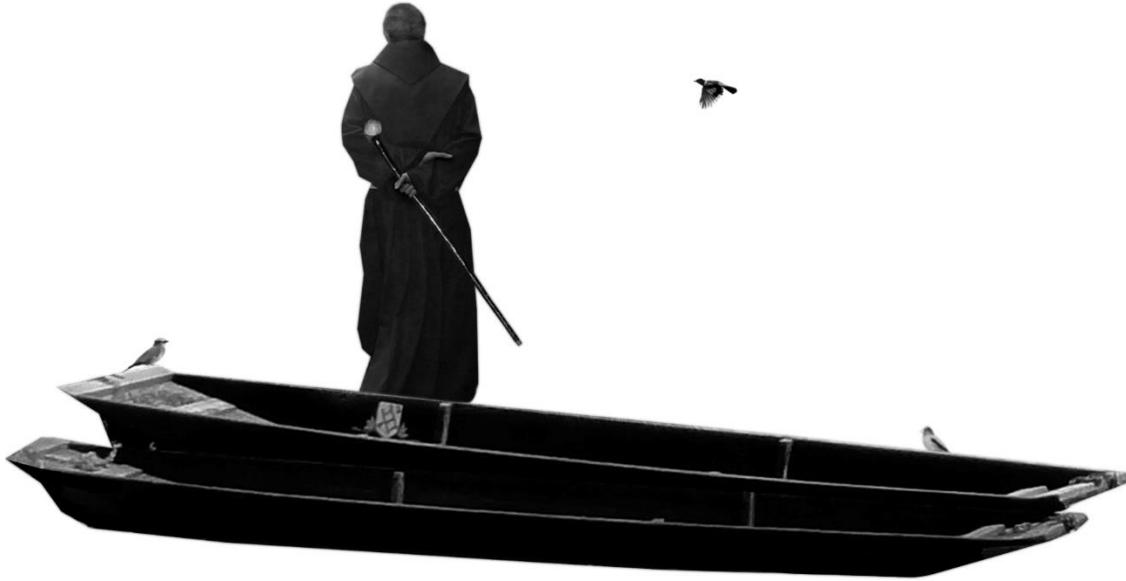


Bayou Bounty,

No matter the twists and turns, the trail always leads back to the heart



by
B.L. Wilson

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Edited by BZ Hercules www.bzhercules.com

Researched by B.L. Wilson

*For all those women who think all is lost and have no hope things will get better,
reach deep inside. You are stronger than you think you are; just push forward.*

Always go forward.

This book is dedicated to you, all my sisters.

*"When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced.
Live your life in a manner so that when you die the world
cries and you rejoice."*

~Native American Proverb~

CHAPTER ONE

“REMIND ME AGAIN WHY WE TOOK THIS JOB, NATE,” Lou, shorthand for Louise Ogletree, remarked. She swatted at another mosquito that was as big as a hummingbird. She, Nate – short for Nathaniel Onebear – and Donald “Donny” Jackson were off-trail, lying in the smelly muck and mud of the latest swamp they had encountered. “Lord, if I never see another body of muddy water in my life, I’ll be happy.” She inhaled deeply and frowned in disgust at the sour, stale odor, then lifted her arm to sniff again. “Christ, I stink. The mud stinks. The water stinks...the whole world....” She felt a sharp elbow nearly creasing her ribs. Nate pressed a finger over her mouth and used hand signals, pointing to something she couldn’t see clearly a hundred yards off to the right. Using economical movements, she carefully shifted the binoculars from the mud they were lying in to her mud-covered face. She adjusted the site dial and honed in on the lone woman sitting on a log with her back toward them.

The woman could be the fugitive doctor they were looking for. From this distance, it was difficult to tell. Until the woman turned around to face them, they wouldn’t know for sure. From the back, Louise could see the thick, distinctive braid that hung below the woman’s waist. Lou sighed. The braid didn’t mean a damned thing. A single braid hanging down a woman’s back, reaching below her waist seemed to be typical for females around these parts. She lost count of the number of women she, Nate, and Donny had stopped who were the right height, weight, and build but turned out not to be the doctor wanted for murder.

The woman seemed to hear her thoughts and turned around to face them. For a moment, Lou thought the woman saw her. She’d turned around on the log and stared directly at her. Her face looked serene and untroubled. The wanted poster didn’t do her justice and neither did the photograph in the file on her. The woman was striking with a coppery brown complexion, dark, alert eyes, full berry-red lips, and a tiny cleft that split her chin in half. A brown hand rested against her thigh while the other hand held a water bottle. She wore the perfect outfit for a day in the swamps: camouflage hip-waders over matching cargo pants, a green safari vest with plenty of pockets worn over a green, long-sleeved shirt that blended into the colors of swamp. She could be a tourist waiting for a swamp guide or she could be the swamp guide, but she wasn’t. She was the doctor they were to detain, arrest, and then bring back to court to stand trial for murder. She might look like a tourist, but she had the skills to escape detention and she’d used them several times. “Gotcha, Doc,” Lou muttered softly, then signaled Donny to go left, while she signaled Nate to go right. She’d take the middle path to the woman. In five minutes, they had the woman surrounded.

She let Donny and Nate do the honors. They were frightening to watch, swooping down on the woman. Two massive, hulking, mud-covered giants popping out of bushes with weapons drawn should be enough to scare the piss out of the average person. She grinned, watching them work. Screaming at the woman to get down on her knees next to the log and lace her hands on top of her head. When she didn’t obey immediately, Donny, a city slicker who absolutely hated anything located an inch outside of city limits, shoved her off the log with his size fifteen boot and into the

patch of beige sand that surrounded the log. He placed a knee in the middle of her back and held the struggling woman down in the sand.

"I SAID get down on the fucking ground! Lace your hands on top of your head. Do it now, Doc!"

The woman underneath him struggled; wiggling, twisting, and turning her body, trying to buck his heavy weight from her back. She grunted, spitting sand as she turned her head to the side to catch a breath and then began to buck, squirm, and wiggle again.

"Goddamn it, Woman! Quit your fucking struggling before I have to hurt you." Donny leaned into her back, using his upper torso to smash down on her. She stopped trying to fight him. Her body relaxed and she stopped her frantic movements. "You finished fucking around now, Doc?" Donny asked, leaning over her back to grab her chin and twist it towards him. He studied the anger in her eyes before she spit a mouthful of sand at him. He raised a hand to slap her, but Lou grabbed his hand before he could and yanked him from his perch on the doctor's back.

"Take a fucking breaking, Donny," Lou ordered, still bending his arm back at the shoulder to make him comply with her orders. "You got her, Nate?" she asked without looking at the doctor but rather keeping an eye on Donny's body language.

"Yeah, Lou, I got eyes on her. She does anything but breathe, I'm blowing a nice fat hole in her with my pump." Nathaniel stood far enough away from the woman that she couldn't snatch his gun or deflect a bullet aimed at her chest.

Donny jerked his arm out of Lou's grasp, then scrambled to his feet, wiping the wet sand and spit from his face. "Fuck you, Lou. She spit on me. How do I know the bitch doesn't have AIDS or something?"

Louise scrubbed at the mud covering her face, feeling the dry parts break off and turn to dust in her hands. She reached a mud-covered hand into the pocket of a filthy T-shirt that used to be army green. It was anybody's guess as to what color the damned thing and the second long-sleeved shirt she'd layered under it were now. She did know the jungle's undergrowth and swamps they traveled through to get to this point had shredded and ripped her T-shirt. She pulled out a Ziploc bag containing a pack of cigarettes with a lighter shoved into the cellophane covering the pack out of a pocket. She threw it at Donny. "Go smoke a couple, Donny. I'll check her for weapons and ID."

Huge hands easily caught the package in midair. He frowned at the plastic package and then at Lou. "I thought you said we couldn't smoke out here."

"We couldn't until we caught her. Well, we got her ass, so smoke as much as you want, Donny." Lou didn't feel like explaining to the big guy again. She'd already told him once how somebody like the doctor who was raised in these swamps could smell a burning cigarette, her perfume, his deodorant, or sense anything out of the ordinary before the trackers hunting her had a clue. Her army survival training had taught her that much. At least it was good for something besides providing a drawer full of accommodations for bravery and sharpshooting. Her certificates and two seventy-five would get her a NYC subway ride. They both spelled big freaking deal. She watched Donny walk several yards away to find a dry spot by a large tree, whose gnarled, exposed

roots reminded her of her grandmother's arthritic hands. He turned away from her and Nate to lean against the tree and light up. She watched the smoke curl out of his nostrils and then it disappeared into the muggy forest of swamp trees and undergrowth.

This trip...the search to find the elusive doctor who seemed to know how to disappear better than Houdini, had been hard on all of them. They'd gone ten days with very little sleep as they tracked the doctor deeper and deeper into the swampland. Frazzled nerves, and they were hot as well as tired. They were running out of supplies, especially drinking water. Now their GPS equipment was on the fritz or it simply didn't work out here. She hadn't told either man that part of their nightmare. The less said about how they were getting back to civilization, the better, with their enigmatic prisoner in tow. Satisfied Donny would be all right, at least for now, she turned around to find the woman's dark eyes studying her.

The woman was kneeling in the sand. She'd placed her hands on top of her head and laced them just as Donny ordered her to do. Her face was blank, but her eyes were alert and watchful. Lou marched over to the woman and quickly snatched her right wrist from her head, twisted it backwards hard, and slapped a handcuff on it. Then she performed the same procedure on her left wrist. She heard a soft gasp of pain as she fastened the cuffs, then jerked the woman up from behind by her cuffed wrists. The log the woman used as a bench was now on the other side of where they stood while Nate remained where he was, his pump-action scattergun aimed at the woman's back.

"Be glad I stopped him, Doc. He woulda broke your wrists to get the cuffs on."

"I didn't say anything...Lou," the doctor remarked sarcastically, eyeing Lou as though she was sizing her up for something.

Lou pulled at the woman's wrists until she stood facing Lou, who was several inches taller and broader. She leaned her rifle on the other side of the log so the woman would have to bend in an awkward position to grab it. "I imagine you know what comes next." She stared at the prisoner, waiting for a response the woman decided not to make. She shrugged and pulled the prisoner closer and began to pat her down. "Do you have anything in your pockets that might hurt me?" Still no response and so Lou started at the woman's neck, checking the collar of her shirt with both hands squeezing the collar.

Something pricked her finger and she drew back to suck the drop of blood on it. "What the hell was that?" She yanked the woman close to see what had stabbed her finger and pulled out an old-fashioned hatpin from a tiny slit at the back of her collar. She stood sucking on her finger as she studied the woman with the serene face and sharp dark eyes. She slapped her hard across the face. "That's for not telling me about the goddamned hatpin!" The woman continued to glare at her but said nothing. "I'm gonna ask you again. Is there anything in your pockets that might hurt me?"

"That hatpin wasn't in my pocket, was it...Lou?"

Lou issued a resigned sigh. Oh, how she wanted to punch the smirk from the woman's pretty face. Or maybe just keep punching until she was a pile of compliant flesh. "Doc, if you knew how much you've aggravated me and my team with your bullshit swamp tour, you'd tell me anything I freaking wanted to know. Do you have anything else on your PERSON that might hurt me?"

"I don't know what hurts you...Lou. Why don't you finish frisking me and see?"

"Don't push your luck today, Lady!" Lou grabbed the prisoner's angler's vest, squeezing the pockets carefully before running her fingers inside to check for weapons. She didn't find any weapons, but she did find lock-picking tools, two generic handcuff keys, and a variety of hairpins that she set on the log. "That's a pile of nice escape shit, Doc. Where'd you get the vest? *Criminals Are Us?*"

She chuckled at her own joke while the doctor remained silent, glaring at her through angry eyes. She unzipped her prisoner's vest and began to search the long-sleeved thermal shirt underneath it. The prisoner had rolled the sleeves up to her elbows, exposing sinewy forearms. Lou could see the thermal shirt was snug across her bosom. The shirt couldn't hide much, but she wanted to mess with the woman's head a little to give her a bit of her own medicine. She suspected the woman had been screwing with her and her team over the past ten days, leading them all over creation and back. She ran both hands around the neck of woman's thermal T-shirt. "Nothing's there, huh, Doc?" she muttered, then moved down to the woman's chest and ran both hands across both breasts as she studied the woman's face. She let her hands squeeze soft breast tissue before resting her palms on them for several moments as she pretended search her bra for weapons.

Both thumbs flicked across soft nipples several times through the fabric of the bra and the thermal shirt the woman wore. Dark eyes continued to study Lou curiously while the body parts Lou caressed remained unaffected. Not getting the desired reaction from the doctor, Lou moved her hands down to search the waistband of the cargo pants. Another hatpin stuck the same wounded finger in a different spot. Lou pulled her hand back to shake it, then she sucked the wound on her finger. "Goddamn it, Woman! I should beat the shit out of you for that!" she roared.

It was a battle of wills; the more furious Lou became, the calmer the doctor's demeanor was.

"Kill me for a hatpin stick. I think not...Lou. Your employer wouldn't like that. How would you explain my death to the authorities down here or back in the city? Maybe the conversation would go something like this. Well, Mr. Homicide Detective, she had this hatpin hidden in her pants. It stuck me and I killed her because of it." Lou raised a hand to slap the smartass out of the doctor's mouth to show her who was boss. She didn't. Instead, she ran rough hands over cargo pants, no longer patting but slapping at the front legs of them and the waders she wore. She treated the woman's back pockets the same way as the front, smacking at them with hard, rough hands. When she ran a hand inside the left pocket, the back of her hand snagged on something...a tiny blade of some kind. Now she had a small cut across the back of her left hand and two pinpricks on her right hand.

Nathaniel sighed. After watching the entire scene between the two women, he could feel hardness where it didn't belong. It was definitely time to head out and go home to his patient wife. "Are you done playing touchy feely with her yet, Lou? Let's get going." He looked up at the sky that he couldn't see very well through the complete cover of leafy trees, bushes, and weeds taller than a man and vines thick as his bicep. He only knew it was still daylight because he could see slivers of daylight shining through the dense forest ahead of them. "I wanna be out of here before dark. Check the GPS. Let's see where we are and how the hell to get out of here."

Still standing in front of the woman, Lou glanced at her team member and held up a finger. "Not yet. There's one more place, Nate...actually, two places I have to check." She grabbed the woman's head by her single thick braid, yanking hard enough to pull her head backward and expose her throat. "Open your mouth, Doc, and lift your tongue. You bite me, and my friend Donny...he's the guy over my right shoulder smoking a cigarette who wanted to break your wrists... will be the least of your problems."

"Oh please, you think you can scare me...Lou. Better women than you have tried. Trust me, they didn't succeed either."

While the doctor spoke, Lou quickly unzipped her fly, reaching a hand inside her cargo pants and feeling around the cotton panties the woman wore. She watched the woman finally react to something she did. The woman closed her dark eyes and her breathing grew more labored, then she shifted her stance to allow her legs to open wider. Lou heard her groan softly. "Open your eyes, Bitch! I'm not trying to get fresh. I'm just trying to see if you have any more of those hatpins and tiny blades hidden where nobody but an ex-narco cop like me would think to look. Besides, you're not my type of woman. I like my women wearing power suits by day and something slinky at night. They'd better not be wallowing in some slimy, freaking swampland with blood-sucking bugs, mud, and stench. The woman better be Black too and not some half Black, half Red witch woman living here in spooky land."

Lou quickly withdrew her hand but not before she brushed two fingers against the panties that her prisoner wore. She pressed into the crotch, finding it saturated. "You gonna open your mouth for me or am I gonna have to punch the shit out of your head and open it myself? My boss said I could bring you back banged up but not dead."

Magic words. Suddenly, the prisoner clamped her legs shut, nearly crushing Lou's hand. If Lou hadn't been expecting something like that, the doctor would have trapped her hand between strong thigh muscles. Who knows what could have happened then.

"You arrogant Black bitch! You want to see my mouth. Well, look as much as you want," the doctor muttered, opening her mouth and lifting her tongue as ordered. "See? There's nothing there. It's empty."

"Yeah, this time, it is. I read the file about your two escapes, Doc." Lou nodded at the miniature cache of weapons she'd removed and placed on the log. "You're a dangerous Black and Red bitch who likes to hide shit in strange, exotic places." She wiggled her brows at the doctor. "But I draw the line at examining your asshole. I'll let Donny do that since he seems to have taken a liking to you." She re-zipped her prisoner's fly. "There you go. All done."

Calm down, take deep breaths, and play it cool. Lou doesn't like calm, so use that against her, her instincts ordered. The doctor issued a tiny, polite smile that didn't reach her dark, wary eyes. "I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you that I didn't do it. Taking a human life or any life, for that matter, goes against everything I believe in."

Studying the doctor's no longer serene face, Lou laughed at her words and then mocked them. "Hey, Nate? How many times we heard that shit from our prisoners?"

Nathaniel groaned loudly, then rolled his eyes, "She-e-e-t, damned near all of them, I think."

He paused to clear a dry throat and wondered how could it be so humid here in swamp hell and his guts feel so dry? "Nope, make that every fucking single one of them bastards said they were innocent." He kept the pump action aimed at the doctor's back. "Like you, Doc, every single one of them claimed innocence and yet here we are bringing your escaped ass back to prison just like the rest of 'em."

Hands cuffed behind her back, the doctor drew up to her full height of five foot seven. Her harsh glare took in Lou and Nathaniel. "*I am* different. Somebody is trying to frame me and I don't know why." That was a lie. She knew exactly why the frame. She knew the bastard who was doing it. She needed to stay outside prison walls long enough to prove it. If she could get one of them, Lou or Nate, to believe her, she might stand a chance. Donny was too stupid to give a shit.

Lou waved a dismissive hand at her as something buzzed near her ear. She grabbed whatever it was out of the air and closed her hand on it. She was going to smash the damned bug in her fist. Instead, she opened her hand to investigate the thing when it tickled the palm of her hand. Her eyes grew large when she looked at the tiny hummingbird trapped in her hand. She examined it closely, prodding it with her little finger. It looked all right and so she bent down, gently placing it on the log.

"No, don't! Let it fly away, Lou. Hold your hand open and it will fly away. It's just stunned. You stunned it when you snatched it out of the sky. Do it before...."

Out of nowhere, a snake slithered along the log, quickly navigating a path over the miniature weapons to get at the tiny bird. When the snake raised its tweed brown head to attack, it suddenly became visible to two people other than the doctor, who had seen it scrambling from its hiding place among the tree roots and muck. Before the doctor could call out a warning, the snake's head left its bloody body and the tiny bird flew off to live another day in swampland.

The doctor watched Lou prepare to retrieve her knife from the wiggling body. "Don't touch the head or the blood. It's extremely poisonous to humans and small animals. It paralyzes the nervous system. The animal suffocates while being eaten alive. If I were you, I'd leave that knife right where it is and stand away from the body before it sprays you."

Lou stroked the empty sheaf strapped to her left thigh, then studied the wiggling headless body and shivered. "Goddamn snake. I hate the filthy creatures. Shit, that was my favorite knife!"

"Christ! Lou, just do what the doctor says. Put a new knife on the goddamned bill and let's go." Nathaniel glanced at his sportsman's wristwatch and then up at the bright but disappearing sun as it played tag among the leaves in the dense forest. "It's getting later by the minute. Did you check the GPS yet?"

Donny flipped his cigarette butt into the sand at his feet, then stamped it out with the steel toe of a size fifteen waterproof boot. He brought a heavy booted foot down on the other six butts, making sure they were out too. He heard Nathaniel say something about leaving and decided to add his two cents. "This place gives me the creeps. I swear to God somebody is out there watching us, Lou." His eyes darted into the emerald green density, then back to the flying bugs that looked bigger than the water bugs crawling around in his basement storage locker that creeped him out.

Lou studied the backpacks at Nathaniel's feet, wondering if the snake had little buddies. "Nate,

how long have those packs been sitting in the sand next to the log like that?" She looked at the doctor with a raised eyebrow, then cleared her throat. She hated asking a prisoner...her prisoner for anything. "You seem to know about snakes. Should we be worried the dead asshole has little buds who like to hide in packs and come out for midnight snacks?"

"Like we're gonna believe any shit she says, Lou," Donny remarked, marching over to the women and Nathaniel. "Since when did we start listening to prisoners when we have the perfect solution at our fingertips?" He took aim, then he shot up both backpacks. He riddled them with both with bullets until the packs were shredded pieces of waterproof canvas fabric embedded with hot metal and melted plastic bits from the GPS, their canteens, bottled water, a first aid kit. He also blew away two silver-coated thinsulate thermal blankets, two pairs of clean panties, two pairs of socks, and three wiggling, squirming, dying snakes that looked identical to the headless one Lou had just killed.

"Wait, Donny, don't...." Lou called out too late to stop the carnage. The man was out of his mind sometimes. She stood studying the remains, a forearm crossed over her chest, which supported the hand underneath her chin. This was a screwed-up snatch and grab. It took ten days tracking to find the suspect and capture her. She wondered now if the subject deliberately led them on a wild goose chase to wear them out and use up their supplies. Donny had just shot up their digital compass. That meant no GPS, but she did have a compass on her watch, as did Nate and Donny. She had that tourist map she had bought in the souvenir shop in her back pocket. Their cell phones didn't work for shit in an area this dense with no towers nearby. She groaned, thinking about all the water they'd been wading through over the past ten days. Why didn't she put that shit in the Ziploc bag with the ciggies? "Well, there goes our GPS and two-thirds of our gear, Donny."

"Yeah, but I killed the shit out of those slimy, wiggling little bastards before they got us, Lou." He lit up another cigarette, letting the smoke curl out of his nostrils to join the smoke rings he blew into the air.

Lou scrubbed the back of her neck, wiping off some of the mud with her hand. "Can I speak to you over here a sec, Donald? Bring your pack with you."

"You're in for it now, you dumb shit. She called you by your given name, Donny." Laughing, Nathaniel rested the shotgun against his thigh and watched Lou lead the way into a wooded area for privacy's sake. "Doc, it's too bad you can't plug your ears for this one. She's gonna ream his ass good for losing our way out of here."

Dr. Grace Byland followed Lou and Donny's journey with her eyes. She wanted to warn them not to go too far away from the sandbar. While a few snakes had wandered into the area, she was certain they had killed most of them. The small sandbar was the perfect spot for pitching a campsite. They could cut off some tree limbs, hollow them out, stuff some dried moss in them, and spread them around the perimeter of sandbar, then light them. The homemade torches and a decent-sized bonfire should keep away most of the gators, small creatures, and snakes tonight. As for food, she could probably find something edible.

"Goddamn it, Donald! What the hell is wrong with you? Do you realize you just fucked up the easiest way out of here?" Lou whipped out the damp map from her back pocket. "Now we gotta

use this piece of shit.” She tried to open the map carefully, but the soggy, unreadable map fell apart in her hands. Frustrated, she balled up the map and tossed it in the swamp. “Screw it! Now we don’t have a goddamned map either.” She looked up at Donny’s grinning face and grew even angrier, pacing back and forth in front of him. “What the hell is so funny, Donald? We are freaking lost in a goddamned swamp and you’re laughing about it.”

“If you could see the mud cracking all across your face, you’d be laughing your ass off too.”

Grace heard Lou raise her voice to the man who towered over her. Making out some of the angry words, she could guess the rest. The big dummy deserved a tongue-lashing. She studied Nathaniel. He was a big guy too. She estimated both men to be well over six feet and between two hundred and fifty to two hundred and seventy-five pounds. How did a woman several inches shorter and eighty pounds lighter come to be in charge of the twin hulks who looked like they could take her out by wiggling one large pinky finger and a solid thick thumb? She was curious about the relationship among the three bounty hunters. “How does a woman get to be the boss of two of the biggest guys I’ve seen in a long time? You and Donald look like you should be playing pro ball somewhere instead of being skip tracers, Nate.”

Nathaniel studied the doctor’s dirty face, wondering why she’d want to know about her three captors. “Why?”

“Why, what?”

“You know exactly what I’m asking, Doc.” His finger stayed over the trigger, even though the doctor wasn’t close enough to grab the weapon away from him, not that she was strong enough to do so.

“I’m a curious soul by nature. I love asking questions and figuring out solutions. I’ve always wondered why certain women chose non-traditional male-dominated fields and turn them into career paths.”

“My gut tells me some of that bullshit you just laid on me is true. Most of it is not.” Still studying the doctor, Nathaniel rubbed the stubble on his chin that was growing into an itchy, scraggly ten-day-old beard covered in streaks of stinking, caked-up mud. “I think you’re scanning us all for weaknesses you can use against us...you know, divide and conquer shit.”

Grace shrugged. He was much smarter than she’d given him credit. He wasn’t the big dumb ox that she was certain Donald would turn out to be. “Do you blame me for trying?”

Nathaniel grinned. “Nope, I’d do the same thing if I were in your shoes.” He studied her again. “It was the army.”

“How’s that?”

“You wanted to know about her. Lou and I met in the army.” He laughed, remembering the tall, skinny woman so cocky and confident she’d make it through boot camp. He was a big, overweight farm boy worried he’d never amount to anything. His daddy wanted him to take their failing farm and make it a success. He hated the farm and the animals they tried to raise. They did all the hard work and had nothing but unpaid bills to show for it. He and his father rose before the sun showed its face. Winter, spring, summer, and fall; the seasons didn’t matter. It was get up before sunrise, work your balls off, and go to sleep long after sunset. That was his life for nineteen,

almost twenty years. One day, he said screw it. *I am not my fucking father. I am not a fucking farmer either. I am joining the military.* That was what he did.

"Lou kicked my ass the first time we trained for hand-to-hand combat and she's been kicking it ever since." He grinned at the doctor. "That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

There has to be more to Lou's story than that, Grace mused. She knew there had to be more. It might be interesting to persuade Nathaniel to expand on Lou's personal history if he knew it. Of course he knew her well. Only friends would be foolish enough to take on an assignment like this, so far from their comfort zone. She supposed that was what bounty hunting was all about...a hunter leaving his own neighborhood to track and capture subjects in territories the hunter didn't know well. What kind of skill set did that take? "What does Lou stand for?"

Nathaniel frowned, then repeated the unexpected question. "What does Lou stand for? I don't understand the question, Doc. Is she a woman with principles? Yeah, she has 'em but doesn't use 'em much on this job. She hates liars. She can't stand to be lied to about anything. She cut off her relationship with her sister for that reason." He groaned once he realized he was talking too much to a prisoner and a clever one at that. "Shit! I shouldn't have said. No more questions, Doc. Enjoy what's left of the sunlight in this godforsaken place."

"I'm surprised at you, Nathaniel," Grace remarked, looking around the sandbar and smiling. "Can't you see the beauty here? This place is ancient." She nodded at the large trees with the exposed roots sinking into the distant bogs. "Those cypress trees have been here since before my grandfather's grandfather was born. Those vines and weeds over there used to be no more than a foot high when I was a child. Look at how they twist and turn around the treetops and block the sun's light. They'll be here long after we're dead. Nate, if you sit still, you can hear the swamp talking to you."

She tilted her head, listening. "Right now, I hear bullfrogs. 'Ah rump. Ah, rump.'" They both heard a group of shiny-coated black birds squawking somewhere over their heads. "Those are crows, I think. We can't see them, but we can hear them. Yes, those are crows. We even have turkeys here in the swamp." She grinned at his look of surprise and nodded. "Yes, this place has lots of interesting plants and animals."

Nate rolled his eyes. "And snakes that can kill you in the blink of an eye, Doc. Don't forget that crap! You didn't mention the damned gators that look like floating logs until the bastards open those freaking long snouts of theirs. Those jaws look like they could do some real damage, even to a big guy like me. I saw some kind of swimming rat thing two days ago when I went to take a leak. It was bigger than my dog." His massive chest inhaled. "She-e-it! Give me a good cigar and a snifter full of a hundred-year-old brandy. A good woman to love me right in an air-conditioned townhouse with cable and a thousand sports channels. I'll take my monsters and creepy crawlies on a national wildlife channel I can turn off when shit gets too hairy, Doc."

Grace smiled at his look of longing. She'd bet Nathaniel wished he was in that townhouse with his woman right now. "Oh, come on, Nate. You have to admit tracking me and then capturing me in this swamp will add a little something to your street credits. I'll bet you and your team get a bonus for bringing me back to civilization too. So what if you spent ten days capturing me? It'll

be a stepping-stone to bigger and better things, right? Think of the stories you can tell your grandchildren about this place.”

“You seem real happy for someone who’s going to jail for the rest of her life. I think maybe you’re a little too confident, Doc.” Nate’s humorous expression turned wary and he straightened up. He pointed the pump action at her chest while he looked around, quickly scanning the landscape next to him. Something wasn’t right. He didn’t hear Lou’s voice. “Lou? Donny? You guys okay out there? Talk to me, people.” He got nothing but silence.