

In 1809, Meriwether Lewis, fresh off his famous expedition to explore the Louisiana Territory, is found dead along the Natchez Trace, a dangerous Indian trail in Tennessee. His partner, William Clark, and four members of their 'Corps of Discovery' crisscross the country during the War of 1812 in search of answers. When the war and the investigation collide in New Orleans, the fate of the young nation hangs in the balance!

Lewis and Clark: Murder on the Natchez Trace

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Lewis & Clark

Murder
on the Natchez Trace

THOMAS BERRY

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

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Chapter 1

October 10, 1809

Along the Natchez Trace, south of Nashville, Tennessee

“I hope the accommodations will be sufficient, Mr. Lewis.” The woman smiled coyly as the tall man looked around the sparse room. She absently brushed a long strand of dirty brown hair back behind her right ear and ran a slender hair over her cotton dress.

“Yes, they will do quite nicely, thank you Priscella. I’ll only be here for a day or so. I’m waiting for a few people who should be joining up with me shortly. I hope to get some hunting in tomorrow morning, and then I’ll be on my way.”

“I’ll prepare supper in an hour or so, Mr. Lewis. My husband should be back from Memphis tomorrow morning and you can settle up with him then. Feel free to make yourself at home.” Her eyes twinkled as she turned and walked away slowly. Lewis couldn’t help but admire how beautiful the woman looked, her brown hair falling loosely over her shoulders, while her simple blue dress showed off her slim waist and ample bosom to an appreciative audience.

He smiled as he closed the door, alone to his thoughts. Meriwether Lewis looked around the small room. The dirt floor was dry at least, despite the recent rain. A small wooden frame bed was pressed against the far left wall, next to a stout looking stump that served as both chair and desk. There was a medium sized open window along the back wall overlooking the woods thirty feet away. He placed his case containing his traveling clothes on the stump and a smaller case that held his papers next to it. His rifle, a state-of-the-art air

gun he had purchased at Harper's Ferry before the expedition, stood in the corner by the back, near his belongings.

He sat down on the bed which squeaked noisily in protest. He was tired, so tired. He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He hoped James would get here soon – the Indian agent had with him an herbal potion that often alleviated Lewis' headaches. But those damn horses had gotten away last night during the storm and the pair of Chicksaw Indians they had hired as guides seemed more clueless in the wild than most of the city bureaucrats in Washington. Staying behind to help find the strays, James had encouraged Lewis to continue on ahead to Grinder's Stand. At the time, he didn't argue the point, but now...*perhaps I was too hasty in leaving them...*

Captain James Neelly was an Indian agent who worked for the government, and had been assigned to the governor for the past few years. Lewis had left it up to him to contract guides for this dangerous stretch of Indian trail known as the Natchez Trace – he was a capable man and Lewis trusted his judgment. But events over the past several days had given him considerable alarm over his personal safety, as well as that of the men who rode with him – enough to voice his fears to Neelly.

James had been very calming and level-headed – assuring Lewis that the stress of the government inquiry was playing tricks with his mind. He accepted it at the time...but now the fears were beginning to return and they wouldn't go away. He got up, and paced the floor, wringing his hands together over and over. His stomach felt like a knife was being twisted inside him, a constant reminder of the stresses of his office. *Where did I go wrong? How had it come to this?*

He dreaded what the next week will bring. A formal inquiry by the Treasury department. Being deposed and interrogated to what end he could not fathom. The headache beneath his left eye was becoming worse and it would not go away.

Maybe a good hunt was what the doctor requires. Despite having traveled the past week through the densely wooded Trace with nary a civilized person in sight, he still longed for the great outdoors over the confines of his St. Louis governor's mansion. He felt more comfortable in the elements than in the big city and he enjoyed getting out as often as he could. Away from the bureaucracy of Washington and the politics that its minders enjoyed so much. They can have it!

Lewis rose from his bed and opened the door. It was almost dinnertime and Priscella said she would have a decent meal on the table shortly. He was the only guest at the small country inn at the moment and he was thankful for

the isolation. He wasn't sure if he could stand making polite small talk with a large group of people in his present state.

The sun was hanging low on the horizon, fighting with the darkness in a losing battle for domination. Soon the night would overtake them and he would rest again, battling the demons that plagued him in his dreams. His future, once so promising and open, now lay in disarray, his career coming to a halt faster than he had ever considered possible.

He walked slowly to the white clapboard building next door which was identical to his own. The paint was peeling badly and many of the wooden boards were stained with mildew and water damage. Priscella Grinder was standing outside, a water bucket in her right hand. She was looking off towards the rear of the property, her attention focused on something in the distant.

"Mrs. Grinder," Meriwether said amicably.

Startled, his hostess turned towards her guest, dropping the bucket and spilling a small amount of water on the packed earth. Her worn coat was open; her thin cotton dress barely able to conceal the gentle curves of her figure. He smiled awkwardly, and apologized for scaring her.

"What can I do you for, Mr. Lewis?" she said, picking up the bucket once more.

"I'd like to do some hunting in the morning, but I'm fresh out of ammunition and powder. Can I buy some from you?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly. I can sell you a day's worth for a nickel, if that's ok."

"That will be fine. It's worth the price, I guess, if I can get out and do something productive. Can you recommend a decent spot for finding elk or deer? Even a rabbit will do nicely."

"Sure, come on inside and I'll get you squared away, honey." Her gaze drifted back towards the rear of the property one last time before ushering her guest into her own building.

An hour later, having eaten a light dinner of tomato and carrot stew which Priscella had prepared, and obtaining his ammunition, Lewis was in a better mood. He wasn't entirely comfortable around his flirtatious hostess without her husband present – he wondered on more than one occasion how it would look to someone coming upon them, and would be grateful to be on his way tomorrow when James and the servants arrived. Such social situations vexed him to no end – he enjoyed the peacefulness of the outdoors over complicated dramas any day. Even his headache seemed to have vanished now that he had eaten and relaxed somewhat.

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The daylight had finally succumbed to darkness, and the moon was reigning its fullness over the earth. The white buildings of the little inn stood in sharp contrast to the thick woods that surrounded it. The activity of the nocturnal animals were in full swing now, as owls hooted in throaty calls, crickets chirped in a high pitched mating dance, while small animals scurried unseen in the tall grass and bushes all around him.

If I close my eyes, I can picture myself back there. Lewis imagined the woods of years ago, thousands of miles away from here. The rivers that coursed their way through the heartlands of this great country, emptying their waters into parts unknown. Great mountains of frozen rock rising higher into the air than any white man had ever seen on the North American continent. Feeling the salty air of an ocean unseen by any American, whose horizon extended far off into the great reaches of Asia and beyond.

He pictured familiar faces in the line of men as they walked on foot and horseback, riding in canoes and large pirogues – men whose fate lay in his hands. Men whom he had come to trust and admire. It was a time that occurred only a few years before and sometimes, like today, the memories came back crisp and clear, as if he had left these men only yesterday.

He opened his eyes, suddenly alert. He had heard a noise that seemed out of place, even predatory. He looked around but saw nothing – the moon did not penetrate the darkness of the woods. Trees, tall and thick, covered the ground in an impenetrable blackness.

Meriwether Lewis heard a snapping again, this time to his right towards the rear of the cabins. A wolf? A bear? Or perhaps it was James returning with the horses.

“James?” There was no answer. It was most probably an animal of some sort.

He decided it would be prudent to retire for the night, not wanting to be caught outside if the nocturnal animal wanted a part of his hide. Bears were always hungry it seems as settlers moved in, disrupting their habitats, scaring away their food sources. Men diverted rivers and spoiled ponds, causing the animals to seek their basic necessities elsewhere. Even if it leads them into human territory.

He opened the door to his small building and entered, closing and locking the door behind him. There was no light anymore, save for a scant sliver of moonlight coming from the rear window. He was glad the window had no glass in it – not like the stuffy houses he was used to in the city. He liked to feel the cool breeze on his face, and the smells of nature surrounding him. It made it easier to go to sleep. He removed his coat and shoes, and lay

down on the bed, using only a thin blanket to cover his tall, wiry frame. The bed was small and the straw mattress thin, forcing him to curl his legs slightly to stay comfortable. Within ten minutes, his tense muscles had begun to relax and he drifted off to a fitful sleep.

When he awoke, the dawn was just beginning to shine its light into the room. What time was it? 7? 7:30? He was always an early riser and was surprised he had slept as long as he had. He remembered the dreams from the night before – and sighed deeply. The details were fading fast, but he noticed he was sweaty and his heart was beating rapidly. He was hoping the briskness of the fresh air and the different scenery would help him sleep better, but some events in his life have shown him that they will not go away so easily. He forced himself to calm down, then after a minute stood up and stepped towards the bag on the stump. He put on a fresh shirt and ran his hand through his short brown hair.

He walked over towards the wall and gripped the barrel of his rifle, cold steel against his flesh, checking that it was loaded with the bullets he purchased last night from his host. It would be effective for what he asked from it today. The specially made air gun was the same one he had brought with him on the expedition several years ago and he smiled as he was reminded of how impressed the natives would be when they saw this remarkable repeating wonder. He was proud of the air rifle and brought it with him on such outings where he might want to hunt...or protect himself from nature's hunters.

Meriwether Lewis saw movement from the woods in back of his cabin and walked slowly over to the window, peering out into the darkness of the thick trees. Was the animal from last night still out there? During the last moments of his life, he thought about how much he loved the woods, how much he longed to give up his career in St. Louis to be a part of it again, how much he wanted to be free...

Chapter 2

April 4, 1810
Montana territory

The glint of the sharp metal tip reflected in the sunlight. The Blackfoot warrior took the arrow shaft from his leather case and silently notched it into the bowstring. His bare chest was lean and well muscled, his hair dark as the night and falling halfway down his back. Leather pants protected his legs, and comfortable shoes made from soft buffalo skin kept his footfalls quiet. His only decoration on this outing was some black paint which he had carefully adorned his forehead and cheekbones. He focused on the spot where he was told his quarry would come into view and waited with practiced patience.

Running River looked up at the sky, judging the time from the last reported sighting and configuring his own internal clock. He was right on schedule. Overlooking the water below, he knelt on a small bluff, prepared to unleash a clean shot. He permitted himself a slight smile. This was going to be fun.

The canoe was silent as the two men made their way down the small creek. Their wooden paddles made a slight swirling dip in the water, perfectly in sync with each other. The weather was warm for this time of year and the animals were starting to come out of their winter habitats.

John Colter and John Potts, both recently released from the tour of duty with the Lewis and Clark expedition a few years earlier, examined their beaver traps they had left beside the stream earlier in the week. Beaver hides were their stock and trade now. A fur pelt could be sold for a good deal

depending on the size of the animal and the condition it was in. Adequate care was important and Colter was one of the best traders in the business.

“Did you hear something?” Potts asked quietly. “Sounds like buffalo.” Scattered trees stood like sentries on each side of the creek but the majority of the land was dry and arid. Cactus plants dotted the landscape and the sun beat down hot upon the two men. The creek stretched about 20 feet on each side towards a small muddy shoreline, but its depth was deceptively deep. The direction of the current ahead turned almost seventy degrees, its headway blocked by low level hills.

Colter had indeed noticed the change in noise, but to him it wasn’t the sound of heavy buffalo. This was more muted, more like... “I think it’s Indians, John. Perhaps we should go back.” Reflexively he reached down for his rifle he carried alongside him in the bottom of the canoe.

But Potts pressed on. “Nah, I’m sure it’s buffalo. We’ve hunted enough of them to know. Besides we’ll be done with these traps in a few hours. Don’t want to turn back...”

As their canoe rounded the next bend, Potts stopped talking and simply stared at the scene before him. On either side of the small creek were more than six hundred Indians and more arriving fast. Potts, who was in the front of the canoe, looked back with an anxious expression at his friend. Colter’s face was impassive, but his eyes betrayed his fear.

The Blackfoot Indians, one of the most aggressive and hostile tribes in the western plains, looked ready to pounce. The warriors were armed with spears and arrows, and as Colter looked around him, he saw a few Blackfoot warriors on elevated terrain, their arrows notched and ready. This was clearly setup up as an ambush – not just an innocent encounter along the waterway. There would be no easy escape. Colter understood these warriors, probably more than most white men who lived in the western plains. Violence was not the way out of this one – but perhaps they could negotiate.

The Indians gestured for them to bring the canoe alongside, and the two men felt helpless to do anything else. Running or fighting their way out was suicide. But as Potts, who was in the bow of the boat, hit the shore first, one of the Indians grabbed his rifle.

Colter was a foot behind him and something about the Indian’s demeanor triggered an alarm in his head. Instinctively he jumped out of the canoe and grabbed the rifle from the startled native. This was one of the only weapons they had and their only bargaining chip. The way the Indians were set up told him they had one thing on their agenda and it wasn’t to let these two white men escape alive. He handed the rifle back to Potts and reached for his own in

the canoe. Potts, his fear quite evident on his wiry frame, quickly pointed it in sweeping semi-circle at the Indians, hoping to scare them off.

Suddenly Potts let out a cry and tried in vain to push off again in the canoe. He knew what happened to captives of the Blackfoot and didn't want to be remanded to that terrible fate. But as he started down, several pairs of hands grabbed the canoe and he turned around quickly to face them. He made a fateful decision and, cocking the rifle, pointed it at the nearest Indian and fired into the man's chest.

Running River watched the events with interest from his perch on the hill to the right of the canoes. His instructions were clear – don't shoot unless fired upon. Take them alive. He really didn't think these white men would be foolish enough to make a stand. But his trigger reflexes took over the millisecond Potts fired his weapon. His fingers let the sharp, gleaming arrow fly and he hit his target dead center of the chest. Other warriors did the same, raining the air with arrows until the body of the unfortunate man tumbled over into the water, blood already spreading out in a circle around him.

He looked quickly at the other man, now held tight by Nesting Eagle and Patient Thunder. The white man's frightened eyes were growing wider by the second. Good. He must be taught a lesson, and Running River vowed to make it a good one. He silently stood and jogged down to the river to meet the newcomer.

Colter tried to wrestle away from the Indians but it was useless. Why didn't they just kill him and get it over with, he thought. He knew why. These types of warriors were very territorial and wanted to make sure white men learned to stay off their lands. And his idea of pain tolerance was going to take on a whole new level. At least Potts was able to take the easy way out, he thought grimly.

The Indians were talking amongst themselves but Colter didn't quite understand them. He had lived among different tribes from time to time, and shared the land with them, but he didn't understand the words of the Blackfoot. But the gestures they made towards him were unmistakable. He tried to look around for any sign of a leader. Maybe he could be reasoned with. It was his only hope.

Soon some warriors moved aside and a middle aged chief, his war bonnet reaching halfway down his back, full of eloquent feathers and beads, came up to him. He didn't speak but made a gesture the rest understood immediately. Colter was moved towards the nearest large tree and tied there, his hands secured around both sides for good measure. Then one of the larger

Indians stepped forward, brandishing a sharp knife. Colter looked him in the eyes – if he was going to meet death, better to see it clearly, he thought.

Running River held the knife in front of the man, his dark black eyes burning like coals in the deepest embers of the war fire. He was slightly amazed that this white man had the audacity to look at him, his conqueror, in the eyes. No matter, he would make him suffer.

But first, the prisoner had to be humbled. Chief Tukamansha made his instructions clear. Running River took the knife and twirled it between his fingers, grinning at the man like an evil demon. Then he took the man's white cotton shirt and, using the knife, cut it away with two quick strokes. Then he did the same with the man's pants until the prisoner was naked. The Indians laughed at the sight and took the discarded clothes, waving them around, whopping and hollering.

Still, Colter's gaze did not waver. Humiliation was just the start, he knew. Would they use him for target practice? He had seen bodies of men killed in such a way. Perhaps they would put him to the rack, and burn him slowly? Burning was a horrible way to go.

After what seemed like an eternity, the warriors again parted to allow the chief access to the prisoner. Colter shifted his eyes from Running River to the new leader who spoke some words to the warriors. Running River took his knife and came around to the back of the tree. Without a word, Colter felt the bonds holding his wrists slacken and he quickly untied himself.

Several Indians grabbed him by the arms and together they followed the chief out into the field beside the river. The hundreds of warriors watched in silence. As he walked past, Colter noticed something different about the Indians, their demeanor slightly more excited – more agitated - than before, but he didn't know if it was significant or not.

After about a hundred yards or so, the small group stopped. Colter shook off the hands that held him and, after a sharp word from the chief, his guards did not restrain him further.

"Walk with me," said the Chief, his first English words he had spoken since the ambush. Colter, a little shaken, stepped forward and started walking into the meadow, the chief beside him. The guards remained where they were.

"What is going on?" asked Colter, trying to remain calm. "You know English, I can see that. Tell me what is happening." He was stark naked and felt more than a little vulnerable. Standing just over six foot in height, Colter was a solid fixture of sinew and muscle. His wavy brown hair fell to his shoulders and his beard of four days lay like a thin carpet on his angular face.

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The aged Blackfoot leader stopped walking and turned towards his captive. "You run fast?" he asked in halting English.

Run fast? Colter thought. What kind of game is this? Desperate to bide some time, he decided to lie. "No, I don't run fast. Bad leg," he replied.

"End come quickly," the chief stated. From under his cloak, he produced a wooden stick. Striking the prisoner on his bare rump, he calmly announced. "Run!"

Colter looked behind him and saw, with a sickening feeling of dread, over six hundred warriors armed solely with spears, give a horrible yell and start chasing after him. The whooping and hollering was so loud, he covered his ears and turned away.

Without another word Colter, barefoot and naked, ran for his life.

Chapter 3

He headed straight across the prairie, knowing the Jefferson River, roughly six miles away, provided his only chance. He had lied to the chief about his running. Among the trappers and hunters of his generation, he was one of the fastest. If he had known the truth, the chief might have second-guessed his choice of sport but, after all, there was really no hope of escape, was there?

The arid land of the prairie was littered with cactus needles and briar patches and his bare feet were bleeding badly after only a mile, but Colter never gave himself the luxury of stopping. The yells and screams of the approaching warriors spurred him to run faster and harder still.

By the fourth mile no one had yet to catch him and he still had another two miles until he reached the river. Once there, he would just have to improvise, but it was his only hope. He dared one backwards glance at this point and saw to his amazement that most of the warriors were about half a mile back, but still running hard. Only one warrior was close to him and he realized with sudden clarity that he would not reach the safety of the river in time. The warrior had his sharp spear held high, but was keeping quiet and soft-footed as he made his approach. Colter decided to grit it out and ran even harder.

Running River was almost there. He knew where the white man was headed and was determined to get to him before he reached it. The rest of his tribesmen would be here soon, but this kill was all his. He smiled at the thought of the man lying helpless on the ground, his spear sticking out of him like a pig on a spit.

By the fifth mile, Colter was exhausted and his body was bleeding and thoroughly worn out. The Indian was almost on him, perhaps thirty yards

away, and he had to do something. Suddenly he felt blood explode from his nose and saw red patches appear on his sweaty chest and seep into his mouth. He had run so hard, he realized he must have blown a blood vessel. *This is it. I'm done.* Colter stopped suddenly and turned around, his arms outstretched, ready to end this here and now.

Running River held his spear high – he was only twenty feet away from his quarry – his prey as they liked to call the captured men forced to play this killing game – and he felt the bloodlust rise up in his head. It was the ultimate pleasure for him – the feeling of a trapped animal who must submit to his own death and beg for mercy. To which none would be given. It was true, this one was especially troublesome and he was forced to run harder today than he had in a long time. The sun would be setting soon, probably within two hours, so it was best to get it over with and return to the village by dusk.

Without warning, he was brought up short. The prey – this white man who had put up a valiant run over the prairie – had stopped and turned to face him, now no more than five feet away. His long spear, which was an effective weapon for mid-range shoots, would be useless here. He tried to throw it down and grab his knife tied on his waist, but in his haste, his feet tripped on the long shaft and he fell head over heels at the foot of his enemy.

Colter, in the span of seconds, saw the Indian approach, the warrior's eyes wide with disbelief as he tumbled forward. The hunted man, seeing salvation where there was none before, grabbed the spear lying on the ground and without a second's thought or hesitation, drove it straight down into the chest of the warrior. The Indian grabbed the shaft with both hands but the spear had gone straight through him, pinning him to the hard earth beneath. Colter bent forward, laying his weight on the spear, exhausted. The eyes of the brave warrior looked up sightless, his face a mask of confusion and incredulity.

But the whooping of the Indians still coming up across the plains brought Colter back to full reality. They had seen from a distance the killing of their tribesman, and would surely be out for blood in the worst way. Already some spears were flying towards him and he turned and ran hard and fast, trying to cover the last mile to the river.

The last mile was probably the longest of John's life. Six hundred warriors who wanted nothing more than to kill him over and over, hang his bloody scalp on their war belt, and dance on his grave, chased him the final distance at a dead run. As he approached the river, the trees began to get more abundant and thicker, undoubtedly benefiting from a good source of water.

As he approached the river, he noticed right away a small island where driftwood had piled up as it came down river. Without missing a step and using the trees for cover, Colter plunged into the river, the cold water stiffening his muscles and gripping his chest like a vice. He came up amidst the driftwood floating in the river and tried to remain as quiet as possible. He remained in the water, keeping his head between two large logs hidden from view. Just as he came up for air again, the warriors reached the river.

They scanned both sides of the river, with some running north and others running south along the banks. Many of the Indians wore black paint on their face or chest in similar fashion to Running River, with leather pants, shirts, and shoes. They had lost their quarry, at least for the moment, but with such overwhelming numbers they had plenty of opportunity to reacquire him. Many Indians waded out into the cold water to search the driftwood.

Others reached the island, which was covered with bushes and smaller trees, searching in vain for the white man. The white man who had killed Running River, one of the bravest and proudest warriors in the tribe. Who wanted to tell Chief Tukamansha that his own son was dead and six hundred of the tribesmen had failed to find the single naked white man who did it?

Colter moved around silently, as he felt the Indians searching the driftwood, sometimes going underwater for very long breathes as he tried desperately to remain hidden. The night was fast approaching now, and he knew eventually the Indians would have to give up. Would they find him? How long could he stay hidden? Wild, horrible yells were heard from all over the river and its banks as angry warriors realized the white man might have slipped out of their grasp! If they only knew how close he really was, Colter thought with a slight smile. But his smile stopped cold when he realized what they would do to him once they found him. They would never allow him a second chance.

As time wore on, the yells from the warriors became louder and more feverish as the frustrated Indians realized they could not keep up the search in the dark. Colter couldn't see them from where he was hidden but he kept his ears open for the next several hours until he made sure the Indians had finally left.

Four hours after darkness fell, the half moon was at its highest point in the sky, illuminating a small part of the river bank. Colter decided it was time to take a look and, seeing no one, he swam to the river's edge on the far side and dragged his body onto the muddy shore.

He had calculated in his mind where the nearest safe haven would be, and decided on Fort Manuel, roughly 300 miles distant. Leaving the Blackfoot

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warriors behind, Colter spent the next seven days and nights walking along the Jefferson, until he finally came upon the trading post, half-starved, naked, sun burnt, and utterly exhausted. But alive. Yes, Colter thought, as he reached the gates of the post. "I am alive."

In 1809, Meriwether Lewis, fresh off his famous expedition to explore the Louisiana Territory, is found dead along the Natchez Trace, a dangerous Indian trail in Tennessee. His partner, William Clark, and four members of their 'Corps of Discovery' crisscross the country during the War of 1812 in search of answers. When the war and the investigation collide in New Orleans, the fate of the young nation hangs in the balance!

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