

Island of Shadows

Prologue

February 1957

Keith Jotherwell slowly piloted his motorboat around the bend, out of the marshes and into the tidal creek separating Crane Island from Choke Island and the coast. He'd fished late into the evening—it was pitch dark now—and was well pleased with his catch this early in the season for northeastern Florida: four sea trout, two redfish and one beautiful black drum. He lit a cigarette and steered toward Snook Creek and the Sawpit boat ramp, where he'd pull up and call it a good day.

A flicker of bright orange on the water in the direction of Crane Island caught his eye and he killed his engine. He lifted his seat where he stored foul weather gear and other necessities and rummaged around for his binoculars. Training them on the distant glow, he saw a reflection in the water from what looked like a bonfire on the island. Did he imagine it, or could he hear shouting? He restarted his motor and steered full speed toward the island.

Keith knew no one lived on the island except Fern Dubuisson, an eccentric recluse and a descendant, he'd heard, of French Huguenots who'd sought to colonize northern Florida only to be massacred by the Spanish. It was said she had Timucua blood in her, the largest Native American tribe inhabiting the region before the arrival of the European. She owned the whole island and shot at anyone who tried to set foot on it, calling them poachers, thieves and worse. Once, Keith strayed too close to shore when harvesting oysters, but quickly turned tail as bullets ricocheted off the water around him.

It was general knowledge that Fern lived in a small house her father, long dead, had built without electricity or gas or even running water, instead relying on a deep well he put in. Few people had gone by to check on her over the years, and it wasn't known if she had any relatives or heirs. She frightened people when she walked into town barefoot, across the tidal creek at low tide, and then another three miles to Center Street in town to collect provisions at the shops for the month. Locals noted and commented on her unusually large feet for an otherwise slight person. Her long, wispy, black hair with white streaks hung in clumps around her shoulders and she always wore a white, loose-fitting garment that made her look like a ghostly freak. Stories were told that she did witchcraft on the island or had a secret stash of gold. But no one was brave enough to go and investigate.

Keith drifted until he could get close enough to make out what was on fire and where the flames were coming from. He knew the only structures on the island were the house and an old barn and he didn't

need his binoculars to see the house was aflame. Through the thick canopy of live oaks shrouded in Spanish moss, Keith could see the house in its cleared glade with balls of fire billowing from the windows. He watched the roof collapse, sending embers flying into the air.

“Hey, who’s there?” he yelled. “Can you get to the creek?” He distinctly heard what sounded like gunshots in the distance, maybe on the other side of the island, but not far. “Anyone hear me? Please answer me if you can!” Keith shouted until he was hoarse, realizing it was unlikely anyone could hear him through the crackling roar of the fire which sounded, ironically, like a watery maelstrom, pelting the ground with hailstones.

He didn’t have his walkie-talkie and thought the best he could do was to get to the fire station or sheriff’s office as fast as he could. There was little he could accomplish by himself without knowing the extent of the fire and the dangers. He started his engine and headed at full throttle to the boat ramp and his pickup. He tied the boat up at the dock, thinking he’d collect it later, but as he pulled his pickup out of the parking space, he stopped and lit a cigarette, thinking. He remembered his overnight in the city jail for public drunkenness last summer and also the year before, when Sheriff Higgins arrested him for pocketing a pack of D batteries from Fudd’s Hardware, charges later dropped.

What if they think I had something to do with this, that I might have burned that lady’s place down? Just because I’m reportin’ it doesn’t mean I might not be a suspect. I don’t need that kind of trouble. I’ve snuck onto that island before to go drinking with my brother and fishing buddies.

And other stuff happened, he knew full well, on Claw Island, a small spit of an island in the tidal salt marsh only a stone’s throw from Crane Island. He maneuvered back to hitch up his boat, turned onto the main road and headed home.

Two calls came into the Kincaid Fire Station, one just after ten p.m., the other soon after from homeowners who lived up Snook Creek saying they smelled smoke, that it seemed to be drifting southwesterly from Crane Island. Volunteer Paul Bondi took the calls at the fire station and activated the local siren to alert the other firefighter volunteers on call. Within the hour, a small water tanker truck pulled onto a solid, grassy ledge across the creek from Crane Island to draw water from the creek into two lines hauled to the site. By then, the house had been burning for three to four hours; not much more than smoldering remains were left.

Water flow from the tanker was low, but enough to douse the debris area and aim at hot spots within and around the ruined house. A few nearby trees had scorched trunks but hadn’t been engulfed by wayward embers, and the crew worked the scene to ensure nothing would reignite. An examination of the scene by flashlight didn’t reveal any sign of human bodies. A more thorough investigation would

have to wait until dawn. Thin loops of smoke whisked into the night sky, buoyed by rising winds from across the marshes to the north.

At first light, Sheriff Shad Higgins along with Wilcox County Commissioner Sam Pelotte, a deputy from the Kincaid police, and Fire Chief Alcee Olsen (known as Big Al) arrived on the island with a small team of investigators, including a forensic specialist from the neighboring county. They crossed the creek on a small pontoon boat and made their way through thick underbrush to a path leading to the blackened zone where the house had stood.

“First off, we gotta secure the area and search for any possible human remains inside what was the house,” Big Al said, scanning the debris site. “Miss Fern lived alone out here, as far as I know, and I would hate to think she couldn’t get help if a fire started that she couldn’t put out and she somehow got trapped. If she’s not in the house, we’ll have to search the whole island, see if she’s out there, injured or something.”

“What do you make of this, Al, Sam?” the sheriff asked. “This fire seemed to burn real hot and fast, looks like. All’s left is the brick chimney.” Sheriff Higgins took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. He was tall and slim with a lazy eye that turned outward even when he was looking straight at you, the result of a high school football injury. It was hard to know which eye to address; he’d tease his wife that suspects under interrogation squirmed in their seats, never knowing what he was looking at.

“Hard to say until we go through the ruins. House was wooden clapboard, I believe, and it’s common knowledge the lady who lived here used candles and lanterns since electricity was never put in.” Big Al, true to his name at 6’2” and well over two hundred pounds, tucked his pant legs into his boots with a grunt and started to walk the periphery of the ruins, the others in his wake. “But that don’t explain the pattern here,” he said over his shoulder. “There wasn’t any wind early last night, so if it had been a candle, it wouldn’t have gone up so fast, more like a slow burn. Mighta caught at some curtains, but still.”

The sheriff mulled this over. Arson seemed an unlikely scenario, at least for now. Who’d want to do harm here, anyway? And why now? He strode over to inspect the remains of the brick chimney, noting the charred bits of furniture, blackened ice box, and bits and pieces of cutlery and utensils, all still emitting thin ribbons of dark gray smoke. The smell of wet ash mingled with the earthy scent of the moist, spongy soil and undergrowth of the island. Undeveloped except for the sole occupant’s light footprint, Crane Island was thick with ancient live oaks hung with masses of Spanish moss, low-growing palmettos and webs of tangled vines and thorny shrubs. Immense hollies and stately southern magnolias grew in profusion on the island, their dark, jade-green leaves diffusing an otherworldly aura into the air. Shad Higgins, proud of his fearlessness—he had to be in his line of work—thought how dark it was around the property even in morning light, and he shuddered in spite of himself. Something

didn't feel right here. He saw no sign of human remains in the rubble, but Big Al and his team would comb through to be sure.

Shad took stock of the scene before pivoting toward the only other known structure on the island, a small barn, apparently unscathed, a few hundred feet away. He tugged his flashlight out of his vest pocket and shouldered the door open. Something flew out in a flash at him and the sheriff reflexively stumbled backwards, yanking his gun out of his holster at the same time. He heard laughter behind him and saw a pair of chickens darting away, wings flapping, leaving feathers flying in their wake.

"Well, Sheriff, that's the first time I've seen you take fright from a couple of fowl." One of Big Al's men chuckled and gave him a pat on the back. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone what just happened. I woulda done the same thing. This place gives me the creeps."

"Didn't know she kept any chickens out here on the island. Did give me a bit of a start." Shad poked around inside the barn, but other than old, rusted farm machinery parts, a few gardening tools and scattered seed packets, he didn't see anything of note. He played his flashlight beam around each of the stalls, all empty except for one. Inside that stall, he ran the light over a couple of bales of stacked hay and a pile of coiled, knotted rope. As he turned to leave, he noticed something like the edge of a picture frame jutting out between the bales. Shad gave a good yank and pulled it out.

It was a good-sized drawing under a dusty glass cover, a bird's eye view of the marsh archipelago, done, Shad thought, in pencil or ink. Each cove and stream was captured with masterful precision, the intricate topography of each island portrayed in swirling lines and delicate shading. Shad knew the area well and found everything accurately depicted. *This was one talented artist*, he thought. It was as if the artist had taken flight, soaring above the watery expanse, capturing every detail.

Shad used his sleeve to rub the dirt off a corner and look for a signature but saw none. *Why's this here?* he wondered. He leaned it against the stall wall intending to come back for it later.

He found Fern's vegetable garden on the marsh side of the island, and it seemed to have been well tended until recently. Potatoes, onions, beets, and broccoli were copious, and a dozen other rows had a plethora of winter vegetables and greens. It was a lot of work for one person, let alone a petite lady like Fern. *Where was she now?* People don't disappear one day to the next and their house burn down. They'd have to get to the bottom of this.

As he circled back along the northern edge of the island along the marsh looking for clues—footprints, articles of clothing, any signs of a struggle or skirmish—he stumbled on a small cemetery overgrown with weeds and brush and containing eight or nine gravestones. They were old, weather-worn, the chiseled names and dates barely decipherable, but Shad could see two small ones for infants, both nameless, birth and death dates within days but the years were unreadable, moss-stained and scratched out. Shad wondered if the others might be Fern's parents or other relatives. He made notes

on his notepad, intending to look up names and dates he could make out. He knew little if anything about the strange woman who called Crane Island home, not even who her people might be.

He returned to where Big Al and his men were finishing up at the house. They'd assembled a few undamaged items that might be important to the investigation, including a charred pouch containing an assortment of human or animal teeth. Nothing in the ruins of the house revealed an answer to the mystery, however.

After another day of examining the debris and scouring the rest of Crane Island from end to end, the sheriff, big Al, and his team were baffled. Where was Fern Dubuisson? No remains had been found anywhere, not in the house, not in the barn or the woods around the house or anywhere else. They searched for signs in the marsh and the tidal creek but there was no trace of her. At some point, the drawing Shad had set aside disappeared, collected, he assumed, by one of Big Al's men.

No cause of the fire could be determined. After a few more items for analysis were removed from the scene, the investigation halted and Fern Dubuisson was declared missing.

Keith Jotherwell picked up the newspaper a couple of days later at the Piggly Wiggly. A photograph of the ruined house on Crane Island was on the front page along with a long article, complete with conspiracy theories as to what might have happened. Keith studied the photograph for a long time, finally uttering a quiet curse before folding the paper and stepping out onto his front porch with an inscrutable expression.

A fruitless search, including notices in local as well as state and national newspapers, was conducted over the course of many months, seeking information on any heir or relations Fern Dubuisson might have had. As time passed, the fire and Fern's disappearance from the face of the earth, while not forgotten by the locals, transitioned into myth. For many years, stories were shared, theories debated. Some people thought they might have seen Fern Dubuisson out by the tidal creek or in the marshes. The tale passed down to the next generation. With no legitimate heir laying claim to Crane Island (though many tried, fraudulently), the seven-year statute was invoked, Fern Dubuisson declared dead, and the island transferred into state receivership. While the state debated what to do with the property, Crane Island succumbed to Mother Nature, sinking into a primeval condition with an almost human sigh of relief.