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The WEREWOLF of FEVER SWAMP

R. L. STINE

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The WEREWOLF of FEVER SWAMP

R.L. STINE

SCHOLASTIC INC.
NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON AUCKLAND
SYDNEY MEXICO CITY NEW DELHI HONG KONG

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1

We moved to Florida during Christmas vacation. A week later, I heard the frightening howls in the swamp for the first time.

Night after night, the howls made me sit up in bed. I would hold my breath and wrap my arms around myself to keep from shivering.

I would stare out my bedroom window at the chalk-colored full moon. And I would listen.

What kind of creature makes such a cry? I would ask myself.

And how close is it? Why does it sound as if it's right outside my window?

The wails rose and fell like police car sirens. They weren't sad or mournful. They were menacing.

Angry.

They sounded to me like a warning. *Stay out of the swamp. You do not belong here.*

When my family first moved to Florida, to our new house at the edge of the swamp, I couldn't wait to explore. I stood in the backyard with the binoculars my dad had given me for my twelfth birthday and gazed toward the swamp.

Trees with slender white trunks tilted over each other. Their flat, broad leaves appeared to form a roof, covering the swamp floor in blue shadow.

Behind me, the deer paced uneasily in their wire-mesh pen. I could hear them pawing the soft, sandy ground, rubbing their antlers against the walls of their pen.

Lowering my binoculars, I turned to look at them. The deer were the reason we had moved to Florida.

You see, my dad, Michael F. Tucker, is a scientist. He works for the University of Vermont in Burlington, which, believe me, is a *long* way from the Florida swamps!

Dad got these six deer from some country in South America. They're called swamp deer. They're not like regular deer. I mean, they don't look like Bambi. For one thing, their fur is very red, not brown. And their hooves are really big and kind of webbed. For walking on wet, swampy ground, I guess.

Dad wants to see if these South American swamp deer can survive in Florida. He plans to put little radio transmitters on them and set them free in the swamp. Then he'll study how they get along.

When he told us back in Burlington that we were moving to Florida because

of the deer, we all totally freaked. We didn't want to move.

My sister, Emily, cried for days. She's sixteen, and she didn't want to miss her senior year in high school. I didn't want to leave my friends, either.

But Dad quickly got Mom on his side. Mom is a scientist, too. She and Dad work together on a lot of projects. So, of course, she agreed with him.

And the two of them tried to persuade Emily and me that this was the chance of a lifetime, that it was going to be really exciting. An adventure we'd never forget.

So here we were, living in a little white house in a neighborhood of four or five other little white houses. We had six weird-looking red deer penned up behind the house. The hot Florida sun was beaming down. And an endless swamp stretched beyond our flat, grassy backyard.

I turned away from the deer and raised the binoculars to my face. "Oh," I cried out as two dark eyes seemed to be staring back at me.

I pulled the binoculars away and squinted toward the swamp. In the near distance I saw a large white bird on two long, spindly legs.

"It's a crane," Emily said. I hadn't realized Emily had stepped up beside me. She was wearing a sleeveless white T-shirt and red denim shorts. My sister is tall and thin and very blond. She looks a lot like a crane.

The bird turned and began high-stepping toward the swamp.

"Let's follow it," I said.

Emily made her pouting face, an expression we'd all seen a lot of since moving down here. "No way. It's too hot."

"Aw, come on." I tugged her skinny arm. "Let's do some exploring, check out the swamp."

She shook her head, her white-blond ponytail swinging behind her. "I really don't want to, Grady." She adjusted her sunglasses on her nose. "I'm kind of waiting for the mail."

Since we're so far from the nearest post office, we only get mail two times a week. Emily had been spending most of her time waiting for the mail.

"Waiting for a love letter from Martin?" I asked with a grin. She hated when I teased her about Martin, her boyfriend back in Burlington. So I teased her as often as I could.

"Maybe," she said. She reached out with both hands and messed up my hair. She knows I hate to have my hair messed up.

"Please?" I pleaded. "Come on, Emily. Just a short walk. Very short."

"Emily, take a short walk with Grady," Dad's voice broke in. We turned to see him inside the deer pen. He had a clipboard in one hand and was going from deer to deer, taking notes. "Go ahead," he urged my sister. "You're not doing anything else."

"But, Dad —" Emily could whine with the best of them when she wanted.

“Go ahead, Em,” Dad insisted. “It will be interesting. More interesting than standing around in the heat arguing with him.”

Emily pushed the sunglasses up again. They kept slipping down her nose. “Well ...”

“Great!” I cried. I was really excited. I’d never been in a real swamp before. “Let’s go!” I grabbed my sister’s hand and pulled.

Emily reluctantly followed, a fretful expression on her face. “I have a bad feeling about this,” she muttered.

My shadow slanting behind me, I hurried toward the low, tilting trees. “Emily, what could go wrong?” I asked.

2

It was hot and wet under the trees. The air felt sticky against my face. The broad palm leaves were so low, I could almost reach up and touch them. They nearly blocked out the sun, but shafts of yellow light broke through, beaming down on the swamp floor like spotlights.

Scratchy weeds and fern leaves brushed against my bare legs. I wished I'd worn jeans instead of shorts. I kept close to my sister as we made our way along a narrow, winding trail. The binoculars, strapped around my neck, began to feel heavy against my chest. I should've left them at home, I realized.

"It's so noisy here," Emily complained, stepping over a decaying log.

She was right. The most surprising thing about the swamp was all the sounds.

A bird trilled from somewhere above. Another bird replied with a shrill whistle. Insects chattered loudly all around us. I heard a steady *tap-tap-tap*, like someone hammering on wood. A woodpecker? Palm leaves crackled as they swayed. Slender tree trunks creaked. My sandals made *thup thup* sounds, sinking into the marshy ground as I walked.

"Hey, look," Emily said, pointing. She pulled off her dark glasses to see better.

We had come to a small, oval-shaped pond. The water was dark green, half hidden in shade. Floating on top were white water lilies, bending gracefully over flat green lily pads.

"Pretty," Emily said, brushing a bug off her shoulder. "I'm going to come back here with my camera and take pictures of this pond. Look at the great light."

I followed her gaze. The near end of the pond was darkened by long shadows. But light slanted down through the trees at the other end, forming what looked like a bright curtain that spilled into the still pond water.

"It is kind of cool," I admitted. I wasn't really into ponds. I was more interested in wildlife.

I let Emily admire the pond and the water lilies a little longer. Then I headed around the pond and deeper into the swamp.

My sandals slapped over the wet ground. Up ahead, a swarm of tiny gnats, thousands of them, danced silently in a shaft of sunlight.

"Yuck," Emily muttered. "I hate gnats. It makes me itchy just to look at

them.” She scratched her arms.

We turned away — and both saw something scamper behind a fallen moss-covered log.

“Hey — what was *that*?” Emily cried, grabbing my elbow.

“An alligator!” I shouted. “A hungry alligator!”

She uttered a short, frightened cry.

I laughed. “What’s your problem, Em? It was just some kind of lizard.”

She squeezed my arm hard, trying to make me flinch. “You’re a creep, Grady,” she muttered. She scratched her arms some more.” “It’s too itchy in this swamp,” she complained. “Let’s head back.”

“Just a little bit farther,” I pleaded.

“No. Come on. I really want to get back.” She tried to pull me, but I backed out of her grasp. “Grady —”

I turned and started walking away from her, deeper into the swamp. I heard the *tap-tap-tap* again, directly overhead. The low palm leaves scraped against each other, shifting in a soft, wet breeze. The shrill chittering of the insects grew louder.

“I’m going home and leaving you here,” Emily threatened.

I ignored her and kept walking. I knew she was bluffing.

My sandals crackled over dried, brown palm leaves. Without turning around, I could hear Emily a few steps behind me.

Another little lizard scampered across the path, just in front of my sandals. It looked like a dark arrow, shooting into the underbrush.

The ground suddenly sloped upward. We found ourselves climbing a low hill into bright sunlight. A clearing of some sort.

Beads of sweat ran down my cheeks. The air was so wet, I felt as if I were swimming.

At the top of the hill, we stopped to look around. “Hey — another pond!” I cried, running over fat yellow swamp grass, hurrying up to the water’s edge.

But this pond looked different.

The dark green water wasn’t flat and smooth. Leaning over it, I could see that it was murky and thick, like split-pea soup. It made disgusting gurgling and plopping sounds as it churned.

I leaned down closer to get a better look.

“It’s quicksand!” I heard Emily cry in horror.

And then two hands shoved me hard from behind.

3

As I started to fall into the bubbling green stew, the same hands grabbed my waist and pulled me back.

Emily giggled. “Gotcha!” she cried, holding on to me, keeping me from turning around and slugging her.

“Hey — let go!” I cried angrily. “You almost pushed me into *quicksand*! That’s not funny!”

She laughed some more, then let me go. “It isn’t quicksand, dork,” she muttered. “It’s a bog.”

“Huh?” I turned to stare into the gloppy green water.

“It’s a bog. A peat bog,” she repeated impatiently. “Don’t you know anything?”

“What’s a peat bog?” I asked, ignoring her insults. Emily the Know-It-All. She’s always bragging about how she knows everything and I’m a stupid clod. But she gets B’s in school, and I get A’s. So who’s the smart one?

“We learned about this last year when we studied the wetlands and rain forests,” she replied smugly. “The pond is thick because it has peat moss growing in it. The moss grows and grows. It absorbs twenty-five times its own weight in water.”

“It’s gross-looking,” I said.

“Why don’t you drink some and see how it tastes,” she urged.

She tried to push me again, but I ducked and skirted away. “I’m not thirsty,” I muttered. I realize it wasn’t too clever, but it was the best reply I could think of.

“Let’s get going,” she said, wiping sweat off her forehead with her hand. “I’m really hot.”

“Yeah. Okay,” I reluctantly agreed. “This was a pretty neat walk.”

We turned away from the peat bog and started back down the hill. “Hey, look!” I cried, pointing to two black shadows floating high above us under a white cloud.

“Falcons,” Emily said, shielding her eyes with one hand as she gazed up. “I *think* they’re falcons. It’s hard to see. They sure are big.”

We watched them soar out of sight. Then we continued down the hill, making our way carefully on the damp sandy ground.

At the bottom of the hill, back under the deep shade of the trees, we

stopped to catch our breath.

I was really sweating now. The back of my neck felt hot and itchy. I rubbed it with one hand, but it didn't seem to help.

The breeze had stopped. The air felt heavy. Nothing moved.

Loud cawing sounds made me glance up. Two enormous blackbirds peered down at us from a low branch of a cypress tree. They cawed again, as if telling us to go away.

"This way," Emily said with a sigh.

I followed her, feeling prickly and itchy all over. "I wish we had a swimming pool at our new house," I said. "I'd jump right in with my clothes on!"

We walked for several minutes. The trees grew thicker. The light grew dimmer. The path ended. We had to push our way through tall, leafy ferns.

"I — I don't think we've been here before," I stammered. "I don't think this is the right way."

We stared at each other, watching each other's face fill with fright.

We both realized we were lost. Completely lost.

4

“I don’t *believe* this!” Emily shrieked.

Her loud shout made the two blackbirds flutter off their tree limb. They soared away, cawing angrily.

“What am I *doing* here?” she cried. Emily is not good in emergencies. When she got a flat tire during one of her first driving lessons back home in Burlington, she jumped out of the car and ran away!

So I didn’t exactly expect her to be calm and cool now. Since we were totally lost in the middle of a dark, hot swamp, I expected her to panic. And she did.

I’m the calm one in the family. I take after Dad. Cool and scientific. “Let’s just figure out the direction of the sun,” I said, ignoring the fluttering in my chest.

“What sun?” Emily cried, throwing her hands up.

It was really dark. The palm trees with their wide leaves formed a pretty solid roof above us.

“Well, we could check out some moss,” I suggested. The fluttering in my chest was growing stronger. “Isn’t moss supposed to grow on the north side of the trees?”

“East side, I think,” Emily muttered. “Or is it the west?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s the north,” I insisted, gazing around.

“Pretty sure? What good is pretty sure?” Emily cried shrilly.

“Forget the moss,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’m not even sure what moss looks like.”

We stared at each other for a long time.

“Didn’t you used to carry a compass with you wherever you went?” Emily asked, sounding a little shaky.

“Yeah. When I was four,” I replied.

“I can’t believe we were so stupid,” Emily wailed. “We should have worn one of the radio transmitters. You know. For the deer. Then Dad could track us down.”

“I should have worn jeans,” I muttered, noticing some tiny red bumps along my calf. Poison ivy? Some kind of rash?

“What should we do?” Emily asked impatiently, wiping sweat off her

forehead with her hand.

“Go back up the hill, I guess,” I told her. “There were no trees there. It was sunny. Once we see where the sun is, we can figure out the direction to get back.”

“But which way is the hill?” Emily demanded.

I spun around. Was it behind us? To our right? A cold chill ran down my back as I realized I wasn’t sure.

I shrugged. “We’re really lost,” I murmured with a sigh.

“Let’s go this way,” Emily said, starting to walk away. “I just have a feeling this is the way. If we come to that bog, we’ll know we’re going right.”

“And if we don’t?” I demanded.

“We’ll come to something else, maybe,” she replied.

Brilliant.

But I didn’t see any good in arguing with her. So I followed.

We walked in silence, the shrill ringing of the insects on all sides, the calls of birds startling us from above. After a short while, we pushed our way through a clump of tall, stiff reeds.

“Have we been here before?” Emily asked.

I couldn’t remember. I pushed a reed away to step through and realized it had left something sticky on my hand. “Yuck!”

“Hey, look!” Emily’s excited cry made me glance up from the sticky green gunk that clung to my hand.

The bog! It was right in front of us. The same bog we had stopped at before.

“Yay!” Emily cried. “I *knew* I was right. I just had a feeling.”

The sight of the gurgling green pond cheered us both up. Once past it, we began to run. We knew we were on the right path, nearly home.

“Way to go!” I cried happily, running past my sister. “Way to go!”

I was feeling really good again.

Then something reached up, grabbed my ankle, and pulled me down to the swampy ground.

5

I hit the ground hard, landing on my elbows and knees.

My heart leaped into my mouth.

I tasted blood.

“Get up! Get up!” Emily was screaming.

“It — it’s got me!” I cried in a tight, trembling voice.

The fluttering in my chest had become a pounding. Again, I tasted blood.

I raised my eyes to see Emily laughing.

Laughing?

“It’s just a tree root,” she said, pointing.

I followed the direction of her finger — and instantly realized I hadn’t been pulled down. I had tripped over one of the many upraised tree roots that arched over the ground.

I stared at the bonelike root. It was bent in the middle and looked like a skinny white leg.

But what was the blood I tasted?

I felt my aching lip. I had bitten it when I fell.

With a loud groan, I pulled myself to my feet. My knees ached. My lip throbbed. Blood trickled down my chin.

“That was pretty clumsy,” Emily said softly. And then she added, “Are you okay?” She brushed some dried leaves off the back of my T-shirt.

“Yeah, I guess,” I replied, still feeling a little shaky. “I really thought something had grabbed me.” I forced a laugh.

She rested a hand on my shoulder, and we started walking again, slower than before, side by side.

Slender beams of light poked down through the thick tree leaves, dotting the ground in front of us. It all looked unreal, like something in a dream.

Some creature scampered noisily behind the tangle of low shrubs at our right. Emily and I didn’t even turn to try to see it. We just wanted to get home.

It didn’t take us long to realize we were headed in the wrong direction.

We stopped at the edge of a small, round clearing. Birds chattered noisily above us. A light breeze made the palm leaves scrape and creak.

“What are those huge gray things?” I asked, lingering behind my sister.

“Mushrooms, I think,” she replied quietly.

“Mushrooms as big as footballs,” I murmured.

We both saw the small shack at the same time.

It was hidden in the shadow of two low cypress trees beyond the field of giant mushrooms at the other side of the clearing.

We both gaped at it in surprise, studying it in shocked silence. We took a few steps toward it. Then a few more.

The shack was tiny, built low to the ground, not much taller than me. It had some kind of thatched roof, made of long reeds or dried grass. The walls were made of layers of dried palm leaves.

The door, built of slender tree limbs bound together, was shut tight. There were no windows.

A pile of gray ashes formed a circle a few yards from the door. Signs of a campfire.

I saw a pair of battered old workboots lying at the side of the shack. Beside them were several empty tin cans on their sides and a plastic water bottle, also empty, partly crumpled.

I turned to Emily and whispered, “Do you think someone lives here? In the middle of the swamp?”

She shrugged, her features tight with fear.

“If someone lives here, maybe he can tell us which way to go to get home,” I suggested.

“Maybe,” Emily murmured. Her eyes were straight ahead on the tiny shack covered in blue shadow.

We took another couple of steps closer.

Why would someone want to live in a tiny shack like this in the middle of a swamp? I wondered.

An answer flashed into my mind: *Because whoever it is wants to hide from the world.*

“It’s a hideout,” I muttered, not realizing I was speaking out loud. “A criminal. A bank robber. Or a *killer*. He’s hiding here.”

“*Sshhh*.” Emily put a finger on my mouth to silence me, hitting the cut on my lip. I pulled away.

“Anyone home?” she called. Her voice came out low and shaky, so low, I could barely hear her. “Anyone home?” she repeated, a little more forcefully.

I decided to join in. We shouted together: “Anyone home? Anyone in there?”

We listened.

No reply.

We stepped up to the low door.
“Anyone in there?” I called one more time.
Then I reached for the doorknob.

6

Just as I was about to pull open the crude wooden door, it swung out, nearly hitting us both. We leaped back as a man burst out from the dark doorway of the hut.

He glared at us with wild black eyes. He had long gray-white hair, down past his shoulders, tied behind him in a loose ponytail.

His face was bright red, sunburned, maybe. Or maybe red from anger. He stared at us with a menacing scowl, standing bent over, stooped from being inside the low hut.

He wore a loose-fitting white T-shirt, dirt-stained and wrinkled, over heavy black trousers that bagged over his sandals.

As he glared at us with those amazing black eyes, his mouth opened, revealing rows of jagged yellow teeth.

Huddling close to my sister, I took a step back.

I wanted to ask him who he was, why he lived in the swamp. I wanted to ask if he could help us find our way back home.

A dozen questions flashed through my mind.

But all I could utter was, “Uh ... sorry.”

Then I realized that Emily was already running away. Her ponytail flew behind her as she dived through the tall weeds.

And a second later, I was running after her. My heart pounded. My sandals squished over the soft ground.

“Hey, Emily — wait up! Wait up!”

I ran over the rough carpet of dead leaves and twigs.

As I struggled to catch up to her, I glanced behind me — and cried out in terror. “Emily — he’s *chasing* us!”

7

Bent low to the ground, the man from the hut moved steadily after us, taking long strides. His hands bobbed at his sides. He was breathing hard, and his mouth was open, revealing the jagged teeth.

“Run!” Emily cried. “Run, Grady!”

We were following a narrow path between tall weeds. The trees thinned out. We ran through shadow and sunlight and back into shadow.

“Emily — wait up!” I called breathlessly. But she didn’t slow down.

A long, narrow pond appeared to our left. Strange trees lifted up from the middle of the water. The slender trunks were surrounded by a thicket of dark roots. Mangrove trees.

I wanted to stop and look at the eerie-looking trees. But this wasn’t the time for sightseeing.

We ran along the edge of the pond, our sandals sinking into the marshy ground. Then, my chest heaving, my throat choked and dry, I followed Emily as the path curved into the trees.

A sharp pain in my side made me cry out. I stopped running. I gasped for breath.

“Hey — he’s gone,” Emily said, swallowing hard. She stopped a few yards ahead of me and leaned against a tree trunk. “We lost him.”

I bent over, trying to force away the pain in my side. After a short while, my breathing slowed to normal. “Weird,” I said. I couldn’t think of anything else.

“Yeah. Weird,” Emily agreed. She walked back to me and pulled me up straight. “You okay?”

“I guess.” At least the pain had faded away. I always get a pain in my right side when I run a long time. This one was worse than usual. I usually don’t have to run for my life!

“Come on,” Emily said. She let go of me and started walking quickly, following the path.

“Hey, this looks familiar,” I said. I began to feel a little better. I started to jog. We passed clusters of trees and ferns that looked familiar. I could see our footprints in the sandy ground, going the other way.

A short while later, our backyard came into view. “Home sweet home!” I cried.

Emily and I stepped out from the low trees and began running across the grass toward the back of the house.

Mom and Dad were in the backyard setting up outdoor furniture. Dad was lowering an umbrella into the white umbrella table. Mom was washing off the white lawn chairs with the garden hose.

“Hey — welcome back,” Dad said, smiling.

“We thought you got lost,” Mom said.

“We did!” I cried breathlessly.

Mom turned off the nozzle, stopping the spray of water. “You *what?*”

“A man chased us!” Emily exclaimed. “A strange man with long white hair.”

“He lives in a hut. In the middle of the swamp,” I added, dropping down into one of the lawn chairs. It was wet, but I didn’t care.

“Huh? He chased you?” Dad’s eyes narrowed in alarm. Then he said, “I heard in town there’s a swamp hermit out there.”

“Yes, he chased us!” Emily repeated. Her normally pale face was bright red. Her hair had come loose and fell wildly around her face. “It — it was scary.”

“A guy in the hardware store told me about him,” Dad said. “Said he was strange but perfectly harmless. No one knows his name.”

“Harmless?” Emily cried. “Then why did he chase us?”

Dad shrugged. “I’m only repeating what I heard. Evidently he’s lived in the swamp most of his life. By himself. He never comes to town.”

Mom dropped the hose and walked over to Emily. She placed a hand on Emily’s shoulder. In the bright sunlight, they looked like sisters. They’re both tall and thin, with long, straight blond hair. I look more like my dad. Wavy brown hair. Dark eyes. A little chunky.

“Maybe they shouldn’t go back in the swamp by themselves,” Mom said, biting her lower lip fretfully. She started to gather Emily’s hair back up into a ponytail.

“The hermit is supposed to be completely harmless,” Dad repeated. He was still struggling to lower the umbrella into the concrete base. Every time he lowered it, he missed the opening.

“Here, Dad. I’ll help you.” I scooted under the table and guided the umbrella stem into the base.

“Don’t worry,” Emily said. “You won’t catch *me* back in that swamp.” She scratched both shoulders. “I’m going to be itchy for the rest of my life!” she groaned.

“We saw a lot of neat things,” I said, starting to feel normal again. “A peat bog and mangrove trees ...”

“I told you this was going to be an experience,” Dad said, arranging the white chairs around the table.

“Some experience,” Emily grumbled, rolling her eyes. “I’m going in to take a shower. Maybe if I stay in it for an hour or so, I’ll stop itching.”

Mom shook her head, watching Emily stomp toward the back door. “This is going to be a hard year for Em,” she muttered.

Dad wiped his dirty hands on the sides of his jeans. “Come with me, Grady,” he said, motioning for me to follow him. “Time to feed the deer.”

We talked more about the swamp at dinner. Dad told us stories about how they hunted and trapped the swamp deer that he was using for his experiment.

Dad and his helpers searched the South American jungles for weeks. They used tranquilizer guns to capture the deer. Then they had to bring in helicopters to pull the deer out, and the deer were not too happy about flying.

“The swamp you two were exploring this afternoon,” he said, twirling his spaghetti. “Know what it’s called? Fever Swamp. That’s what the local people call it, anyway.”

“Why?” Emily asked. “Because it’s so hot in there?”

Dad chewed and swallowed a mouthful of spaghetti. He had orange splotches of tomato sauce on both sides of his mouth. “I don’t know why it’s called Fever Swamp. But I’m sure we’ll find out eventually.”

“It was probably discovered by a guy named Mr. Fever,” Mom joked.

“I want to go home to Vermont!” Emily wailed.

After dinner, I found myself feeling a little homesick, too. I took a tennis ball out to the back of the house. I thought maybe I could bounce it off the wall and catch it the way I had done back home.

But the deer pen was in the way.

I thought about my two best friends in Burlington, Ben and Adam. We had lived on the same block and used to hang out after dinner. We’d throw a ball around or walk down to the playground and just mess around.

Staring at the deer, who milled silently at one end of the pen, I realized I really missed my friends. I wondered what they were doing right now. Probably hanging out in Ben’s backyard.

Feeling glum, I was about to go back inside and see what was on TV — when a hand grabbed me from behind.

The swamp hermit!