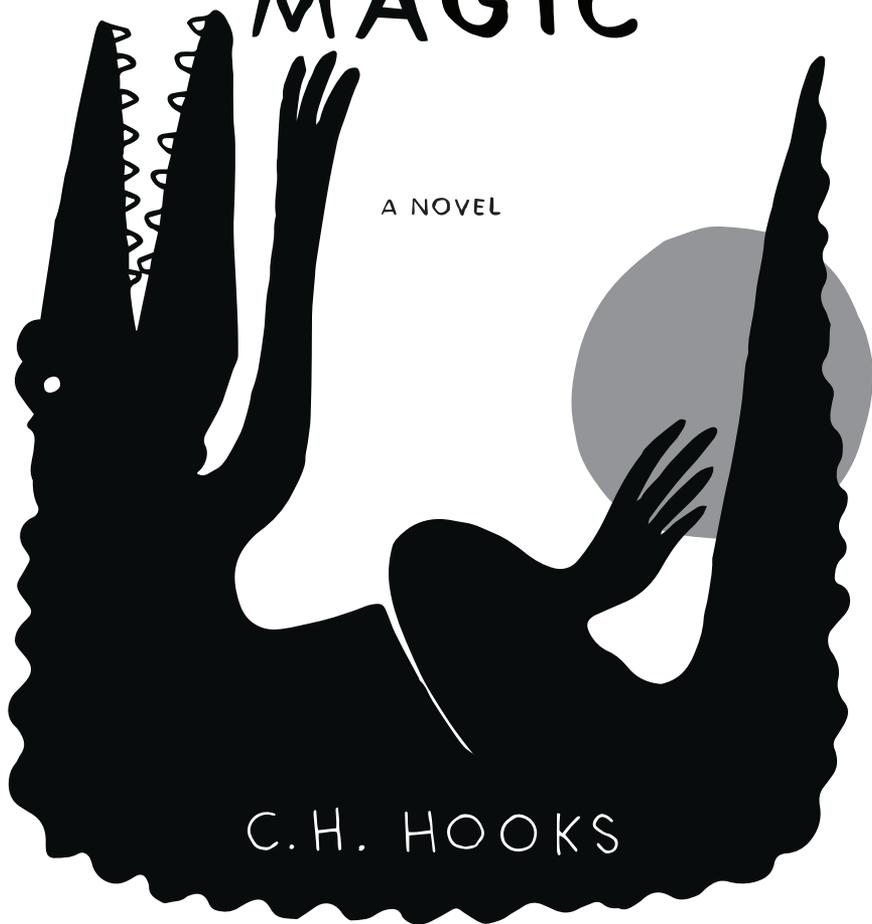


# ALLIGATOR ZOO-PARK MAGIC

A NOVEL



C.H. HOOKS

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# PART 1

*Jeffers - Master Magician*

# 1

Jeffers was looking like a ghost hanging upside down from that big old oak tree, the one we used to swing from out into the spring's cool waters. That tree was there probably a few hundred years not thinking it would ever be used for magic. But there was Jeffers, his nice-guy eyes plugged deep, a sleight of spirit in a head full of hurt. He took in a lifetime of everybody's bad, and made good. He hung by his ankles—all slithered up in rope coils—a bunny wrapped-up in a snake.

"I don't get the trick," some city-boy was saying, still looking down to make sure they'd followed the right directions out into our woods and far out of feeling comfortable.

I don't know that anybody there was knowing what to make of Jeffers in the trees, rope creaking, hanging by his feet in the orangey-pink twilight. People were swatting at their bodies and listening to the crickets and the frogs get their songs started. That little sliver of a moon was peeking through the trees, winking at everybody like it was in on the joke.

There were probably about a few hundred people out in the woods—road leading there was lined with trucks, vans and big-tired trans, and folks were still walking up the road. They brought their beach chairs and picnic blankets. There sure wasn't enough space,

so they just stood around eating buckets of chicken and drinking out of rolling coolers. I cut my nerves with some smoke and hustled through my first couple beers.

Jeffers cut me out. He cut his lady, Miriam, too. We tried asking separate, we tried asking together, but he just shook us off. I don't think he had a real reason other than the need to be alone. He wanted to go solo into the danger of this one, Miriam told me. The only people close to him, he blocked out. Instead, he got Judd. Didn't say why, wouldn't even talk about it, but it pissed me off plenty. Miriam tried to apologize for Jeffers, but didn't even know what to say about it. She didn't know a reason. Just knew I was hurt.

I stared over at Judd for a minute, and he felt me looking. Kept examining the rope in his hand, looking guilty and a little sheepish. I wanted to punch him in the lip, give him something to wipe on his shirtsleeve, to remember me by when I left for good.

Jeffers and me hadn't seen each other in over a week. It was the longest ever that I hadn't seen him since he ran off when we were just kids.

He'd been coming out here practicing for this trick. Wouldn't tell me where he was going when I called. I should've known when I told Miriam I was going swimming and she asked me to go pick her up some beer, instead. She knew I'd do it if she was buying—that I'd end up with some for myself. She never even drank beer. *Tricky, tricky.*

I looked up at the moon again. It wouldn't even shine enough light to let us see the trick. Don't know why we had to have the trick at the last of the light, but it was all on purpose. Jeffers didn't do these things for no reason. One deer-light off Judd's truck was

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pointed straight at Jeffers. Nothing else. It was still too warm for lightning bugs.

Some little hustler was walking around selling baggies like they were popcorn. “Shrooms! Shrooms?” Made me mad at first, then I bought some, pure outta hunger. Wasn’t no need to get bent, things were weird enough. Even still, I popped a couple just to have something to chew on. Folks were always looking to make a buck. I was wondering if Jeffers was getting a cut—when Judd started in.

“Thanks for coming out everybody.” Judd was tall—hunched and hairy—all loose jaws and tall gums. His sleeves were wet, maybe from wiping his mouth, and his shadow looked like it might lurk around in some kid’s bad dream. “Ladies and gentlemens. Jeffers the Magnificent!”

Asshole waved his arm like a showgirl, then tried real hard to get that deer-spot right on Jeffers.

Jeffers looked wild and spooky, like he hadn’t slept in a while.

“Tonight, I’m gone do the biggest trick you ever seen, yet!”

He didn’t look himself. Maybe it was all the blood rushing to his head. Some folks started crowding in. I did too.

“These are some handcuffs from the sheriff!” Jeffers pointed down to Sheriff Chuck. He was eating out of one a them baggies. Taking a nice pinch in his fingers when Judd shined that spot on him. He looked up and smiled and finished the bite while he bobbed his head. Then gave a thumbs-up. Judd shined the light back on Jeffers.

“There’s a whole bundle of gators down there.” Jeffers motioned below. “They might be hungry!”

Judd moved, pointed the light down on the spring. Sure enough, there was a cluster of little shiny eyes. The light went back on Jeffers.

He got to tightening up the handcuffs and held his wrists out to the crowd. The handcuffs were real shiny. Looked like Miriam might've put some glitter paint on them. He showed us the keys to the cuffs, then dropped them in the water.

My buddy Tommy snuck up and nudged me. He whispered, "This shit for real?"

"I don't know." I was happy to start feeling the mushrooms. Knew I was answering honestly.

"Thought you always did?" Tommy was surprised. I was a little, too. "Always did before. You just ain't talking."

"Nope. I'm not in on this one." I pointed over at Judd with my thumb like I was hitching. "His new assistant."

"Huh." Tommy looked over there, his mouth hanging open and wheezing a mix of breath and whisky. "Weird."

Pete walked up and his brother Andy wasn't far behind rolling over another cooler. I was kinda relieved to see them. But there was definitely somebody missing. Miriam stayed home. Said she didn't want to see this one.

Judd hit a button on the tape deck and some techno circus music started pumping out in the crowd. City boys were laughing. Folks weren't taking it seriously, and I felt a little embarrassed for Jeffers. It took him a lot of years to get here. I was a little embarrassed for myself, too.

I heard another familiar voice. But it wasn't human. Wasn't no everyday gator. Sounded like a Cummins diesel wrapped up in gator skin. That bellowing was shaking water and rumbling and I knew then—things weren't right. *Lazarus* was out there in the water. Didn't know how he got there, but he was hungry for sure.

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I swear Jeffers looked down at me. Nodded. When he did, that rope started getting longer. It slipped out faster and folks started freaking a little. I did too. Judd kept on giving him slack and lowering him down even when people started yelling *stop!*

Shadows of all the little gator logs crossed the water and I saw something big walking over top of all those little gators, just like it was walking on water. Lazarus was as big as a gator came and could jump out the water about the same as he was long. Sonofabitch looked like a dog going after a frisbee when he went to meet Jeffers at the end of that rope.

Jeffers gave out one last big moan and Lazarus gave about the same. They flopped in the water with who-on-top-of-who and splashed up a fountain back toward the trees. White cloth flattened on top of the water like a blanket, then made a sad sucking noise when it all got yanked under. For a second it seemed funny, then the whole world twirled around like smoke.

The sun gave out its last little bit of light and quit for the moon to take over for keeps. It didn't even get to set. A cloud covered it up and helped it slink away in secret.

Jeffers had never bullshitted me. He told me this one was going bad for sure. That thought didn't bring any comfort. Just made me feel queasy. I ran over toward the water.

"Judd, shine the light!"

Judd looked as sick and surprised as any, had this real blank face and got startled when I talked at him. He fumbled with the light and pointed it down on the water. All I saw was splashing and a bundle of little gators rearranging after all the excitement, and a stream of bubbles. It could have been the spring welling up or

Jeffers' last breath. I kneeled down on the bank and got the knees of my pants good and muddy trying to digest what I just saw. If Jeffers just got snatched up, there was a small chance he could make it back to the top—if he got the handcuffs off, if he could find which way was up, if he was still in one piece, if Lazarus decided to let him go.

The deer-light went out.

“Judd, keep the light over here!” I turned around and saw taillights where the spot-light had been. Judd was driving off. “Pete, get Chuck!”

But Sheriff Chuck was leaving too. Nobody wanted to wait around to be a witness. People were scrambling out into the woods, trying to get to their cars before the lines of traffic backed up. Everybody wanted to see Jeffers' big trick, but not a soul wanted to be a part of the fallout.

Me and Tommy and Pete and Andy split up on both sides of the bank and started walking down stream. We swatted bushes with sticks, shooin g moccasins and small gators, knowing that if we came across Lazarus he'd probably be sleeping after such a meal. I found a boot, but it wasn't Jeffers'. Pete found nothing and Andy found a car battery. There was no doubting that Lazarus could've dragged Jeffers down in the caverns, no problem. A body could get hung up in there and never come out. But Lazarus would have to come up for air. Lazarus would've been a little more difficult to hide. I fully expected to have to cut him open and find pieces of Jeffers in his belly. Maybe his eyes would still be open, maybe he'd gasp out a last word, tell me what went wrong.

I heard Lazarus before I ever came up on him. Letting loose some big gator groans like he would when he got an upset stomach

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