

## Prologue-

Many people never think to go into a fuller story than their own- etching out the bare details of their lives, not realizing they're leaving out the simple aspects most important: those of the ones around them.

The people that make up who we, ourselves are are just as crucial to the plot that our own elements. That is why I chose to tell a tale other than my own, one far more peculiar than my own, for that matter. Costello's.

## Chapter One-

Islamadora was just another unimportant town in Southern Florida. The only semi-appealing features of the town were the gators. Alligators the size of small boats would appear out of nowhere, snatching pets and children. The civilians kidnapped by the ferocious animals would never see Islamorada again. This may be common in some Florida cities, but Islamorada was different in one way- the swamps. There were swamps everywhere. They coated the streets when a small rainfall blew in, creating smelly mud, and weedy shrubs.

Worse yet, these very same swamps would eat up anything in their pathway. As if the stench, and threat to swallow up a tricycle wasn't enough, there were the gators lurking in each and every swamp, from the tiny mud-pits that grew overnight, to the aged bogs that had been there for years.

Yellow eyes, the pupils following your every move, and a shriek rippling out from a suspicious green-brown lump in a certain swamp were the tell-tale signs of a Islamorada gator.

You had to be cautious of everything, wary of a simple noise, or an especially odd looking bump in a swamp. All this so as not to be taken alive and gobbled up by a Florida alligator.

## Chapter Two-

The core darkness of the night alone would scare any normal Islamorda teenager out of her mind- gators sulking around any corner ready to snatch you up for a snack. But I'm not normal. Gators don't scare me.

The dark, inky surroundings awakened my senses. I pulled my phone out of my denim shorts pocket. The screen lit up brightly, and the Verizon Wireless tune chimed loudly as I held the "on" button. Usually the cheery noise and obnoxiously bright screen nearly scared the daylight out of me. But I guess, judging on the pitch-black night, there were no more daylight to scare. The numbers clicked to 1:04 AM.

I breathed in. It's now or never. I grabbed my cousin's Princess Tiana backpack, already stuffed with my most prized possessions: my first Barbie doll, a mermaid with purple hair; *The Secret Life of Bees*, my favorite book my aunt had given to me; and the picture of Costello and I-taken on the eve of August 11th. After one last glance in the mirror, showing eerie shapes made out by the cloudy dusk light, I was off.

I attempted to open my window wider, as it was only halfway ajar. The steamy August air seemed to thicken as I stuck my head out. The windowpane was gone, the screen held in place by duct tape. I grunted, and tried to shove the window upwards, getting nowhere. As I struggled to lift the window higher, the squeak began. It was an awful high-pitched noise coming from the metal sides of the window rubbing against the wood on either sides of it.

I gasped, immediately aware of the shrillness, scared it would wake someone up. There was no need to worry for my cousins, because they could sleep threw a tsunami; but my Auntie Louisa's ears were huge, and heard things miles away.

I turned my head, frantically trying to find something to grease the window with. The best I could see was my shea butter. It was stowed away in my backpack, so I struggled to find it. Thankfully, after a few swipes of the salve, the creak stopped, the window glided up soundlessly.

I could barely squeeze through the space in between the edges of the window, but after popping out the screen, and placing it next to me, I made it out all right. When it was time to fall, I closed my eyes, and let go. I was motionless until I hit the ground, grateful it was only three-story drop.

One last look at the apartment complex was all it took for tears to appear in the corners of my eyes. But, wordlessly, I brushed them away- unable for any other thoughts to fill my mind than go. Go find Costello.

### Chapter Three-

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a rustling in the trees. I glanced to my right, then slowly, slowly, my left. Nothing but the metallic ebony sky. Stars lit up the sky like the angel's candles from heaven, but they were nothing compared to the severe darkness of the night.

I shivered- not because it was cold, but the realness of it all was suddenly sinking in. I glimpsed a peek at the moon as I ran through the night. The tree branches etched crooked shadows across its ominous shape. Fanning myself with my hands, I sighed. I had stopped for a break, but couldn't muster the strength to keep going. The heat was taking my strength as well as my stamina.

I had to have gone at least a few miles by now, I thought, while contemplating stopping for the night. Tired ideas clouded my mind, and I found myself so fatigued I could hardly clear my head. Finally, I persuaded myself to rest, after nearly falling in a deep slumber while standing.

I had to find somewhere safe from the gators, seeing as they were known to pluck people from thin air. After searching for a small stretch of time, I settled on the back stoop of an abandoned motel, ironically named “The Islamorada Gator Motel.” Nice scheme to reel in unsuspecting customers, I pondered, my thoughts almost dripping with sarcasm. Although the gators were unfortunately brazen enough to sneak into towns, they weren’t that brave. They had never been reported to crawl into buildings before. Anyway it would be stupid to try. The gators knew where humans, or future meals were most likely to be, and old shady buildings weren’t that.

But even knowing this, I was tense. I tried and to relax, but was unsuccessful. I pulled myself higher up on the cool cement staircase, but my rigid spine stayed straight- like a ruler had been stuck up my shirt.

Finally, irritated with myself, I decided to hide deeper into the dark. I tried the door at the top of the stairs, and it creaked open without a hitch. I happily let myself in, but grew wary as soon as I glanced around.

It seemed like my eyes had been switched to the “sleep” setting because I was unable to grasp any tiny shard of light from anywhere. It was obvious the motel hadn’t been in use for years, because dust coated the place. Thank my lucky stars I had my camera. Sure, a flashlight would’ve been better, but the light generated from the flash worked better than nothing. I had some candles and a lighter that I had stuck on the inside pocket of my backpack on one of my failed attempts at running away, but I was too sleepy to use them properly. Gladly, I was too cautious to even risk burning down the building. The episode the candles were from was one that had only made it a few blocks away. This venture away was so seemingly far in the future, I occasionally hesitated to step forward.

I checked the time. Sure enough, it was hours after I had left, and the time was quickly waning until dawn. Meanwhile, I was so exhausted, my eyelids were weighed down. Even thinking of trying to climb the stairs to a bed made me sigh. Rolling my eyes at my own tiredness, I decided one thing for sure: it was time for bed. Sleep was calling me.

I found a soft spot of carpet and couch cushions behind a desk. The fake-gold-plated nametag read “manager.”x There appeared to be a yellowed guest list sheet on the desk that I would have to look into tomorrow.

After coaxing myself into an uneasy sleep filled with a mysterious dream-sequence of my investigations of the motel, I heard a noise. I jolted myself awake, shaken, and frightened. The thumping had stopped but I realized something different now: a glowing.

I got up, my drowsiness not worn off. After a quick look around, I started to shake. The heat causing a stress-attack was common in the southern most parts of Florida. I tried to calm myself by singing, but my shuddery voice didn't help. I wouldn't stop shaking until I found the un-named source of the light.

It was an odd glinting light, kind of multi-colored fluorescent. The gleaming was coming from the opposite direction of where I had entered. Normally I would've been scared to the bone by now, or at least back asleep, seeing how worn out I was. But this was different. It was no longer the dead of the night, and no one had stepped foot in this old motel for a decade at least- that I could be sure of.

So, with all alarming thoughts left behind, I started cautiously into the motel. Luckily, it was a small place, and the trip to the front door wasn't nearly as terrifying as I had expected.

Stupidly, I had left my camera in the back room, so after feeling around a little, I discovered the door. I slipped out into the surprisingly cool night, but didn't shut the door behind me. Thankfully, I wasn't that foolish- what if it had locked behind me? The glow increased outside, and I was puzzled until I looked up.

I gasped when I located the source of the light. A huge array of neon rainbow lights was twisted into a sign. It was just as bright and beautiful as the moon. The sign read "The Islamorada Gator Motel."

#### Chapter Four-

I could've stared at that sign for hours. Its grandeur was mesmerizing. The blazing lights would flicker, and then come on again sometimes; but otherwise, the thousands of tiny bulbs burned on through the dead night and on till the morning. It was shocking to see something so simple as all those dazzling lights twinkling at the same time to turn into something so beautiful. The mere idea of all those minuscule dull lights working together in harmony created a gorgeously blinding show was amazing. It was perfect proof that if us humans worked together so seamlessly, like these lights, maybe we could make Islamorada into a safer town.

As I sat there, gazing up at the starry show, I thought about Islamorada. I've been told time and time again that there's nothing we can do. "It's just one unimportant town in southern Florida,

honey. There isn't nothing we can do 'bout them gators," Auntie Louisa's neighbor, who I called Tiny had once said. I had always thought that was just one of Tiny's infamous eccentricities. They also included being extremely superstitious. She wouldn't shake out a rug in the month of May if her life depended on it; if a clump of seagulls happened to fly above on a clear day, it meant a death was coming; and most odd of all, she bred grasshoppers because she believed they were good luck. But more to the point, one of her superstitions included alligators.

Tiny was deathly afraid of alligators. She'd shriek with the shrillness mustered only by an insane fear, and her face would go white with a ghost-like chalky expression whenever one crossed her path. She'd lived in Cuba her whole life and never happened upon a gator, so when she came to Islamorada, she'd freaked and stayed inside for the whole month of July, terrified. Her petrified state of mind had gotten serious, and her hermit tendencies had forced someone to take control. My aunt had given her therapy sessions for years, and finally, one hot August day, she'd ventured out to get her ever-growing pile of mail heaped on the front stoop.

Now, Tiny was crazy about her family back in Cuba- she talked about them on and on, to anyone who would listen. She especially favored her cousin, Coleman. But sadly, sifting through the junk on her front porch that day, she'd found a notice declaring the death of Coleman. Tiny had cried for weeks on end until she found the letter left to her name from Coleman, sitting under a pile of lawn-mowing adds. It contained news of an ancient Cuban family superstition about alligators, warning her about the dangers of the scaly beasts living in the Florida Key where she'd settled.

Well Tiny, believing any and everything her older cousin Coleman said had begun to prepare for the gators. She was convinced that the Islamorada town was cursed with angry souls, and because of the jinx, the terrifying reptiles had been dumped in Florida to terrorize the citizens day in and day out. Tiny also suspected that the only way to get rid of the gators was to feed them endlessly, until they got sick and shriveled up.

The myth said to feed the gators you needed eight hispid cotton rats, their favorite food. After all the eight rats were gone, you had to throw a pail of hot water over your shoulder at the alligator, as to wake up the spirit living inside the creature. It had to be dark, so the spook could light its way back to the present time with glowing embers. When all was done, the vexed spirit would crawl out of the gator, and become human again. This process was to be taken care of very carefully, because everything had to be just so. Finally, once the affair was completed, the alligator would live for exactly twelve more hours, and when the last second had been concluded, the monster's body would wither up into little more than dust.

## Chapter Five-

I realized I had been lost in reminiscing for hours now. As the pale dawn sun rose, I gaped at the sign. After staring fixedly at it for such a long length of time, you'd think I'd be bored-but I wasn't. But, now, gawking at the sign seemed silly. The lights were no longer lit, and it seemed a frivolous thing to spend my time on now.

The sun crept slowly above the horizon, and I remembered last night's crazy thoughts of Tiny and alligator superstitions as I had half-dreamed myself into an odd slumber on the front stoop of the motel.

I picked myself up, and decided to proceed back into the depths of the motel to gather my things. My peculiar trance last night had helped me to make my decision: I would go back to my cousins and Auntie Louisa. My pointless adventures were useless now. I had slept in an abandoned, haunted motel for a night, and that was all well and good, but my family needed me home now. I wondered, typically if they'd found my note by now, explaining my sudden leave and need for a quest of some sort.

Missing Costello was one thing, but foolishly throwing all I had- a safe roof to sleep under, and yummy pasta, so I'd been craving- was stupid. Costello was gone forever. There was one seldom way to find him, and there was no way in hell I was going down that road. Sure, I'd thought about it before, but it was crazy. Wasn't it?

## Chapter Six-

I was sure my lungs had frozen. The blood pumping to my heart turned to ice; yet my palms and face were white hot. *What's happening to me?* I remember wondering, my dizzying thoughts spinning.

When I first felt the claw on my ankle, I barely moved. For a fraction of a second, I was remotely still. That's when I snapped. *I'm hysterical*, I thought, hopefully. Or maybe I'm hallucinating. Sure I'd had my encounters with the average Islamorada gator, just like any aged citizen. Even some extremely trying consequences...

But this was different, for one reason, and one reason only. I knew, not by even turning around, that this was one was enormous. By subtly glancing at the scaly talon placed strategically on my right shoulder, I noticed the disgusting thick pale green hide; all five of the yellowed nails; and the extremely terrifying grip it had on my arm. This one colossal alligator had the force to kill me. And it wasn't afraid to.

I observed all of this in one single moment. A lot can happen when you see your life flashing before your eyes. But of course one glum closing thought floated through my mind, a question more specifically: How could I be so stupid? An abandoned motel? In the southernmost tip of Florida? Where alligators under the blistering sun were as common as flies? The Islamorada Gator Motel was a perfect breeding spot for the gators.

Auntie Louisa had always warned me of such dangers when I was littler, teaching me the most common places to find a gators, and how to escape if one ever got near to me, but I had always sullenly rolled my eyes, and gazed longingly outside, wishing I could go out and play in the ocean.

Aunt Louisa's paranoid lessons of gator etiquette had been as dull as anything, but a mysterious second meaning was terrifyingly shaded behind them- Costello.

Finally the realization of the alligator's claw on my shoulder seemed like a sign from some higher power. It was August 11th.

#### Chapter Seven-

It was a searingly hot afternoon, in late summer-August 11th to be exact. We had decided to take a trip down to Glinda's swamp; this was, of course back when the alligators weren't such a threat. More like a tacky, tourist-y type animal. I was about thirteen, making Costello fifteen. Auntie Louisa had taken us, and our cousins down to picnic and swim on the banks of the lake. The only way to keep cool in such weather was to swim, she'd always said. Funny that after that day, I haven't swum since.

"Nala!" Costello had called out. "Watch!" He dove into the sea, and a few seconds later, his legs popped up opposite the waves. Costello was always into tricks, and handstands were his latest favorite.

I threw my head back and laughed. Dropping my tuna fish sandwich on the sandy blanket, I ran into the foamy Florida drink to join him. After many failed attempts at handstands, I shook my hair off, and wiped the salt water off my face. I loved taking walks down the beach, especially when the sun was setting. It was almost time, so I told Costello I'd catch up with him in bit. He protested, begging me to play with him some more. But I shrugged him off, promising to bring him back a shell.

The beaming afternoon sun turned lazy, slowly sinking below the splashy horizon. I had walked a long way up the beach, about to give up when I found the perfect shell. It was Costello's favorite kind- shimmery, with a swirly detail. I tilted it back and forth, watching the glittery color

change with each dark beam of light.

Deciding to head back, I dragged myself back up the beach towards Auntie Louisa, my cousins, and Costello. I remember thinking, what a perfect day.

I was nearly back, when I heard the shouts. Of course I saw the silhouettes first, the shadow bouncing off the oddly rough waterfront. But when I heard Auntie Louisa's ragged scream, I knew something awful had happened.

I broke into a sprint, my feet leaving barren footprints behind. The constant slap sounding each time I took a step. I reached the bay quickly; I had always been a fast runner. I collapsed a few yards away from the spot where we had picnicked earlier, my lungs gasping for air.

When I gazed up and saw the blood gushing into the waves, I knew it was over. Clumps of blood were everywhere; I had never seen so much red. I seemed as though I had stepped into a parallel universe where the world was just shades of red.

I couldn't bear to see all this red anymore. I closed my eyes and sank to the sand. I lay beside him, silently taking his hand. I didn't make any noise- didn't talk, didn't cry, as if somehow that would make it true. It's so hard to gauge the pain I felt then. With blood and salt water rushing over me, the seagulls calling gaily to each other, and my dead brother's hand in mine.

Chapter Eight-

Deja vu lapsed over me, my eyes unblinking. I shifted my body, slowly, turning towards the alligator. Gazing into its giant ominous eyes, I smiled. August 11th, my time had come. Take me to Costello, I silently willed the gator, and closed my eyes.