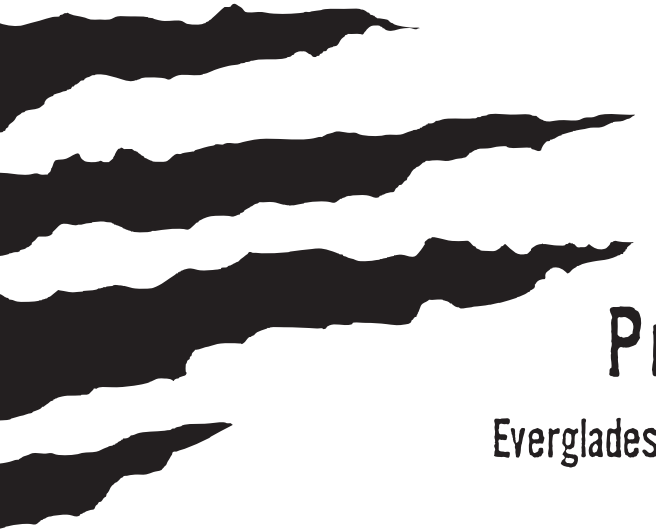

Prologue

Everglades National Park
August

THE BOAT SLID SILENTLY ACROSS THE SURFACE OF THE water. At the stern the man turned the tiller to the left on the nearly silent electric motor. The craft responded instantly and he pointed the bow toward a bank of mangrove trees rising up out of the swamp. After thirty yards, he switched the motor off and the boat floated to a stop, the trees another twenty yards away. He flipped on his infrared night-vision goggles and studied the trees for heat signatures. Scanning from the far left of the tree line, he saw nothing. Then, there it was, a slight movement in the branches of a tree to his right.

The snake was at least twenty to twenty-five feet long. Though reptiles are cold-blooded, it still gave

off some residual heat from the sunlight it absorbed during the day. Besides, the night-vision goggles the man wore were the most advanced in the world. They could detect a heat signature from a burned-out match for three minutes after the flame died. Unlike a warm-blooded mammal, which would show up as bright red in the view-screen, the snake appeared as a light blue image, twisted around the branches of the tree.

He picked up a tablet computer from the console in front of him, touching an icon on the screen. Near the bow of the thirty-foot craft sat two metal cages fastened to the port and starboard sides. Receiving a signal from the tablet, the electronically controlled doors on the cages rose up, and two of his greatest creations, representing years of work, slithered over the sides of the boat and slipped into the water.

Were it daytime, and someone could see the creatures swimming toward the trees, they would look like ordinary alligators. But only at first glance. Both were close to twelve feet long and moved effortlessly through the water. They had the familiar snout and scaly skin with bony ridges along the back.

But a biologist or park ranger or anyone more familiar with the species would immediately notice that these two were different. For one thing, most of their bodies rode above the surface of the water rather than below. This was because their lungs were not like those of a

normal alligator and were more similar to those found in birds, their distant evolutionary relatives. These lungs held more air, making them more buoyant. When swimming, they floated, though they were still capable of diving beneath the water's surface and holding their breath for a long time.

The eyes were different as well: less reptilian, sitting higher on the bony structure of the face, and more similar to those one would find on a bird of prey, like a hawk or eagle. These alligators possessed superior vision and could even see well beneath the water.

But it was what would happen once they left the water that would send a sense of complete and utter awe through anyone who witnessed it.

The two swimming reptiles hesitated for a moment. This was the most critical part of the man's experiment, and he held his breath. Another difference between these creatures and a normal alligator was in their elongated necks. Again, it was similar to a bird's, and they could lift it out of the water, their heads able to move in any direction.

"Come on, my pets," he whispered, his pulse racing. With no movement by his creations, thoughts of failure entered his mind. In the lab tests they almost immediately zeroed in on their prey. He believed he'd done an adequate job of re-creating the conditions they would face once released into the swamp.