

GHOST OF A CHANCE

Chapter One

Emma Fitzgerald's rocking chair creaked as she listened to a chorus of crickets holding sway down by the lake. Silent lightning snaked across the sky and angry clouds rolled in behind, toward the island. The approaching storm heightened Emma's senses, imparting a quiet portent of something about to occur.

The storm arrived with thunder booming and lazy raindrops spotting the mosquito netting draping the covered porch. Emma didn't notice, her gaze locked on a point of light far across the lake. Words from behind released her from the spell.

"Miss Emma, you'll catch your death if you don't get in this house. You know it is way past your bedtime."

"It's dry beneath the overhang and I'm not the least bit sleepy. The storm's blowing in and I'm watching that strange light out there."

Pearl Johnson opened the screen door and joined Emma Fitzgerald on the porch. She shivered when thunder rumbled the rafters, causing warm air to surge through the house. With one brown hand she

shielded her eyes from some nonexistent glare and stared toward the direction Emma had pointed.

"I don't see nothing, Miss Emma."

"Then I guess you scared it away."

Pearl frowned and shook her big head. "Come on inside. You been brooding out here since dinner and it's getting late."

Emma glanced at her watch's luminous dial. "Then why are you still here?"

"Cause you're distressing me the way you're acting."

Worry lines on Emma's face softened into a smile. She rose up from the rocking chair and wrapped her rocky arms around the big woman.

"Don't fret over me. I'm too old and ornery to let anything get me down very long, least of all a man. Now you run on home to Raymond before the bottom drops out and drenches that pretty yellow dress of yours."

"You sure?"

Emma pushed Pearl toward the door, waiting until she'd opened the screen and stepped outside. "Sure as this ol' lake's got twelve-foot alligators. Now get on home with you."

Pearl started to say something but shook her head instead and hurried down the stairs. More thunder, closer this time, shook the rafters as the large woman lumbered toward her own house on the far side of the clearing. After Pearl's backside faded into darkness, Emma settled back into the rocking chair and draped a frayed orange Afghan over her knees. This time the meow of a striped kitten broke her trance.

"Tiger, you little rascal. Don't you know cats are supposed to hate rain and thunder?"

Tiger didn't seem to mind the rain, curling up in Emma's lap and closing his eyes. Pearl had gone just in time as falling water swelled into a deafening deluge. The pouring rain pooled up on the roof, finally causing a waterfall to stream from the porch overhang.

Emma watched the storm as Tiger ignored it with a contented purr. Neither moved until the storm had passed, leaving behind full moonlight cloaked in misty haze. Grabbing Tiger by the scruff of his neck, Emma carried him inside and deposited him on his kitty bed beside the stove.

"Enough attention for one day, you little rascal," she said.

Tiger opened his green eyes long enough to nudge his toy mouse before returning to contented sleep.

Emma started for the stairs but stopped at the window, staring at the lake. Again she saw it. The ephemeral glow of circular light had returned, hanging just over dark water. Forgetting her feather bed, she wrapped the Afghan around her shoulders and headed for the door.

The hoot of a distant owl echoed across the clearing as Emma followed the mushy path past the boat dock to the water's edge. Vapor rose off the lake's surface as she stopped beside a pile of brush and stared across the water. Rain had moved north, leaving only dancing shadows to frolic over the lake.

An alligator's knotty head appeared ten feet from Emma muddy slippers but she ignored it. The light floating toward her on a cottony mist had locked her gaze and grew brighter as it approached the bank, the surrounding mist chilling muggy air around her.

Emma's dilated eyes soon recognized the vague outline of a girl's slender body. But something was

wrong. It wasn't a live girl but an apparition surrounded by veils of phosphorescence floating through the fog.

Consumed by clouds fleeing the lake, Emma's sense of reality dimmed, locking her in place as the spirit girl approached. As she came ever nearer, Emma saw her translucent skin and glowing, colorless hair. Even her eyes were colorless. Emma focused on something clutched in the girl's hand.

"Help me," the spirit girl whispered.

Emma reached for her hand but succeeded only in passing her own gnarled fingers through damp mist as darkness engulfed the spirit's waning image. Emma blinked and when she opened her eyes the girl had vanished. Her hand was damp and cold but no longer empty. The object in her hand emitted an eerie pink glow when she opened her palm.

Sounds of damp earth being shoveled, along with light from a different source liberated Emma's attention away from the spirit girl's gift and the beam of a powerful flashlight overpowered its misty incandescence. Squeezing the newly acquired object still fresh in her hand, Emma decided to investigate. When she reached the slough, following a path through a thick maze of creepers and vines, murky shadows replaced moon-bright sky.

She traced the vibrating thread of light through the thicket, locating its origin in a small clearing in the trees. Bracing herself against a cypress trunk, she brushed gray hair from her eyes and caught her breath. Then she saw the large hole in the ground. When a hand touched her shoulder she wheeled around, slipping in the mud as she realized who was with her in the clearing.

"You scared me half to death. I told you to get the hell off my island and never come back."

Instead of an answer, Emma caught the brunt of a shovel across the back of her head. A chorus of bullfrogs began to sing as she toppled into the mire. Miss Emma Fitzgerald never heard them.