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Murder at Wakulla Springs A North Florida Mystery

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*A North Florida Mystery*

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*Murder on the Prairie: A North Florida Mystery*  
By M.D.Abrams

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“Great book! I just finished reading it in two sittings because I didn't want to put it down. It flowed so nicely and grabbed and captured my interest.”

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“I don't know...the alligators, chiggers, snakes, have not made me any more likely to come to Florida. But, my curiosity is completely aroused about the prairie...the sink holes, etc., are giving me goose bumps - which I suppose is exactly what a mystery should do.”

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“Well-written with picturesque detail of the North Florida landscape, there's both substance and engaging characters in these real life situations.”

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ISBN-10 1-60145-059-1

ISBN-13 978-1-60145-059-3

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2006

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# **Murder at Wakulla Springs**

**A North Florida Mystery**

**M.D. Abrams**

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Prologue

“Quite a crowd already,” Alex said. He surveyed the cavernous lobby before signing the registration book.

“Oh, yes,” replied the clerk. She wore a badge which read, “Wakulla Springs Lodge” with the name “Janice” above it. He suspected she was one of the young Florida State University students he had often seen working at the Preserve.

“Creaturefest is a very popular event. It’s a fundraiser for Friends of Wakulla Springs put on by the Tallahassee Film Society. We’re booked solid for the entire weekend,” she said, leaning toward him. “My boyfriend and I always watch *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* on the Sci Fi channel.”

“Really?” he replied absently, handing her his credit card as he continued scanning the lobby. Alex noted a number of people already dressed in 1950’s boating clothes. Some wore hats decorated with small Creature dolls, while others wore rubberized replicas of the Creature’s hands and feet. Their laughter made him regret the time he spent strolling around the waterfront, before checking into the lodge. He had done it to reorient himself. For just this one weekend, he wanted to experience peace and pleasure at Wakulla Springs rather than the turmoil it had recently brought him. The bitter controversy over his springs research had driven his wife and daughter away, and would possibly cost him his reputation as a scientist.

As he waited, he impatiently readjusted his Gill Man Creature suit which hung loosely draped over his arm like a deflated parade float figure. He was proud of his creation—made from an old diving wet suit and hood—and he hoped to be the only one wearing the full iconic outfit. Ever since he was a boy, Alex had loved to create and wear costumes. His father disapproved of the hobby, fearing Alex might one day become an actor...or worse.

Janice slid his credit card back across the desk and handed him a large room key. “Second floor with a view of the spring. So you’re going to be the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*?” she said, peering over the desk at the slime green costume. “Cool suit. Have a great weekend, Dr. Hadley.”

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He thanked her, reached for his overnight bag, and walked up the marble steps near the reception desk. He couldn't help smiling as he turned the key to his room. He knew what to expect—the lodge was known for its old-fashioned simplicity, and the serenity of its natural surroundings. He entered the modest space and took a deep breath. He put his things down on the bed and was immediately drawn to the wide expanse of draped windows. He opened the drapes and stood looking out. An aura of peace descended upon him as he stared at the renowned spring through the broad expanse of lawn and moss-draped oak trees.

“This is just what I needed,” he said, and felt a familiar sense of awe and intimacy for this seemingly ordinary pool of water. Alex had first-hand knowledge of its boundless depths and extensive caves. He was one of a privileged few professional divers to explore and map them. But, at this moment, he avoided any thoughts about the threats to Wakulla Springs once pristine waters.

Abruptly ending his reverie, he felt eager to join the company of others in the lobby, to swap stories about the making of the Creature movie. After a quick shower, and—dressed only in shorts, and a tee-shirt—Alex sat down and began pulling on the costume's web-footed pants. He pushed his left leg into the bottom, felt an odd crunch under the foot, and felt the first sharp sting.

Instinctively, he slid his hand into the lower portion of the suit. He experienced another stinging bite on his finger. He quickly withdrew his hand, and saw a small red fire ant crawling on it. Biting stings intensified on his feet and up his leg.

Panicky—his heart pumping wildly—Alex lunged toward the bed to get his Epi Pen. He tripped on the corner of the metal bed frame, landed on the floor, and cried out, “Holy shit!” then crawled over to the overnight case which lay opened on the bed. He tossed its contents searching for the epinephrine syringe. He knew he was in great danger when he realized it wasn't there.

“Impossible,” he whispered, his throat dry from fear. “I know I packed it.”

Still sitting on the floor, he clumsily tried to yank off the pants, but his swelling leg was stuck in the wet suit. His breathing became

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labored. His confusion and dizziness increased, and he knew he desperately needed to get help. He grabbed for the telephone on the nightstand, over-reached, and knocked over the lamp.

Exhausted, Alex fell flat on the floor between the beds. In between violent wheezing spasms, he gasped for breath and flailed at the costume. The pain from his leg was excruciating. His face, eyelids, and lips were grotesquely swollen.

In an almost dreamlike trance, he thought he heard someone knocking at the door. He tried to call out, but the swelling in his throat prevented it. Within minutes, he slipped into severe anaphylactic shock and unconsciousness. He lay still with one leg stuck in the Gill Man costume. Red ants emerged from the other leg of the costume, and blended into the rose-colored rug on which Dr. Alex Hadley lay dead.

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## Chapter 1

“Forgotten Coast indeed,” I muttered as I drove along Florida’s Highway 98 coastline which was dotted with new pastel painted stilt houses. They were lined up like lollipops along the Apalachee Bay on the Gulf of Mexico. After a weaving stretch of densely forested road, the sight of the bay had emerged like a shimmering gem in the late afternoon sun. I passed through Medart, saw the sign to Wakulla Springs State Park on SR 319, and promised myself a visit to the famed springs.

The cell phone jangled as I passed a narrow strip of beach along the shoreline. I pulled off onto the adjacent shoulder. I hated using the damn phone under any circumstances, and I was nervous using it while driving.

The ringing sounded insistent as I plucked the phone from my handbag and got out of the car. It felt good to stretch my legs after the four hour drive from Gainesville.

“Hey Lorelei, what’s going on? I got a message at the plant lab you were looking for me.”

“Jeffrey? It’s about time you returned my calls. Don’t you use your cell phone anymore?” I leaned against the car door and took a deep breath of the cool sea air.

“I’ve changed companies—my old cell stopped working. Anyway, my boss sent me to check out a lab at the University of South Florida in Tampa. I’ve been pretty busy.”

“Knowing you, I’m sure you managed to get in some party-time.”

He laughed, “I’ll admit, I did get in some visits with friends. Hey, Louisa Monterosa asked about you.”

“That’s nice,” I said, and wondered if the friends included his former lover, Eduardo Sanchez. It was hard to know where Jeffrey’s sexual preferences were after the shooting which landed him in the hospital. He was always so secretive about his love life.

“So, Red, what’s up?”

I scanned the sparkling blue bay and took another deep breath.

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“What’s up is that I’m on the road to Apalachicola. I’ll be there for about six weeks—in a play,” I said. The bay air held only the faintest fishy odor. No one was on the little beach except an occasional seagull running along the water’s edge as the waves ebbed and flowed.

“Apalachicola? How lucky can you get? It’s one of my favorite towns.”

“Yes, mine, too. Bill and I...”

“Lor? Are you okay? It’s been a while since we’ve talked. Have you started dating? You need to find someone your own age. Someone passionate crazy about you. You do remember what passion feels like, don’t you?”

It was the same tune Jeffrey had been singing since he showed up in Gainesville two years ago.

“Of course, I remember. I suppose you mean someone like you.”

“Not so passionate anymore,” he said. “Besides, I’m focused on my doctorate. Life’s not quite as exciting as it used to be.”

“Exciting? If that’s what you call it when you got shot in the head and nearly died on me? Anyway, the reason I was trying to reach you was to let you know I was leaving town for a while. Just in case...”

“In case what?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just feel better if friends know where I am. I’m counting on this time away to be peaceful—so I can figure out what to do with my life.”

“Without Bill? C’mon, Lor, you know...”

“Please Jeffrey, don’t tell me again how much better off I am without him.”

“Okay,” he said, and lowered his voice, “I know it’s been rough, but you’ll pull through it. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Just stand by. You may get a late night call or two. By the way, let me get your new cell number.”

He gave me the number, and I jotted it down on a gas receipt.

“So what’s the play?” he asked.

“Renee’s directing her own adaptation of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. I’m going to play the wife. It’s not much of a part, but...”

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“You’re kidding me.”

“Okay, wise guy. I get it. The new widow playing an old wife.”

“Sorry, Lor. You’re breaking up—are you on your cell?” he asked. “You’re not driving now are you? I remember that road. It’s pretty narrow in spots.”

“No, I’ve stopped along the beach,” I said, feeling comforted by his concern. “It’s so unpopulated, Jeffrey. There’s some development, but it still looks like old Florida. I can even see shrimp boats moving out to the gulf.”

“Maybe I could make time to come up and visit you for a couple of days. See the play and...”

I knew what he had in mind, but I still felt too vulnerable to entertain the idea of Jeffrey bunking in with me. “You’re welcome to come up, but you’ll have to find your own place to stay.”

He said, “Hey, I just thought of something. I have a friend around there. I’ve kind of lost track of where he lives, but he’s cool—a geologist and an environmental policy wonk. Graduated from USF. We worked together once in Tampa.”

“How can I find him if you don’t know where he lives?” I asked, thinking it would be nice to get to know someone local.

“Good point. Let’s see, last I heard he was working for FPIRG—the Florida Public Interest Research Group. You could ask around. Wait a minute...he’s a diver, he used to teach at a dive shop in Carrabelle. You’ll like him, Lor, and if you get lonely...”

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Hadley. Alex Hadley. Just tell him I said to take good care of you.”

“Thanks, Jeffrey. I’ll do it.”

Before getting back into the car, I picked up a broken conch shell from the grass. I lifted the shell to my nose, and touched the hard outer part to my tongue, before dropping it back on the ground. The taste triggered childhood memories of the beach.

Along the coast, on the way to Eastpoint, I was shocked by the amount of storm damage. A boat had settled on top of a building, other buildings were off their foundations, fish packing houses lay in ruins, water front restaurants were closed, and one dilapidated store

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had a sign, “We have not moved.” Many of the destroyed properties had “For Sale” signs on them. Hurricane Dennis’ storm surge had made a wreck of the area.

I drove past the bridge to St. George Island and through East Point, which looked pretty much intact. I was surprised to see condos and a marina in this town prized as a fishing village. I finally crossed the bay causeway and the John Gorrie Bridge. It exited right in the heart of town.

It had been years since I visited the Panhandle. Bill and I had stayed at the quaint Cape San Blas Inn on the St. Joseph Peninsula. We enjoyed solitary walks across the wild dunes and the white sandy beaches. I planned to revisit the areas where I had once been happy.

The town of Apalachicola looked like I remembered it. The historic Gibson Inn stood at the foot of the bridge. Its spacious porches and Victorian trim lived up to the claim in its brochure which described Apalachicola as a “Victorian fishing village.” I drove two blocks, lined with small stores and restaurants, and turned right down Avenue E. The old fashioned marquee displayed “Dixie Theatre” in large letters. It was where our play would be produced. I parked and got out of the car.

A petite old woman was reading a poster at the theatre entrance. She wore a small red suede hat with silk flowers on the brim, and carried a matching bag.

“What a great old theatre,” I said, walking up alongside her and taking in the old fashioned ticket booth.

“Oh, yes. It’s a real treasure. The Partingtons have done a remarkable job of restoring it.” She glanced at my car then back at me. She had a bright and curious look. “Are you driving through or vacationing?”

“I’m here for the play. I’m going to be in it,” I said, gesturing toward the poster. “I hope you’ll come to see it.”

“Really?” she said, glancing back at the poster. “I like Ibsen, but I don’t know this play. Will I like it?”

I laughed. “I hope so.”

“I try to see all the plays and films at The Dixie. Did you know this theatre’s been here since 1913?”

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“No, I didn’t. I guess I’ll learn more about it when we start rehearsals tomorrow. I’ve only just arrived. By the way, I’m looking for this address on Water Street.” I showed her the address on the contract Renee had sent me.

“Oh, my dear, it’s just around the corner.” She pointed toward the bay. “Water Street is the next block down. Turn right, and it’s a little ways before the big Apalachicola River Inn. You can’t miss it.”

I thanked her and returned to my car. It was approaching dinner time, and I noted a quaint looking café across from the theatre. It appeared to be open. Turning on Water Street, I found the address at a small entranceway next to the Bay Street Fish Market. The apartment was on the second floor.

Not an attractive location, I thought, but a definite advantage to be on the water, and it was a short walk to the theatre. I parked the car under a shady magnolia and grabbed one of my suitcases. The faint smell of disinfectant permeated the narrow stairwell. I wondered what I would find in apartment 2A—my home away from home. The door was open.

I put my bag down. The apartment appeared to be clean—something a traveling actor is apprehensive about since some of our colleagues have been known to leave messes behind. The bedroom and bath were small, as was the kitchen which had a pass-through to the living-dining area. The furnishings were spare but tasteful. I pulled the small glass-topped dining table across the wooden floors and arranged it and two chairs under the windows facing the bay.

I returned to the kitchen to examine the contents of the refrigerator and cabinets. The refrigerator contained a small platter of cheese and crackers covered in plastic wrap with a hand-written note that said, “Welcome.” There was no signature.

“How thoughtful,” I said.

I leaned against the kitchen sink suddenly feeling weary and slightly depressed. I spied a wall phone next to the pass-through. “No,” I thought, “I’m not going to give in this easily.” Next to the phone was a menu for Sophie’s Café—the one across from the theatre. It was time to get acquainted with the locals and grab something to eat before tonight’s “meet and greet” at the theatre.

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As I left the apartment, a large black cat attracted my attention with several squeaky meows. He was sitting at the front of the door to Apartment 2B. As I paused on the landing, I heard a soulful operatic aria coming from inside. I stooped to pet the cat and wondered who my opera loving neighbor might be.

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