

HELL SWAMP Book Excerpts:

I could hear myself screaming. I snatched out of the fingers' grip and fell. Fell a long way. Then the dirt hit my face. I was being buried alive! I scrambled sideways when I realized The hand wrapped around my throat, the long nails on its fingers cut my skin. I screamed. there was nothing to stop me. When I hit the table, I woke up, piled on the floor with the aloe plant from the bedside table and all its dirt on top of me. The nightmare I'd once had was back and more frightening than ever. I sat up on the floor and spit out dirt, flipping the plant unto the floor. I trembled, realizing I had peed in my pants.

I saw tree limbs hanging out over the river but I was past them before I could react. I soon saw more branches and grabbed at them as they broke off in my fingers. I'm not sure how far I went downstream before I saw the tree, bent far enough into the river I might have a chance to grab something on it. I hit hard when the river suddenly hocked me into a thick limb. I managed to hang on to substantial tree growth by sheer determination. The current was stalwart. If I didn't get to the bank fast, I'd be going on another water ride. I reached deep inside for enough strength to throw my leg over in spite of the river pulling on me. Once on the tree, I shimmied to the bank and stretched out until I caught my breath and calmed profuse shivering.

My eyes peered over the edge of the loft floor and I almost fell backwards. I'm certain my eyes flew out of their sockets and then withdrew as far as unbelief would allow them. Bones. Hair. Teeth. What I'd thought was fertilizer was apparently lime, to keep down odor and rodents. I climbed down once my feet let me, and ran to the Hummer to call Sheriff Gunn. As I dialed the number, pain invaded my eye and the world went dark.

Some folks were already setting up yard decorations for Christmas. Even Mr. Grady went all out. Colored lights that ran back and forth on some kind of netting covered his roof. I looked in my rearview and since nothing was behind me, I stopped in the middle of the road and giggled until I broke out in a full-blown howl. In front of the house a partially inflated and extremely jolly Santa waved at me, and he appeared to be humping Rudolph, well inflated and right in front of him. Next to this inflatable, Frosty and his family came to life in a snow globe. At this point in the inflation process, Frosty's carrot nose seemed firmly wedged in Mrs. Frosty's large white buttress. He grinned to the brims of his top hat.

I jumped to my feet as everyone started to look up and pray, each prayer very loud and different from the next. The prayers reached a fever pitch when the preacher handed Rose a vial, which she held up and poured down her throat. The service crescendoed as Rose Paul Hill let out a yell louder than anyone in the church. I couldn't take my eyes off her. All of a sudden her loose false teeth bounced out of her mouth and across the floor, breaking into several pieces. The room became frighteningly quiet.

Rose fell to the floor; nobody tried to catch her. I worked my way to the end of the pew and ran to the front. The preacher at first seemed delighted that the Spirit moved me—until I stopped and knelt beside Rose.

“What did you drink, Rose?”

“Strychnine.”

“That’s poison!”

“I’m anointed, child. It won’t kill me.” Rose Paul’s unconvincing voice grew weak. I glanced over at her broken dentures, wondering if the dental bill would finish her off. I saw movement under the front pew and blinked several times. My eyes were clear and focused, and, more than likely, outside their sockets.

“Holy Shit!” I yelled out, snatching a raggedy old toupee off a man’s head as he let out a yelp. I threw it at the snake, hoping he’d think it was an animal he could overpower.

It didn’t work. The humongous snake, thicker than my upper arm, came straight toward me. I could see his beady eyes under the hairpiece as he moved swiftly across the wood floor. Grabbing the Glock from under my jacket, I aimed and shot the rattlesnake twice.

“She’s got a gun!”

People screamed and stampeded for the doors. The preacher and some of the men jumped me, wrestled the gun from me, and pinned me to the wood floor. Somebody lifted Rose away from the ruckus.

“What are you doing? A snake under that pew. I killed it for you.”

Preacher Hawfield shrieked into my face, “You imbecile! That snake and all the others are for this worship service!”

All the others?

Two hefty men escorted me out of the church and deposited me in the dirt near my Hummer. One man threw my gun down beside me.

I was still on the ground when Preacher Hawfield appeared again. I thought he’d peck my face with his beak of a nose. “You’re not welcome here. Don’t you ever come back!”