

GATOR HUNTER

CHAPTER 1

Two years after Dad's disappearance Memaw puts together a funeral for him, and just about nobody shows up.

I sit in a lawn chair in her backyard, unmowed grass up to my shins, sweaty skin prickling with early spring humidity, and determined mosquitoes. The skunky smell of weed hangs on the stiff breeze.

Memaw's grow shed provides a sliver of shade for the sparse crowd of mourners, a grainy picture of Dad blown up and hung from the door to keep the little cousins out.

It's a fitting portrait of him, dressed in rubber waders and gripping a fishing pole.

His eyes aren't on the camera—caught mid-cast, his sharp gaze probes out across the still green surface of the bayou. Not smiling, but not frowning. In the blurry capture of my waterproof Nikon, I could pretend he was as close to happy as he ever got.

The funeral doesn't last too long, cause Dad doesn't have any friends, and the few he has are convinced he ran off to some place he can fish and work on airboats in peace forever. So there's a short list of backyard funeral attendees, all family. Dad's older brother Willie and younger brother Luke, who could've been twins despite the ten years between them, spitting images down to their double cowlicks and short-sleeve gray button-downs. They stand at the front of the horseshoe of folding chairs and do most of the talking, sloshing Abita Amber everywhere as they recount stories from growing up with Dad. Memaw puffs on her spliff and dabs her eyes with a puppy and party hat patterned cocktail napkin from her sixtieth birthday last weekend. Stone-faced Aunt Jess holds Memaw by the shoulders, expression

unreadable as her eyes track Uncle Willie. She paid for the cake and all the drinks, though she'd been sober for two years. The only person in the Montgomery family who doesn't drink to survive.

Little cousins chase each other around the yard, laughing, barefoot in their Sunday best. Too young to understand this is supposed to be a somber affair.

"Monte," Uncle Luke slurs. He tips the neck of his Abita Amber in my direction. "Why dontcha say a few words about your Daddy?"

I open my mouth, close it; feel my cheeks warming. Pa was my Pa. What else is there to it? What more is there to say?

I couldn't remember the last time Pa and I said we loved each other. We hadn't shared so much as a hug since Momma's funeral. It just wasn't the way of our relationship. To go on about him in front of everyone felt strangely dishonest. Insincere.

Everyone goes so quiet, looking at me. Feeling sorry for me. I prickle under their attention.

They can't ever know I am the reason Dad stormed off that night.

"I don't think I can," I say. My voice, scratchy with nerves, sounds torn up, like I can't speak or I'll break down. I don't know. Maybe I will anyway.

Why are we fucking doing this? Dad isn't dead. He left. I want to scream and let it out but I can't. I can't. Then everyone will know *why*. And they'll pack up and leave me forever, too. I'll have no one.

Memaw wobbles over to me, cupping my head to her breast. Smoke from her spliff hovers in front of my face as she litters the top of my head with sticky, red-lipped kisses. "Don't put him on the spot like that! You know he's my sensitive boy." She braces herself on my shoulder and offers me a hit. "Want some, baby? It'll help."

I nod, a little desperate for it, and Memaw passes over her half-smoked spliff. I suck at the end to keep my wobbling lips from exposing me. Her chunky bracelets clatter as she cast her other hand wide, gesturing to the half-circle of lawn chairs. A queen regaling her redneck kingdom. “We’ll take care of you, Monte. You still got family. You got us.”

She hunches over me and hugs me, and I catch a whiff of her wine breath. Uncle Willie and Luke and Aunt Jess crowd in too, tangle me in well-meaning limbs and weed smoke. Someone’s Abita Amber spills down my back.

“We got you, boy,” Uncle Willie gruffly comforts. Less drunk than Luke and Memaw, but getting there. Red rings his eyes.

I nod, sit rigid in their arms as I puff away at the spliff. I can’t seem to smoke it fast enough.

If there was a body, we might’ve taken the whole funeral thing more seriously. Coordinated speeches and flowers, ordered take out from the local Chinese restaurant—the whole nine yards. But there is no body. There’s not been a trace of Dad to be found anywhere since the night he left two years ago. No swipe of his card at an ATM to pocket his life savings and start anew somewhere else. No final stop at a local gas station to fill his tank before launching his never-ending trip.

Life in the stilt house waits for him, perfectly preserved, like a historic site. Dad’s phone lay where he left it plugged up to charge every night on the kitchen bar. Worn fishing net and wading boots leaning against the back door. His wallet dangling on a swamp rusted chain from the key hook. ID and cash untouched inside. He could row up tomorrow and pick up like nothing happened. For a long time, I was convinced that’s what he’d do.

In the beginning, when his abandonment was raw, I’d go into his room every night and search for some sign of where he’d vanished off too. I’d lay in his bed and stare at his cracked ceiling and try to enter his mind. Dad kept no journals or calendars. He never owned a computer. He used a flip phone without

internet access and lived off his veteran's pension, taking the airboat to town once, maybe twice a month depending on beer levels, rarely visiting his "friends" from the service. Then one month with him gone turned into three. Three bled into six. Suddenly a year came and went without him. Birthdays and graduations. The birth of his first niece. Finally, I grew certain Dad was really gone, was really never coming back.

He loved our stilt house more than anything; the last place we lived together with Ma as a family. There was nothing to explain his leaving it behind but me. The one thing he must've hated more than he loved the stilt house, and his strange, secluded life. A holdover of a time on the bayou long slipped away.

Why was he the one to go away that night? He could've kicked me out like he threatened to, kept the bayou stilt house and all its precious memories of Ma for himself. He didn't even take her wedding ring.

It should be me out there, lost to the night.

The drive back to the folk boat after the funeral is silent as a graveyard. Uncle Willie likes to listen to blaring country, probably to drown out his kids, but Uncle Luke is a car-ride chatter. The ear closest to him will hurt by the time you make it where you're going together. Today he's quiet as his mute radio. Maybe he's thinking about Pa. Maybe he's thinking about me going home alone to my mausoleum on the water to float with the ghosts of my family. Either way, we don't talk about it, and I'm grateful for it. There is nothing to be done for any of it.

I dip my head in thanks to Uncle Luke when he drops me off at the water, but he stays to watch me depart through the rolled-down passenger window. His gaze tickles the back of my neck as I toss my shoes into my small row boat and push off the spongy grass. The boat lurches, dragging along the muck, then lightens, gliding across the sunset gilded surface. I chase the boat calf-deep before hitching a leg over and climbing inside. Momentum slows. I collect the oars before I lose it all and glance over my shoulder to find Uncle Luke's truck camping on the shoulder, half pulled off in the grass. Twin beams of light

puncture the buttery sunset like spears. A smaller, golden light burns overhead in the cab, illuminating Uncle Luke watching me. Tears shine on his tan cheeks and make my stomach twist. Damn, I need something stronger than two Abita Amber's and a half smoked spliff.

I row around a bend in the trees and we disappear from each other's sight.

CHAPTER 2

I see the silhouette of the person sitting on the porch dock long before I arrive.

The water stretches between us like a sheet of gently rippling stained glass. Warm oranges and yellows shining across the surface as if lit from behind.

For a strange, buoyant moment gazing across the water, I think it's Dad come back at last. Broad shoulders backlit by the warm porch light, cap and collared shirt lacquered yellow by the moody dregs of sunset. Long legs dangling familiarly off the edge of the porch.

Then the figure spots me and stands, waving eagerly with both hands, and the illusion vanishes. Dad would never wave like that.

Yellow porch light glides across brown skin as he moves and familiar features emerge. Strong jaw and full lips. Dark eyes under thick brows. Darker hair shorn down to the scalp and mostly covered by a ball cap. I could see the design on the threadbare stretch across the forehead without really having to see it. An outline of a graceful crane, posed like a ballerina, with the blocky words: SAVE OUR WETLANDS underneath. The O and W were already fraying to threads our Sophomore year.

What's left of it, I wonder. Are all the words gone? Has the hat fallen apart like our friendship—slowly, then all at once?

Wilem crouches on the edge of the patio dock and grabs the bow of my boat as I drift up. He sticks out his other hand for my tie rope, and I toss it over without a word, watching as he secures me to a silver hook protruding from an enforced post.

I smile at him out of reflex despite the surreality of the situation as the boat cuddles up close to the dock. A few feet away, a bright blue inflatable kayak is tied to another hitching post along the porch dock. The latex branding on the side is bright and brand new. Either it's his first excuse to use it, or he bought it for the twenty-minute paddle trip to the stilt house. With Wilem's aversion to swimming, I lean towards the latter.

Why's he come here? Today, of all days to show up.

Wilem props his foot onto the stern to help balance the boat, and I clamber onto the dock, shooting looks at the kayak, at Wilem. I can feel the two Abita Amber's I bummed sloshing in my belly, and I clear my throat, adjust my nice shirt, suddenly embarrassed by my appearance. I'm a mess. Drenched in sweat. Probably reeking of weed.

"Hey, Monte," Wilem greets, warm and casual, as if I hadn't ignored his countless attempts to reach out the last two years. Every text, call, email, each thinking-of-you bouquet that got me teased at work, the ream of letters waiting for me at the post office—unanswered.

"It's not really a good time," I say stupidly.

"Your Dad's funeral." He takes off his cap, rakes his hands through his hair. I notice offhandedly it is the hat I gave him. *OUR* and *WETLANDS* are completely unintelligible. If I didn't know what the words

were, I could never discern them amongst the stray threads. “Why didn’t you call me? I would’ve come. Stood by you.”

“I know,” I say. I can’t stop looking him over.

No longer a man on the cusp, he’s only gotten more handsome in the years I haven’t seen him. Filled out, too. New muscles pad his beanstalk limbs. I turn away and look out over the water. Wilem’s kayak gently bumps the patio in the wind stippled water. *Schlump. Schlump. Schlump.* The breeze always picks up at night. On the shoreline, crickets and cicadas rev their engines from the ruffling trees, raring up for a long night. Despite the distance the water carries their sounds to us.

Wilem squeezes the hat in his fist, releases slowly. “And you didn’t come to graduation.”

I tilt towards the water, then away again, like the shivering limbs of a submerged cypress dragged by the water’s wiles. I turn back to Wilem and find his eyes seeking my face, frowning as he searches for something in my expression.

“I didn’t graduate,” I say. I dropped out sophomore year—three days after Dad went missing.

Wilem frowns at me. “I did.”

“Congrats.” I reach into my pocket to fish out my keys, feeling more than a little sorry for myself, but Wilem leaps forward and grabs me by the arm to hold me in place.

“Wait—I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just. You’re my best friend. I thought you’d be there.” He squeezes my forearm and lets go. “And I thought you’d want me here for this. Did they find him?”

Find him? Something stings my neck. I’m too slow to slap, and there’s a bloody smear across my palm when I peer down at it. Damn mosquito got a nice drink before I swatted him. “Let’s go inside. I’m getting ate up.”

Inside is dark, and cramped. Awkward plywood editions extend the house in squares that jut out over the water. It looks like multiple homes cobbled together. A kitchen table with three chairs occupies the small room when we first walk in. Then we squeeze through a tube of a hallway, so low it nearly grazes Wilem's head, and emerge in the kitchen, the biggest room in the house after the Katrina renovations. Fancy four top propane burners. Deep stainless-steel sink. Marble countertops running the edges, copper accents everywhere. It's my favorite place in the house. You can almost forget you're floating in the middle of a swamp here.

Wilem invites himself to sit on the couch against the far wall. There's no place for his wallet and keys, so he drops them on the ground by his right sneaker. He's only been here a few times—childhood sleepovers were typically hosted at his house—and his uncertainty reflects in his pinched shoulders, his roving eyes.

“How've you been?” he asks as I hand him a can of beer and retreat to the kitchen to roll up.

“Fine.” I turn my back to him to lick the paper for a seal, though he must know what I'm doing. Likely he can smell the lingering smoke in the air from my joint before Dad's funeral. My face heats. I don't know if I'm embarrassed or annoyed to have him here, but I feel young again by his side. Observed. Judged.

Wilem never smoked, and rarely drank. In college, when I tried coke and shrooms, he watched from the corner with crossed arms, ever my vigilant babysitter. He resolutely didn't participate, driving me back to the dorms while I sprawled across the backseat of his Camry. Stoned, drunk, tripping. Pinning me in the rearview with his gaze, as if nothing bad could happen under his watch. My guardian angel or something.

But he couldn't protect me from everything.

I go to the window, shove it open, take a seat on the ledge to light up. Press the twist of brown paper between my lips and pull hard. Smoke slips down my throat, fills my lungs, floats through my blood to my brain and makes the moment bearable again. I lean out the window to exhale, wash away the burnt taste with a deep swallow from my beer.

Wilem watches, silent. His beer waits unopened in his hand.

I brace my feet on the floor, wrist dangling out the window, joint pumping smoke like a steam train, and take another sip from my beer. Can't help myself. There's a strain between us from our time apart—from the way I left.

"Why did you come here, Wil?" I ask.

"You wouldn't answer any of my calls or texts."

I blow smoke at him. "Maybe I didn't want to talk to you." It comes out meaner than I meant it; but I don't take it back. Because we can't take back what happened the last time we saw each other, and the way it changed our friendship.

I never should've let it happen. But Wil was always the cautious one between us.

He taps a fingernail to the top of his can, cracks it open but doesn't take a drink. The sound of that can opening is the loudest thing I've ever heard.

Somewhere behind me, a fan boat drones and chops up the water, sending Wilem's kayak rocking against the porch dock again. *Schlump. Schlump. Schlump.* Rhythmic as a ticking clock. The whirring of the big fan quiets, then vanishes in the distance. Stillness rushes back. There isn't another house to disturb the night for miles. No lights. No noise.

I take another drag, blow out the smoke in a long stream over my shoulder. It hovers over the water like spirits. Haunting the bayou. Haunting me.

"It's been two years," I say, as if time excuses everything.

Wilem doesn't say a word.

In. Hold. I ash the joint into the water and grind the stubby butt into an overflowing ashtray on the windowsill. Burn holes litter the carpet below. Sprinklings of ash, black from the joints, white-gray from the cigarettes. I exhale more smoky spirits and feel lighter inside.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come to your graduation. I should’ve. I just...” I lift the beer can from between my legs and drain it. Wilem gets up and offers me his. I take it and guzzle half.

“I know. You were supposed to be walking across the stage, too. Not watching from the bleachers.” He squeezes my shoulder and bumps his hip to mine. He’s too big to fit beside me on the windowsill, but I scoot over and make space for him to lean on the wall next to me. Our shoulders brush, our arms, our upper thighs.

I want to roll another joint, but I don’t want to look bad in front of Wilem. I tip back the rest of his beer, crush the can in my fist. Then we both stare at nothing in the kitchen together.

When we were kids, Wilem stuffed every pocket of silence with words. So talkative he bordered on annoying. He’s quiet now, though. No daydreams or anecdotes. I peer at him from the corner of my eye and see he looks restrained. Brows furrowed, lips pressed into a flat line.

I get up, retrieve another beer. It cracks open with a warning snake’s hiss. I lean against the fridge, putting some space between us, and take a drink. Then I tip the can at him, a silent invitation to speak.

Wilem kicks off the wall and gets rid of the distance I created in three big strides, coming to stand in front of me. “This what you’ve been down here doing for two years? Smoking and drinking and paddling around?”

“I’ve been fishin’, too,” I say, nonchalant as ever, and kind of hating myself for that. How cold I am after I start drinking. I take another sip.

“C’mon Monte. Your Daddy wouldn’t want you living like this.”

I choke out a mean laugh, drink more beer to keep myself from saying something terrible. Beer splashes from the can and wets my hand. I can feel droplets dampening my shirt front. I don't care. "My Daddy ain't here."

He left me.

"Come back to school. I've got an internship lined up for the fall, and I'm getting my own place. A little two-bedroom apartment in the city. I think you'd like it. Your room has a great view of—"

"My room? You've got this all planned out, dont'cha. My hero." I slam my beer can on the counter and it clatters. Empty. The twenty four pack in the fridge is finished, just a cardboard sleeve, so I stumble over to my rolling tray, pick up a rolling paper with trembling fingers. The joint is ugly, disfigured. Back at the window I puff, puff, puff, trembling, thinking about going to school. No, no. I can never go back to school again.

"What do I gotta say to get through to you?" he pleads.

"I think it's time for you to go, Wilem."

I usher him down the tube hallway, trailing smoke. He's talking, rambling about LSU, the apartment, my future. Grasping at every straw.

"The internship pays well, so you won't have to worry about splitting rent—and you can walk to campus. Your plaque is still up."

My steps stutter as I imagine my plaque in the library, nailed nearly to the top of the wall as they ran out of space after so many years of the tradition. Top mechanical engineering freshman it reads. I can imagine more plaques joining it: top mechanical engineering junior. Class valedictorian. But the images are just dreams, weed smoke-appiritions. They dissipate when I run my fingers through them to inspect their details.

I'm not the same Monte I was. Since Dad left, I can barely get through a book without my attention drifting. Too much of my mind is dedicated to his disappearance to focus on anything else. I'm turning the pages of some dry science book, trying to study, trying to get back to real life, but I'm thinking of him. Where he wanted to go. Where he ended up. If he's alive or dead.

If it's all my fault that he won't visit Memaw or call his brothers.

I open the front door, and ooze onto the patio. The beers and the joints are catching up. I'm drunk and high and tired. I want Wilem to leave so I can lay down and start to process Dad's "funeral".

The night air is humid, and heavy. Despite the late hour, it's hot out. So hot it weighs on my shoulders and curls my spine, wilts me like a spring daisy.

If the water was like glass earlier, reflective and wavering, it's more of a moody painting now. All thick brush strokes and dark, layered paint impossible to penetrate with the eye. The only movement across the surface comes from the bugs: flies and water skimmers, flirting with the surface, causing tiny rings of disturbance. It's a beautiful night, but also frightening. The darkness is oppressive without streetlights or neighbors to poke holes in it. Monsters could easily lurk unseen in its depths.

Wilem passes me, fingers skimming my lower back, stabilizing me, or saying goodbye. I don't know. He says nothing; unable to come up with anything that'll convince me to come back with him to Baton Rouge.

He kneels on the dock and reaches into his kayak to collect his paddle. "I'm in town for a few more weeks before my lease starts. Can I come see you tomorrow? Take you to lunch?"

"I'm working tomorrow." 4 A.M. to 11 baking bread for po'boy's. I'd feel like shit if I didn't go to bed real soon.

Wilem bobs his head. Unties the lead on the reinforced post. "Still working first shift at Guidry's?"

I hiccup.

“Alright. I’ll be waiting for you there,” he says coolly.

Something splashes behind him, probably a big fish jumping by the sound, and Wilem shouts, scrambling back a few steps. He presses an open hand to his heart and whips a big-eyed look my way. “What was that?”

And.... there goes the lead line off the dock. It slithers into the water, quick as a snake, and disappears. The bright blue kayak starts to drift away from the post. Wilem drops flat on the dock and fishes for the line with his paddle, straining, swearing, but a knock against the kayak’s side sends it lurching further away.

I rake my hand down my face and sigh, turning for the yawning house. “Should make you swim for it.”

“You know I can’t swim!” He cries as he hurriedly gets to his feet to follow me inside.

CHAPTER 3

I wake up to the honking of my alarm and go through the motions: Slink under the lukewarm spray of the shower with half-open eyes. Wash down two headache pills with tap water, cracked lips parted under the faucet. Taste the aluminum of the cistern. Dress in the dark: a t-shirt with a hole in the collar and a ball cap—standard line cook uniform.

In the mirror, I look half-presentable. Inside, I’m a mess. Wilem slept on my couch last night. The first person to stay here with me since Dad left.

I check my phone. No messages. Not even Memaw, texting off her mind on Ambien. The time glows 2:30 AM. I turn off the light and spend a few moments in the darkness listening to myself breathe, preparing for another day. I haven't started drinking beer in the morning before work, really a pathetic line to draw in the sand, but I consider it daily. Today more than ever I want one to take the harsh edge off the world. Off my life. The urge to drink is like a fishhook tugging in my guts.

My parents are gone, my life is totally fucked, yet I've gotta clock in to make sandwiches. It's cruel.

When hunting season starts on the bayou at the end of August, I'll quit my seasonal work at Guidry's Po'boys, and get to swamping. If I'm lucky, the county will give me fifty gator tags this year, and I'll make enough money to last till the next hunting season without Guidry's help. No more two a.m. wake ups.

In the quiet kitchen, I use the moonlight streaming in through the window to roll a joint and stick it behind my ear like a flower stem. The timer on the coffee machine kicks on while I pack my dry bag—phone, wallet, keys, lighter. Coffee drills the bottom of my mug like piss against a urinal. The rich smell fills the house and clears away the clinging weed stench.

Wilem's snoring stutters, and he blearily sits upright on the couch. "I'm up. I'm up."

I pour half my mug of coffee into another cup and offer it. He accepts it gratefully, nursing it with both hands under his chin. Steam drifts from the cup and curls in translucent tendrils around his face. His hat's on the floor, a make-shift bowl for his belongings. There's a red crease from the couch running across his cheek.

His stomach grumbles. "Got anything for breakfast?" he asks.

I wave my mug of coffee in his direction, then think better of it and produce a cigarette, waving that his way instead, grinning. "A growing boy's gotta eat."

He gets up, opens my fridge as if he doesn't believe me, closes it, opens it again. Yellow light from the small fridge bulb shutters over him.

"It's empty."

"I didn't go fishin' last night."

"Weren't you gonna have somethin' with it? Some rice or okra or something?"

I snort. The green numbers on the stove roll. 2:43.

"C'mon." I head for the door. Wilem drifts along behind me, still half-asleep, and doesn't hesitate to climb down into the boat, eyes closing as he sags against the hull. His hat-bowl rests in his lap by his loose fingers. Pieces of lint from the old couch are stuck to his tight curls. It all presents a very sweet, sleepy image.

I dip my fingers in the cool water and splash him. His eyes jolt wide. "Grab an oar."

It's a forty-minute row to the dock closest to Guidry's—it'd honestly be faster in something sleek like Wilem's kayak, but the folk boat's familiar. It's family. Dad only took the airboat out during swamping season. Always said it was too loud, stirring up nature and wildlife. He wanted to experience the bayou how it really was: wild. Dangerous. Every time we went out on the water to spend time together fishing and crabbing, we did it in this little boat, gliding along like sleek swamp animal's ourselves.

Besides, I like the commute. I settle my oar across my lap and tell Wilem to keep paddling as I light my joint and gaze out at the trees, bent-backed giants with drooping leafy heads, their green hair like carpet across the water. Bald cypress grows most beautifully out here, half submerged, root knees protruding from the water. Tangled networks of buscayos lurk below the surface, hiding huge catfish and venomous water snakes. The buscayos of a single bald cypress could extend a quarter of a mile underwater. A bayou floor made of roots.

I've never left Louisiana, but I'm sure there's no place like this anywhere else.

I take a hit of my joint, exhale breezily. Thinking of something Wilem said yesterday. "What's your apartment got a view of?"

"The botanical gardens," he answers simply. He's realized he can't compete, so he doesn't try to.

His oar strokes the water and propels us forward. I pin my joint in the corner of my lips and pick up my oar to course correct. Smoke fills my mouth, my nose. I don't dislike the feeling—it unburdens me. If only the smoke could make me so light I'd float away and join the winking lightning bugs in the sky.