



Proudly Presents

THE QUEEN OF THE SWAMP

WRITTEN BY LELAND FAULKNER

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When you think of magical childhoods, names like Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, even Peter Pan, might come to mind. No childhood, however, could even come close to being as magical as mine. You see, I spent every summer learning, exploring, and playing at my grandparents' home alongside the swamps of the Louisiana Bayou. Mornings and afternoons were never dull around my grandparents' swampy marshlands. There were too many places to explore. There were too many things to discover. And there were always my faithful companions. There was my six-year-old sister, Avery. There was my fifteen-year-old cousin, Otis. And there was Ruth. Well, truth be told, Avery, Otis, and I didn't exactly know if her name was really Ruth, but that's what we called her. Oh, I should add here... that Ruth... was our pet alligator.

I guess Ruth wasn't exactly our pet, because, well, you can't really have a full-grown alligator for a pet. Especially in the swamps. But still, Ruth was a pet in the sense that we saw her everyday. We played with her, from a distance mind you. And more importantly, we fed her.

Now, I know wild animals are supposed to fend for themselves, but we took pride in helping Ruth maintain her slithery seven hundred pound physique. We fed her frogs. Lots and lots of frogs. Each morning, Avery, Otis and I would get out of bed, eat the feast-like breakfast prepared by Grandma, and bolt out the door. We made a game out of seeing who could catch the biggest frog to feed, what my sister called, the Queen of the Swamp. Otis and I let Avery give Ruth this well-deserved title, because it was obvious my sister knew all about things such as royalty. After all, every day, rain or shine, staying at my grandparents' home or going into town, Avery wore the same outfit: a bright, pink tutu, one of a dozen-or-so pastel leotards, cowboy boots, and a faux-diamond tiara. So after collecting a pale full of amphibian snacks, the three of us would sit on the embankment, far away from the snapping jaws of, what was sure to be, the only pet in the whole South who couldn't actually be petted.

I have to hand it to my sister. Avery may have only been six-years-old, but her tenacity for catching—what Grandma called wart-frogs—was only overshadowed slightly by her almost unwavering ability to throw the slimy frogs into the air, down the embankment, and into the mouth of one very hungry alligator! She never flinched. Never. In fact, the only time Avery ever cried was when I tossed one of Ruth’s treats high in the air and shouted, “Goodbye, Kermit!” It is then that I learned the importance of name association. Avery was fine with catching nameless frogs, but attaching a name to one of them changed the demeanor of the game entirely.

While Avery may have been a little sensitive at times, my cousin, Otis, was nothing short of our very own Indiana Jones. In fact, Otis gave himself his own nickname. Louisiana Jones. Nothing ruffled him. Nothing frightened him. Not even poisonous snakes. Otis thought it was a game to see if he could catch a poisonous snake without getting bitten, which would, in his own words, “... make you sick enough to go to the hospital and get a bunch of shots.” It never occurred to Otis that shots and a trip to the local hospital might take a back seat to—I don’t know—let’s just call it death! I remember one time Otis found a snake—a poisonous snake mind you—coaxed it out from underneath a bush. He then corralled it, grabbed the snake by its throat (Do snakes have a throat?) and snapped it like a whip to break its neck (Again, do snakes have necks?) After parading the dead, poisonous snake around my grandparents’ backyard, Otis asked me if I’d ever seen a flying snake. I said, “No. I’ve heard of flying squirrels, but I’ve never seen a flying snake.” He told me to stand back and watch. Otis held the snake by its tail, and after a double-full-body-spin, released the snake. At that exact second, my sister, Avery, turned the corner to announce that Grandma had lunch set up on the back porch. I tell you, that snake, as if in slow motion, flew through the air! The timing was so well-choreographed, I swear, I could hear Yanni music accompanying this movie-like moment. Well, the snake then landed on my sister’s left shoulder, and in a spinning-top-motion, wound its way around my sister’s neck, as though the