



GRISLY

His canoe drifted silently along the current's edge. Top water bite for smallmouth at dawn was as good as it got. Water erupted behind a rock-sheltered still spot adjacent to the current as brownie leapt skyward, then dove for its life. *I could spend every morning of my life on Skunk Creek*, he mused. Five minutes later, he freed the twenty-inch, red-eyed warrior and immediately recast downstream.

Skunk Creek. The ancient name was formalized by Thomas Hardly, founder and original resident of namesake Hardlyville, which sits midway between the creek's origin and its merger with a mighty river along the Missouri and Arkansas' border. Heart of the Ozarks. Home to so many clear, karst, limestone bottomed tributaries to larger waters. The Ozarks. Land of beauty and headstrong, independent cusses. Settled by those fleeing structure and order, set on freedom and independence, in a harsh but plentiful landscape. Some God-fearing, others godforsaken, most there by default. The Ozarks. Yet to escape its history, choosing instead to cling to it for sustenance and deep rooting among those who find comfort in such. Skunk Creek, aptly named in that context. As for Thomas Hardly?

Dead. Soon after founding, brutally murdered. Some say worse. No suspects. No motive. No nothing, beyond grieving wife, young daughter, and new village left behind, more than a century past.

Lucas Jones had put in at his secret access spot less than an hour earlier. He could care less about the history but knew firsthand that there was nothing more spectacular than a crisp, clear sunrise in the Ozarks, skimming slowly along a glass-smooth surface of crystal, with mottled rock bottom beneath. Sun creeping over the horizon slanted soft light through trees, bringing a pink glow to most beneath it. A kingfisher screeched, and a plaintiff owl hooted. He even heard a buck deer snort in the foreground. This was indeed a heavenly palate of color, sound, and texture, and it was all his to share with only him or them or that who made it. No, Lucas had not been many places in the world, well, none really, but he would stack up what he was part of this morning with any picture in any magazine he had ever seen. If the fish weren't biting, he would simply sit and drift through it all, hoping that some of it might rub off on him to take home to his wife, Lettie, and their two young'uns. But there was clearly brownie action on this stretch this morning, and he cast his Zara Spook ahead at a slight angle, again along the current's edge between rocks. Nothing this time, but bound to be next.

Lucas Jones lived a simple life. He loved, he fished, he hunted, and he fixed things. There was not a broken object he could not repair. It was the way his mind worked. He could absorb, in a glance, what something looked or worked like, what it had used to look or work like, and how to return it to its original state. This was an innate visioning capacity, as Lucas had barely passed high school. And beyond fixing things, Lucas wasn't much good at anything that could earn him a living or support a family.

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Lucas charged by the hour and worked only when he wanted to, allowing him to pursue his other passions when and however he wished. He generally liked to fish in the morning, hunt during season, and love Lettie whenever she was in the mood. He occasionally got his priorities mixed up a bit, but Lettie always had a way of helping him reorder. This assured him of plenty of time to fix things.

He was a tall, strapping, handsome chunk of manhood, with a disarming smile that served him well when he got in trouble, an occurrence of some frequency. He considered himself the most fortunate human being in the world. He was also a little naive and self-absorbed, rarely innocent, mostly guilty, and occasionally beyond comprehension, his or another's.

This magnificent morning, Lucas rounded a bend left to the facing bluff before noticing the still, graveled campsite across. He would seek to drift by and honor the "do not disturb" sign implied thereon. It was then that a quick glance changed his life forever.

A form extended from the open tent door. It was a body, that of a man—nude, spread eagle, face up, splotted with red. Blood. And closer to the creek's edge, a young woman, similarly adorned.

"Oh, my God," he gasped to no one in particular.

He reluctantly moved closer to inspect the carnage. He pulled ashore and sat in stunned silence. Blood caked along gashes on both throats. Both had been murdered in cold blood and apparently sexually assaulted. Both were shot execution style, single bullet hole in the forehead to certify death. Brutally ravaged bookends to unspeakable acts of violence. Evil doings by evil men. Had to be men, from what he could see.

He sat in the canoe in stunned silence, unsure of what to do next. He threw open the cooler and grabbed a Bud Light. After

three long gulps drained it dry, he grabbed another. It was early, but he had to find a clear thought somewhere.

It was then that he wondered for his own safety. He or they could still be about. He himself was subject to offing for no other reason than wrong place and time. He would even make a fair suspect, if framed properly. He vomited violently, spreading his DNA around the crime scene. He quickly grabbed a third beer to wash away the sour remains in his mouth.

There were, in fact, several pairs of eyes on him as he ruminated over what next.

He quietly pulled his cell phone from a waterproof bag, pushed the “camera” icon, and snuck several photos of the whole bloody mess, including close-ups of the mangled victims. He tried to cover each body as best he could with a single bed roll and several brightly colored beach towels, still scented with soap.

He reboarded his canoe, tucked the rod beneath the bow seat, and shoved into the current, paddling rapidly downstream. He had thought about carrying the bodies with him but didn’t have the stomach for it.

Thirty minutes earlier, he had been one with Skunk Creek and her surrounds. Now, only shock and fear.

Once he rounded the downstream bend, eyes in the woods took shape as several forms slipped into view. They built a large fire creekside and burned everything that would ignite, including the deceased young lovers. The stench of burning flesh mingled with the acrid undertones of smoldering camping equipment, fouling a beautiful, early morning spring bouquet. Partially baked remnants were doused with water and air cooled before loading into trash bags. A canoe was pulled up into the woods, attached to a waiting plow horse, trash bags were dumped into an empty cavity along with that which couldn’t burn, and trekked a mile or so to a dirt road and a pickup truck bed for hauling to a

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private landfill. Smoldering human remains were shoveled into the moving current for random distribution downstream.

Drill complete, she ordered the assailants to move on, and they were joined by an upstream sentry for a walk out beyond the pristine gravel bar. No hint of campsite or former tenants remained. It was a shame the weak-stomached bystander had floated by before cleanup was initiated, but better then than later in the process when they would have had to kill him as well.

Skunk Creek, Dead Creek, whatever, they laughed among themselves. They had taught the young sinners a lesson, saved their putrid souls, gotten a little pleasure in the process, and done so in gory glory.