

Is there a conspiracy to kill Gainesville environmentalists? When actress Lorelei Crane returns to Gainesville to star in Sweeny Todd: The Barber of Fleet Street, friends ask her to find out about the murder of their fellow Earth Save member.

Murder on Hogtown Creek

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Murder on Hogtown Creek

A North Florida Mystery

M. D. Abrams

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Prologue

The two University of Florida students entered the Hogtown Creek from just north of the campus. The girl didn't want to use the Hogtown Greenway since she took pride in knowing other ways to access the creek. The pair half skidded down the fern- and ivy-covered slope on a bank lined with trees and shrubs—tall loblolly pines, sweetgums, hickories, and thick vines. Grabbing hold of saplings and bamboos helped them control their descent. Once at the bottom, standing on a low knoll next to the shallow sandy stream, they remained silent and looked around. The air smelled fresher below street level and there was less noise made by cars and motor scooters as students hurried to their classes.

The young man spoke first. "This is so cool. I can see why you love it here. It's almost a jungle right in the middle of the city."

"And instead of majoring in business," the girl replied, lightly punching his shoulder, "you could have a career exploring places like this instead of spending time in some stupid office."

It was a fresh spring morning in Gainesville, and the crisp air heightened the palette of green hues that enveloped them. The smothering north Florida humidity had not yet arrived. They listened to hear the chirp of a cardinal, hidden somewhere along the forested bank, and then looked up to see a pileated woodpecker boring holes in a nearby tree. Their attention slowly shifted from sounds of the city to those of the woods.

"It's like really amazing, isn't it?" said the young woman. She slapped at the mosquitoes biting her bare legs and wished she had worn jeans rather than shorts. "It's been here forever. My dad used to take us kids hiking in the creek to look for shark teeth and fossils. He told us we were on a limestone ridge formed millions of years ago as the whole region was rising out of the sea. Hard to imagine, huh?"

"Yeah, it still looks pretty primitive...except for the Blue Moon beer bottle over there on the bank."

“Ugh,” she said. “I hate it that people throw their trash down here.”

They stood watching the slow-moving water until the girl said, “C’mon, let’s take off our flip-flops and walk the creek. It’s easier to go barefoot. Besides, that’s how you find fossils—with your toes. Oh, and be on the lookout for snakes and alligators.” There was a glint of teasing on her face, but the boy didn’t see it.

After removing his shoes, the young man hesitated, but she grabbed his hand and pulled him down the slope into the stream. The water was only a few inches deep and they splashed around in it, like children.

“Oh, don’t worry about critters, city boy. I was only teasing. They won’t bother you unless you step on one. Anyway, I haven’t ever seen gators here or anything dangerous, for that matter.”

She led the way and, as they walked along the streambed, she proudly pointed out some of the plants and trees along the bank. She was a botany major and eager to impress her new friend.

They walked in silence for a while, studying the sand for hidden treasures. Finding none, the boy casually glanced at the surrounding bank. “What’s that pretty bush up there with the red berries? Bet the birds love it.”

“Oh, that’s one of the invasive plants—the coral ardesia,” she replied.

“I know about invasive plants,” he said. “We’ve got the Maleluca tree down in the Everglades. They say it’s taking over everything.”

“So, you’re not ecologically challenged after all,” she teased. “There are lots of exotics here, like the ivy and heavenly bamboo we saw coming down from the road.”

“And don’t forget the air potato,” he said, stooping to dislodge a sharp object he felt with his foot. It was a pull tag from a drink can. He shrugged and put it in his pocket.

“How do you know about them?” she asked, walking just ahead of him.

“Oh, a friend of mine took me on an air potato roundup last semester.”

Murder on Hogtown Creek

“My dad used to nuke them.”

“What?” He came up alongside her.

“Yeah. Daddy called himself an eco-terrorist. ‘Course that was before being a terrorist was so...well, so terrifying,” she laughed. “Anyway, he’d carry a can of herbicide or some homemade concoction and zap the invasive plants.”

The boy considered the idea and concluded, “Sounds like a good plan. Did you decide to major in botany because of your dad?”

“I guess so. But it turns out that zapping the plants wasn’t such a great idea now that we know so much about water pollution. All the bad stuff goes down the aquifer where we get our drinking water. In fact, this creek is pretty polluted. We’re going to have to scrub our feet when we get back to the dorm.”

“Hey,” the young man said, “I think I just felt something hard. Wait a minute.” He bent down, moved his fingers around in the sand, and picked up a small shark tooth. How cool is this?” he asked, showing his find to the girl.

“Awesome,” she said. “Keep poking through the sand. Maybe you’ll find some more.”

They continued their slow walk searching the sandy creek bed. After a while, the boy asked, “So is it true that Gainesville was once named Hogtown?”

Before she could answer, the girl’s attention was drawn to a large dark mound at the base of the concrete embankment ahead. At this distance, it looked like overstuffed bags of garbage dumped at the bank of the narrow stream. Yet there was something odd about it. “Look at that,” she said, pointing toward the culvert. “What do you think it is?”

The students moved toward the heap until its shape became apparent.

“Oh, my God,” the girl cried. “It’s a body.” She looked up at the road above. “Someone’s fallen into the creek.”

They sloshed through the shallow water toward the culvert, and soon arrived within feet of a large crumpled body. It looked like a man in blue jeans and a blue work shirt. He was lying face down, legs

M.D. Abrams

spread apart, torso half on the bank and half in the water. His head was twisted grotesquely, and his hair was matted with dried blood.”

“Jesus,” the boy cried, looking at the girl who stood transfixed and ashen. “Do you see that? His wrists are tied behind his back. Get your cell phone and call 911.”

She reached into the pocket of her shorts, pulled out her phone, and pushed in the number.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” the boy said. He waded to the bank, and started to retch.

Chapter 1

The Swamp was noisy, but not as crowded as it is during regular semesters. The restaurant is situated directly across from the University of Florida campus and shares its name with the Ben Hill Griffin Stadium. It's a favorite hangout for students and even the locals occasionally eat here. The food is good, reasonably priced, and the collegiate environment reminded us adults we were living in a college town.

The sport *du jour* blared from the large screen TVs situated around the main dining area, and the aroma of beer and grilled meat told me why it was Jeffrey who had suggested we lunch here. Though well beyond his undergrad years, it remained his milieu.

"God, I really missed you, Red," he said, taking my hand in his from across the table. "Gainesville isn't the same without the lovely Lorelei Crane. Right, Becky?"

Becky, who sat between us, smiled and nodded emphatically. Her shoulder length wiry hair bobbed as though electrified. She was in her mid-thirties, but still fit the collegiate mold. Perhaps it was because all of her friends were perpetual grad students or instructors at the local college.

I chuckled at Jeffrey's silly rhyme, withdrew my hand, and unfolded my place setting. He sat back in his chair, cocked his head, and gave me a wistful look, which made me uncomfortable. It suggested a bittersweet rendezvous of old lovers which, in his view, we always would be.

"I have been gone quite awhile," I said in a more detached tone than I intended. "Although at this moment it feels like I never left. It's great to see you both. Nothing much seems to have changed, except the traffic has gotten worse."

Becky said, "It's not just the traffic. Have you seen the new apartments around campus? Who's going to rent them all? Anyway,

M.D. Abrams

Lorelei, we were afraid you'd never come back to Gainesville. Especially after we heard you sold your Micanopy house."

I felt warmed by Becky's concern. "What do they call it, 'the Gainesville suck?' Once you've lived here you just can't stay away from the place. I confess, I might have remained longer in South Florida if it weren't for Renee offering me such a juicy part in her fall production."

"How is your mother?" Becky asked. "You mentioned on the phone that she's in a retirement home down there."

"Oh, she's feisty as ever despite her stroke." I paused, not wanting to dwell on any particulars about my mother's saga. "But I really am glad to see you both. Catch me up on what's been happening this year. When I returned from Apalachicola, I didn't get to see you guys before I had to rush down south. When we talked on the phone you told me about your work, but what's been happening on the environmental scene?"

"Are you going to tell her?" Becky said, looking at Jeffrey.

He took a deep breath, pursed his lips, and was about to speak just as the server came to take our food orders and bring drinks. Jeffrey leaned forward and said, "Lor, you just wouldn't believe it. Practically the whole time you were gone we've been fighting the same damn old battles to keep development off of the Prairie. It just never stops."

Becky shot Jeffrey a quizzical look as though she were surprised by what he said in response to her question.

He continued, "First a whole new development, Cottage Grove, springs up—almost overnight—across from the Prairie on 441."

"Yes, I was shocked when I saw it while driving down to Micanopy. I went down to pick up some things from storage and visit our old cat, Maynard."

Becky put her hand on Jeffrey's arm and said, "Do you want me to tell her?"

"Tell me what?" I asked, sensing her urgency.

Jeffrey frowned and said, "Becky, how about let's ease Lorelei back into the scene. Just tell her about the Gainesville Country Club deal, and some of the other stuff that's been going on."

Murder on Hogtown Creek

Becky shrugged, withdrew her hand, and said, “It was a real shocker. All of a sudden the old Gainesville Country Club started pushing plans to expand. They wanted to build umpteen condos right on the edge of the Paynes Prairie. Can you believe it? They even tried to convince everybody it would improve the Prairie. They must have thought we were stupid or something. Improve it with multi-story condos on the edge? Thank goodness the County Commission finally turned them down. But you know they or someone else will just try again.”

“Well, I’m glad they put a stop to it,” I said. I had a mental image of towering condos on the edge of all the serene beauty and wildlife on the open prairie. I loved driving across it, from Micanopy to Gainesville, and witnessing the change of seasons.

Becky continued, “And, on top of that, there’s...” Her face became flushed with agitation as she outlined a litany of issues from water bottling plants at nearby springs to old grievances of gopher tortoises buried alive by developers. She had not lost her righteous passion about injustice to the land and to animals. I set my face in an interested look, but felt a sense of detachment as I studied my two friends.

Jeffrey tolerantly sat just staring out of the window during Becky’s rant. He seemed calmer and less intense than I had known him to be. He’s aging, I thought, and noticed he had acquired a sprinkling of gray at the temples of his dark curly hair. He still looked younger than his 43 years. His muscular and lean athletic build suggested he had been working out. I felt a familiar twinge of attraction to the man who had been my first husband. I studied Becky, and saw she had put on weight, which made her face look more mature. She appeared more womanly than the bright-eyed grad student with whom I once worked at the Center for Earth Options. And her professional costume must have changed from jeans and short tops to the smart slack suit she wore today.

Now that I had returned to Jeffrey’s turf, I idly wondered what our relationship would be. I knew he and Becky had a brief affair, and that it ended amiably. With whom was he currently involved?

M.D. Abrams

When Becky stopped talking to take a sip of water, Jeffrey turned to me. “You see, Lor? We could use your help. Can we count on you now that you’re back?”

“Help with what exactly?” As if I didn’t know the answer to my question. “Oh, c’mon you two. You can’t be planning any of your eco-actions again. As I recall, Jeffrey, you were nearly killed, and some of your Earth Save cohorts were arrested the last time you played that game.”

“You know what they say, Lor, ‘what doesn’t kill you outright makes you stronger.’” He gave me one of his innocent silly grins, as if it had all been a big joke.

The server reappeared with our sandwiches. I had my favorite, portobello mushroom quesadilla, Jeffrey had a cheeseburger and fries, and Becky raised her fork with relish as a large Greek salad was set down before her. The conversation stopped and, as though the mere presence of food caused a reflexive action on our part, we began to down our meals. We were all good eaters.

Finally, Jeffrey took a swig of beer, wiped his mouth, and said, “Lorelei, you know we can’t just sit back and do nothing while North Florida is trashed by development like they’ve done down south. Too many of us have invested so much to protect it.”

I raised my hands to ward off what I knew could be a full-length diatribe. “Listen, my dear friends, I’m definitely with you in spirit, but I’ve got a complicated play to prepare for, I’ve just moved into my new condo, and I’ll need to make trips back down south to check on my mom. I don’t have the extra time or energy to be involved with you guys. I’ll be happy to write you a check, but that’s about all I can do.”

“Okay, okay,” Jeffrey said. “Let’s not talk about it right now. Maybe you’ll feel different after you get settled into a routine. I assure you we’re not going to do things the way we did before. We’re a lot smarter now, and more careful.”

I was relieved to be let off the hook so easily but, knowing Jeffrey, I knew it would be a temporary reprieve. He was nothing if not persistent.

Murder on Hogtown Creek

In contrast to Jeffrey's attitude, Becky appeared upset by my response. She cast him a pleading look, and said, "But Jeffrey, we agreed we needed her help to find out..."

Jeffrey gave her a warning look that stopped her from finishing the sentence.

"Find out what?" I asked. "What is it with you two? What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing important," he said, and changing the subject asked, "So tell us about the play you're in. Another classic?"

"Yes, it's *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*." I put on a ghoulish face and wrung my hands. "And if you can believe it, I'm going to be Mrs. Margery Lovett—maker of human meat pies."

Becky said, "The movie was so gory. It made me glad I was a vegetarian. Lorelei, that woman is so unlike you. How can you play someone so evil?"

"It's called acting, my dear," I said, repeating Olivier's famous retort. "But the truth is, it's a fun part, and I'm excited about it just because it is such a different role for me. I got bored playing the *Cherry Orchard* again. This one is part Dickens and part farce."

Pointing at me with his last french fry, Jeffrey said, "I didn't see the movie, but I know the play was a musical. I never pictured you in a singing role."

"Oh, Renee isn't doing the musical version. She's using the Christopher Bond script that was the source for Sondheim and Wheeler's musical. It's going to be a dramatic production."

"Anything you're in will be really cool," Becky said with a look of admiration. "I can't wait to see it."

We finished lunch. "My treat," I said, grabbing the check from the center of the table. "I've missed you all. Everything in South Florida felt so...well, so glitzy and frenetic. Even if I don't join your adventures, I hope we can spend time together."

"We will. Trust me," Jeffrey said. He stared at me for a moment. His coal black eyes held a searching look as though hoping to prompt some emotional response from me. He rose, bent down, kissed my

M.D. Abrams

cheek, and brushed his hand in my hair. “Oh, that gorgeous red hair. I’m so glad you’re not coloring it anymore.”

“Jeffrey,” I protested, squirming a bit at his intimate gesture.

“No problem, Red. Thanks for lunch. I’ve got to get back to the Plant Lab. It’s tough being the boss—you can’t goof off like everybody else.”

“Jeffrey a boss?” I teased. “Who would’ve pictured that?”

Becky made no response. Her eyes followed Jeffrey as he left the restaurant, and she continued staring in that direction even after walked out the door.

“What’s on your mind, Becky? You’re obviously worried about something.”

She quickly turned toward me. “Well, I’ve been thinking about whether I should tell you. He didn’t want me to, but...”

“Tell me what? For goodness sakes, get it out already.”

Her eyes took on a glassy, frightened cast, and she shook her head to dispel the emotion.

“What is it Jeffrey didn’t want you to tell me?”

“I guess, he thought we should wait a bit.”

I was becoming more impatient. I bent closer and put my hand on hers. “Tell me right now,” I urged in a soft voice.

Becky’s eyes opened wide, and once again they held a hint of fear. “It’s about the murder,” she blurted out. “I’m really scared, Lorelei.”

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