

# Controlled Burn

BY NORMAN GERMAN

**T**HE WARDEN GLASSED THE MARSHSCAPE AND SAW TWO egrets rise, green silhouettes in the night-vision binoculars. Then she caught the poachers in the circular field of view. Last week she had cordoned off this sector for a prescribed burn to keep the game reserve in balance.

Cecilia Henderson was named after a road sign. Her father, on a celebratory drunk at her birth, ran into the idea driving to the hospital: Exit 330 CECILIA / HENDERSON, villages north and south of the Atchafalaya Basin Bridge in Louisiana. Descended from the original Hendersons, Odell named his daughter Cecilia simply because he thought it would make a good story.

If Cecilia had heard it from her mother once, she had heard it a thousand times: "Your daddy ain't mean-mean, baby. He's just playful-mean."

When Odell needed beer money, he would take his little girl to help him collect snakes for LSU's herpetologist, Dr. Herbert Truard. Father and daughter did

not actually hunt the snakes. They went about other business — trapping during the day and harvesting catfish from other men's trotlines at night — and bagged snakes as they came upon them. Cecilia enjoyed everything about these trips except her daddy's smearing mud all over her as mosquitoes descended at twilight.

Then Odell vanished. He had disappeared before, staying away for days at a stretch and then showing up with a wad of hundreds and huffing about easy money for offshore work. "Come on, Verline," he'd say, and they would traipse down to Whiskey River Landing till the money gave out.

On the 10th day, however, the family started talking.

"He mighta got caught 'tween the chain and the drill pipe."

"Coulda been beat up at The Landing and th'own out in the hyacinths."

The split-cane rockers creaked doubtfully on weathered boards.

"Or been struck by lightning, bit by a snake or ate by a gator."

When Dr. Truard made it to Henderson, he confirmed what he suspected and made a pact with Cecilia. "Little swamp girl, you have a mind sharper than cottonmouth fangs. If you supply me with snakes for the next few years, I'll get you a fellowship at LSU."

When Cecilia graduated, a professor of marsh ecology recommended her for a position at Sabine Refuge. Harold Benoit, the refuge director, conducted the interview under a moss-bearded chenier oak leaning away from coastal winds. Near the end of the monologue interview, Benoit, reaching for closure, said, "Where you from, Little Bit?"

"The south side of the Atchafalaya Swamp."

To anyone who knew anything, that said it all.

"Well, then." Benoit looked at Cecilia like he had stumbled on a new species. "You're hired." He put his hat on. "You'll

RICK MARTIN



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check licenses, investigate violations and patrol the reserve. But your No. 1 priority is to catch the ghost poacher.”

Cecilia felt like she had been dropped into a *Dukes of Hazzard* episode.

“He’s been haunting me for years. This” — Benoit swept an arm across the marsh — “is where I was raised. And I’m tired of him profanin’ what’s mine.”

“I’ll have him by year’s end,” Cecilia boasted.

“You’d better, girl.” He tipped his hat up. “You don’t and I’ll fire you in the twinkling of a lightning bug’s ass.”

For the first month, Cecilia fought against liking the refuge. There were animals she knew from the basin, but fewer deer and no owls. It was a menacing place of nursery-book clouds frowning into thunderheads and grackles zoot-suiting around for a handout.

Just when she allowed herself to be happy, she saw him for the first time while patrolling the canals around the freshwater sector. He was sliding along in a pirogue, snatching frogs off the bank with a Q-Beam. When she idled up to him, he ground the bow into the mud and stepped off. She chased him slowly, both of them tumbling over clumps of marsh grass, then an airboat roared out of nowhere and whisked him off.

On a 20-degree night Cecilia saw him cast-netting on the Hog Island Gully weir. She pulled her white Explorer onto the parking lot and asked if he knew the cast-netting regulations. He didn’t say a word. When she stepped onto the weir, he dove into the icy water.

Cecilia smoldered with fury throughout the spring. Benoit taunted her, threatening dismissal for incompetence. The profile in the night-vision binoculars jolted her heart. Benoit would fire her if she didn’t catch this poacher soon.

The men were on a point jutting into the ship channel. She stepped toward the pirogue by the wharf. “You morons,” she said. “You’re on foot.”

The poachers were surrounded by water on three sides. If she torched the marsh and caught him, she would lose her job for the unsupervised burn. If she didn’t burn the marsh, he would escape, and Benoit would fire her anyway.

Cecilia ran to the shed and grabbed a drip torch. Soon, flaming gel poured from the nozzle onto the grass. Deciding to not douse herself with Repel, which would hold her body heat like liquid cellophane, she shoved the pirogue off, then lay down and let the outgoing tide take her to the weir. She kept her bearings by the

flickering orange of the western horizon.

Fifteen minutes later, she looked over the side of the pirogue. In the golden aura of a Coleman lantern, he rhythmically swept a 10-foot cast net back and swiveled forward like a discus thrower. The net blossomed like the bell of a huge jellyfish.

Invisible in the blind spot beyond the lantern’s glow, she eased to the weir. A Slim-Jim of a man squatted on the weir fishing tightline, four redfish gasping for water behind him.

Without looking at her, Slim said, “We thought you’d never get here.”

The short one emptied a handful of clicking shrimp into a green ice chest and looked up. Cecilia was shocked by his horrid face, which had been ruined by fire or worse. Then she realized it was a mask of mud protecting him from mosquitoes.

She drew her pistol. “You’re under arrest for at least half a dozen violations.”

Stepping closer to the one she wanted, Cecilia noticed he had lost an eye since their last encounter.

“Shouldn’t draw on a man ’less you got the guts to shoot.” He picked up a white thermos and sucked on the spout, then popped it shut for emphasis. “You’re just posturin’ is what I think.”

He cast the net, then jerked to cinch the hem. After he dropped a dozen 30-count shrimp into the chest, Cecilia stepped forward. In a flash, he swiped her gun and knocked her down, then stood over her, close enough for her to see the gnats crawling on the raw rim of his empty eye socket.

The men tied her up and returned to their business. Mosquitoes drilled into Cecilia’s face as the controlled burn consumed the marsh. She imagined the men would heave her body into the channel like an oyster sack.

After filling both ice chests, they loaded the pirogue.

“Thanks for the transportation,” Slim said over his shoulder. “Woul da been hell hauling them chests back.”

Then she heard a faint humming sound, like distant car tires singing on blacktop. Ahead of the controlled burn, hordes of mosquitoes were rising out of the marsh like a biblical pestilence.

Desperately, to the one who mattered, she said, “You’re a poacher, not a murderer.”

He laughed. “Who said anything about murder?” He took his spent cigarette and flicked it at Officer Henderson, bouncing it off her forehead.

“Yeah,” Slim said, “we usually just take possum cops and set ’em on a channel island, then let the skeeters gnaw on ’em for a day or two.”

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"Tell you what." The short man gathered up the net. "If you throw a better bloom than I do, you go free."

"And if I don't?"

"We'll leave you here and let you inch-worm your way back."

While Slim untied Cecilia, the short one stepped to the water and threw a perfect bloom, then handed the net to the game warden.

Cecilia coiled the throw line, looped the neck, reached down and raised the hem to her mouth, clamping her teeth between two lead weights. Then she grabbed three lengths of the hem in her right hand.

The short man frowned.

Lifting her lips, Cecilia bared her teeth.

"Gimme some room here."

He stepped back, bumping his partner.

"Game wardens don't have to worry about limits," she said.

This offended Slim. "You mean they let you catch as many redfish and shrimps as you want?"

"No, I mean that there's no limit on poachers."

Cecilia pivoted and threw with an expert motion, the net blossoming perfectly over their heads. The ensnared men tottered for a moment and then fell. She bound their legs and wrists. Nearly dehydrated, with inflamed mosquito bites covering every inch of exposed skin, she picked up the thermos.

The short one shrugged his shoulder against a mosquito. "Can I ask you just one thing, little gal?"

Cecilia popped open the spout. "Shoot." Not wanting her lips to touch where his had been, she lifted the thermos and let the water flow into her mouth.

"Who taught you to throw a cast net thataway?"

Cecilia almost choked, then sprayed water all over the man's mud mask. She laughed and stared the legendary poacher right in his missing eye.

"You did, Daddy."

