like a grasshopper, so that from where I was standing it looked like he was trying to kiss her through the glass. The Chief had started screaming at these men on the ferry dock, but now that we were home

he seemed angry with us: “What’s wrong with you girls? You need to calm down.” He patted Ossie stiffly. “Those clowns are gone. Those fools are just paying our rent until we get the *families* back. This is like bad weather, you understand? It’s gonna blow over.”

But I couldn’t sleep—because what horizon did we think the sun was dropping into? If the World of Darkness stayed open and Mom stayed in her grave, how, exactly, were we supposed to get the families back? We ate our dinners beneath a reticent crescent moon. The Chief picked at his molars with a yellow toothpick, Kiwi read, Ossie kept her head down and ate off everybody’s plates. She ate with her fingers, peeling colorless grains of rice off Mom’s blue tablecloth. But I couldn’t stop imagining our fate up there, the black balloon. A thin globe of air clearly visible behind the toothy palms. I could see that balloon and the moon shining through it but I couldn’t begin to imagine what was going to happen to us.

CHAPTER TWO

The Advent of the World of Darkness

INCREDIBLY, MOM STAYED dead but the sky changed. Rains fell. Alligators dug and tenanted new lakes. It became (how?) early April. We were doing four or five shows a week, at most, for pitiful numbers of people. Some audiences were in the single digits. I read my comics and memorized the speech bubbles of heroes. I dusted our Seth clock, a gruesome and fantastic timepiece the Chief had made: just an ordinary dishlike kitchen clock set inside a real alligator's pale stomach. The clock hung from a hook next to the blackboard menu in our Swamp Café. TIME TO EAT! somebody—probably Grandpa—had scratched into the boards above it. Water overflowed the sloughs and combed the black mudflats. Mangroves hugged soil and vegetation into pond-lily islands; gales tore the infant matter apart along the Gulf. Our swamp got blown to green bits and reassembled, daily, hourly. The wet season was a series of land-versus-water skirmishes: marl turned to chowder and shunted the baby-green cocoplums into the sea; tides maniacally revised the coastlines. Whole islands caught fire from lightning strikes, and you could sometimes watch deer and marsh rabbits leaping into the sea of saw grass on gasps of smoke.

Some days Gus Waddell—our fat angel at the ferry's helm—was our only visitor. Of course, we couldn't tally Gus

as a Swamplandia! tourist because he didn't pay money to see us. Gus Waddell was the ferryboat captain, as per his monogrammed life vest and his little captain's hat and his squishy-foam I'M THE CAPTAIN drink cozy. Uncle Gus brought us mainland provisions: bagged butcher-shop meats and various zoo supplies and gallons of whole milk, big sandbags of rice. Several boxes of our favorite mainland cereal, Peanut Butter Boos. For the Chief, a rubber-banded roll of emerald Win This Lotto! tickets and the "Ziggurat"-size carton of Sir Puffsters cigarettes.

Back when Mom was healthy, we'd see the flash of orange paint behind the mangroves that meant the ferry had arrived and go scrambling for our staff positions, like mainland kids who hear a school bell. And then all day my siblings and I would barely see each other—we'd be too busy busing tables in the Swamp Café or selling tickets or giving a tram tour. Sometimes the first minute that we spent together didn't come until 3:30 p.m., when we met onstage for the Bigtree Wrestler Spectacular. But now Kiwi and Ossie and I were always lumping up in the Gator Pit, trying to figure out: what are we supposed to do? When Gus showed up with supplies and no people he gave us an uneasy gift: time. Free time. Many blank, untouristed hours of it. That's how my sister's metamorphosis started to happen, I think—inside that white cocoon.

We started spending the no-tourist days on the Library Boat—even Ossie, who had never been what you would call a bookworm. We boarded an airboat and motored over to the long bottleneck cove of a nameless pine island about a quarter mile west of Swamplandia! A coppery green twenty-foot schooner was at permanent anchor there, listing in the rocks. This was the Library Boat. Like Gus's ferry, the Library Boat was another link to the mainland, although this boat never moved. It held a cargo of books. In the thirties and forties, Harrel M. Crow, a fisherman and bibliophile, had piloted the schooner around our part of the

swamp delivering books to the scattered islanders. Then Harrel M. Crow died and I guess that was it for the door-to-door service. But his Library Boat, miraculously, had survived on the rocky island, unscavenged and undestroyed by hurricanes. It was an open secret, utilized by all our neighbors. You could row over to the site of the wreck, descend into H. M. Crow's hold, return with an armload of semidamp reading material. People contributed newer books, too—the bottom shelves had filled with trashy romance novels, mysteries, somebody's underlined Bible, a mostly filled-in book of jumble puzzles, the plays of Shakespeare. So the collection was always evolving.

I can't remember when I first saw *The Spiritist's Telegraph* lying around the house, but once I'd noticed the book it seemed to be everywhere—in our kitchen, facedown in the café. Ossie was never without it. I was surprised she'd found it out there. *The Spiritist's Telegraph* looked old, ancient, centuries older than Harrel M. Crow. It was a spell book, Gideon-thick. We didn't think it was from our country, even though the writing was English. Inside the print was so tiny—in places it was almost impossible to read—and Ossie said this was because each chapter had been written as a whisper to the reader.

"Well? So what the heck kind of machine is the Spiritist Telegraph?"

"I think," Osceola said wonderingly, turning a page, "that it's supposed to be *your body*?"

There were dozens of drawings in the appendix. Ossie showed me an old anatomical sketch of a woman floating with her arms akimbo, her private parts inked in. Her eyes were pupilless, serene, like the Egyptian sculptures I had recently discovered in a kid's World Wonders book of my own. THE SPIRITIST RECEIVES A MESSAGE, read an ornate scroll of Bookman type that furred her collarbone.

"Can I read it?"