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Jackson Banks  
writerjacksonbanks@gmail.com  
www.writerjacksonbanks.com

ALLIGATOR RIVER  
by Jackson Banks

## Chapter One

Something was wrong. The reeking odor assaulted Jake, forcing him to take slow, shallow breaths. The source of the smell came into view as he rounded a bend in Milltail Creek. Jake paddled his kayak toward the old hunting cabin, his friend Will beside him.

"Jesus, what the fuck is that smell?" asked Will.

Jake didn't answer. They both knew what it was. They just didn't want to say it out loud. They didn't want it to be true.

The cabin was nestled in cypress and pine trees, its outer walls faded and peeling red paint. Its tin roof was rusted from years of abandonment. Several cypress trees had grown through the dock that served as its front porch and splintered it into pieces. Most of the cabin was hidden behind the overgrown vegetation, but its doorway was visible and stood open and dark.

Unpleasant odors weren't uncommon in the Alligator River

National Wildlife Refuge near the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The marshes gave off a sulfurous aroma of decay at low tide. The boys had been coming to the refuge since they were small. They'd kayak and fish along its paddling trails, always on the lookout for wildlife. Today had been no different on their break from college. They saw several bears during their ten-mile paddle route, making it a perfect day on the river - until now. This smell was something different.

"What do you think died in there?" asked Will. "A raccoon or something?"

"Even in this heat, I don't think a raccoon would give off that much of a stink."

"A bear?"

Jake considered it. "Maybe." He wanted it to be a bear, but he didn't believe it.

"We better go check it out," said Jake.

"Why?" asked Will, laying his paddle across his lap.

"You know why."

Jake continued to paddle, hesitating at each stroke. Will followed behind at a reluctant distance.

They pulled alongside the uneven and splintered dock. Jake put one hand on the planks and pushed down to check its stability.

"Do you think this will hold us?" asked Will.

"I hope so," said Jake.

Although it was a beautiful day, swimming was not what Jake wanted. The refuge was called Alligator River for a reason.

Jake tied his kayak to the splintered wood. Once secured, he shimmed himself up onto the dock and stood carefully, leaning on a cypress tree for balance and support. He flexed his knees a few times to further test the strength of the rotting wood.

"Okay," Jake said.

Will climbed up next to him.

The two moved gingerly toward the darkened door, the dock creaking underneath their weight. Will gagged at the stench as they moved closer.

"Definitely a dead bear," Will said as if trying to reassure himself.

At the sound of rustling from inside the cabin, they froze and held their breath a few feet from the threshold. The rustling sound was getting closer.

Will exhaled. "Hello?" he called out, his voice uncharacteristically high.

Silence.

"Hello is someone in there?" added Jake.

Still no response.

"Hello!" Will yelled, shattering the silence once more.

Jake's heart nearly jumped from his chest.

An opossum scurried out the doorway and disappeared into the brush beyond the dock.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" asked Jake.

"What? We found out what it was, didn't we?"

The two inched forward and stood at the threshold, peering inside. It was dark except for strands of daylight that poured through the doorway and cracks in the old planked siding.

"Which one of us is going first?" asked Will.

Jake shrugged.

"This was your idea, so..."

"Fine," Jake said through clenched teeth. He closed his eyes for a moment, steeling himself for what he imagined he was about to see. He slowly entered the cabin.

After a few moments, Jake sprinted out and to the edge of the dock. He hunched over and vomited into the murky waters of the creek.

"You okay?" asked Will.

Jake shook his head and vomited again.

"What did you see?" asked Will.

Jake couldn't answer. He was fighting his gag reflex.

Will turned from his friend and poked his head through the threshold into the cabin. He quickly joined Jake at the edge of the dock and vomited himself.

"What the fuck?" asked Will once the two were standing again.

"We have to call 911," Jake said as he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Jake dialed the number. He tried to remain calm once the operator answered, but his speech became faster as his mind processed what he had just seen.

"Me and my friend are on the Milltail Creek Paddle Trail at the old hunting cabin," said Jake into the phone, his voice high and shaky. "We need you to send the police. There's a dead body in the cabin."

## Chapter Two

The breeze made the day's heat almost bearable as Brandon Maddox's boat sped up Milltail Creek toward the cabin. Maddox was an officer with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and oversaw the refuge. This was the first time there had been a human body found within the borders, as far as he could recall.

Maddox wore a scowl due to the development. Of course, he wasn't the type anyone would classify as happy in the best of times. Maddox joined the Wildlife Service to get away from people after a long and difficult career, first as a U.S. Marine in Vietnam, then a local police officer, and finally an FBI agent after graduating college on the GI bill. He had seen more violence and mayhem than most and had looked forward to moving to this remote northeastern corner of North Carolina to serve out the rest of his working years with the bears, wolves, and gators rather than the most savage beasts the human population

had to offer.

The familiar smell of death hit Maddox as he neared the cabin. Up ahead were the two college-aged boys who had called 911 waving from the dock. Both were pale with shock.

Maddox tied his boat to one of the cypress trees growing through the dock and disembarked. He looked at the boys from behind his blue-tinted Costa sunglasses and beneath his cap, his features hard and with no trace of empathy.

"Where's the body?"

Jake pointed toward the cabin door.

"Wait here. Don't touch anything."

"How long do we have to stay here?" asked Will, his eyes growing wide.

"Until I say you boys can leave."

Maddox removed the flashlight from his utility belt and clicked it on before he crossed the dim threshold of the cabin. He prepared himself with a deep breath.

It was difficult to see that it was a woman at first. Large, ragged gashes ran the length of her open abdominal cavity. The scavengers had done their job with the insides of the chamber. Her spine was visible through the torn throat. Her eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. Maddox considered the body for a few moments, wishing he could still be surprised at the depravity of the human race after all these years of seeing similar scenes.

Maddox reached for the radio clipped to his uniform's shirt.

"Dispatch, this is Maddox."

"Go ahead, Maddox," came a staticky reply.

"I've confirmed we got a body, and it's in bad shape. Get the coroner and forensics out here as soon as possible. I'm staying on scene to secure the area."

"10-4."

Maddox resisted the urge to look for identification on the body. His days of investigating this type of scene were long over. He preferred to stick with searching coolers of fishing boats for under-sized fish.

Maddox removed his hat and ran his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. He shook his head at no one in particular and walked back outside the cabin where Jake and Will had been waiting as ordered in the blinding sun. Some of their color had begun to return.

"What do you think did that?" asked Jake.

"Likely a bear," said Maddox. The lie was intended to keep the boys calm while they waited for more help to arrive.

### Chapter Three

Jake and Will questioned Maddox more than he had questioned them while they waited for backup.

They asked questions about bear and wolf attacks in a near-hysterical blather. Maddox checked his watch for the fifth time.

The sound of a boat motor approaching from up the creek brought their chatter to an end. Maddox took a sigh of relief.

As it neared, Maddox recognized it as belonging to the Dare County Sheriff's Department. A deputy and Criminal Investigation Division detective were in the patrol boat. They grabbed the last space at the dock, tied up, and disembarked. Both glanced inside the cabin and muttered obscenities under their breath.

While waiting for the forensic unit and coroner to arrive, Detective Daniel Tunstall took Jake and Will's statements. The boys needed to leave the scene as quickly as possible. With their two kayaks tied up to the dock, there wouldn't be space

for more. They were more of a liability than help anyway, and likely already contaminated at least a portion of the scene.

Tunstall didn't think it mattered though. Judging by the gruesome sight, it was obvious to him what had happened, but procedures were procedures.

Both boys were too shaken up to paddle four miles up the creek to the put-in, so Tunstall instructed the deputy to load their kayaks in the patrol boat and take them back.

Just as the patrol boat left, the other boats arrived. The forensic team and coroner disembarked and the dock creaked and groaned under their weight.

"Perhaps you should just wait in your boat," Maddox suggested to the coroner, who appeared to be nearing retirement age. He happily obliged.

The forensic team was young, as if they were fresh out of college, and Maddox thought they were likely inexperienced as the team got to work.

Maddox was comforted by Tunstall's presence, since he was in his forties and had been on the force two decades. Maddox had known him for years. Tunstall at least had the sense to go into the cabin with the forensic technicians to supervise their work. Maddox hung back in the threshold and watched from outside.

The technicians collected samples of blood and hair, and swabbed the deep and large gashes in the body for what Maddox

assumed was saliva. The two photographed around the body and didn't bother with the interior of the cabin. Maddox could tell everyone had already made up their mind about what had occurred.

"I guess I'll turn this investigation over to you," Tunstall said.

"Why's that?" Maddox asked.

"Well, it seems pretty obvious this was a bear attack, doesn't it?"

"Does it?" Maddox didn't entirely blame Tunstall for misreading the situation. North Carolina's Outer Banks weren't exactly the murder capital of the state. Most of the detective's experience had been breaking and entering, rapes, robberies, and lower-level crimes. Drugs were the major offense in the area.

"You don't think so?" asked Tunstall as he loosened his tie. Sweat stains began to appear on his suit. "What do you think it was then? Wolves?"

"I don't think it was an animal at all."

Tunstall was silent for several moments while the technicians looked on. "Are you saying you think a person did this?" he finally asked.

"Yes," Maddox said as if it should have been obvious to anyone who looked inside the cabin.

"Mind telling me why?"

"Sure," said Maddox. "It's simple really. One, why would

this lady even be in this hunting cabin? It's been abandoned for years and is unstable. Even an adventurous sort wouldn't normally come in here due to its remoteness and its condition, and she is wearing heels and jeans - not exactly what one would wear hiking. Second, why would she come in here if there was a bear nearby? Our bears weigh on average five hundred pounds. If one of them was around, either in the cabin or out there in this brush, she would hear it. Black bears are skittish and prefer to steer clear of humans, so they wouldn't have approached her in most cases."

Tunstall looked around the dim cabin and found it hard to deny the truth of what Maddox was saying.

"The body is the other thing," continued Maddox. "Why is more of her not in pieces if an animal tore into her? Where are the tracks? Look at all this blood everywhere; beneath her, splattered on the walls and ceiling. Are you telling me an animal managed to do this to her but was smart enough, or careful enough, and just plain lucky enough, to get back out of this cabin without leaving blood-covered tracks all over the place?"

The technicians burned with embarrassment. Tunstall was better at bluffing and nodded in agreement.

"You make some good points," Tunstall said. Confusion filled his face as if he was trying to make sense of how, or why,

a person would commit such a crime against what had once been an attractive young woman.

"Start photographing the rest of the cabin and checking for prints on the counters and threshold. They should be easy to spot with all the dust," Tunstall instructed the technicians.

Maddox left the cabin and walked down the dock for some sunlight and fresh air. The stench was not much better, but at least he didn't have to look at the victim while trying not to gag. Tunstall followed him.

"You used to be law enforcement, right?" Tunstall asked Maddox.

"Technically I still am."

"I mean, well..."

"You mean real law enforcement?"

"That's not quite how I was intending to say it, but yeah."

Maddox nodded. "I spent twenty years in the FBI."

"What are you doing here, then?"

"Got sick of people. Got sick of dealing with shit like this."

"I can understand that," Tunstall replied, glancing back at the cabin. "If I'm being honest though, this is the most interesting case I've ever had in this job."

"I don't think she finds it very interesting," chided Maddox.

"I suppose not."

They stared across the creek and watched a blue heron take flight.

"I could sure use your help on this," said Tunstall.

"Not in my job description anymore, Detective," replied Maddox. "But, if you need a little advice you know where to find me."

"I would appreciate it."

The two stood in silence again and enjoyed the sunlight and views of cypress, pine, and cedar reflecting off the brackish brown water of the creek.

"Detective," called out the female technician from inside the cabin. "You're going to want to see this."

Tunstall walked through the doorway once more to find her standing with a plastic evidence bag in her hand. Maddox followed him into the cabin.

The technician held the bag so both men could get a good look at what she had found wedged in the corner between a cabinet and old chair.

Tunstall looked at the machete through the bag. It was black from handle to tip, and a portion of the back half of the blade was serrated. There were flecks of a reddish brown all along the straight sharp edge of the knife and some more around the handle.

"This must be the murder weapon, if this was in fact a murder," the male technician said.

"I don't know about that, Jim" Tunstall said. "That's probably rust on the blade and the handle. I mean, look at this place. It and everything in it hasn't been touched for decades."

Maddox cleared his throat. "I think he's right about it being the murder weapon."

Detective Tunstall turned to look at Maddox. "Why do you say that?"

"If it was rust there would be more of it. The whole blade would probably be rusted if it had been original to this cabin with all the humidity and dampness this place gets. The back half of the blade is fairly pristine."

"Well, if that's the case, then why in the world would the killer leave it in here for us to find?"

Maddox shrugged. It was a valid question. If the killer was smart, he could have disposed of it by throwing it in the thick bush surrounding the cabin, or into the creek.

"I don't know," said Maddox. "Some criminals are just stupid. You said you found that over there in the corner out of sight?"

"Yes, that's correct," said the female technician. "My name's Sarah, by the way."

"Probably tossed it over there to try to hide it,"

continued Maddox, ignoring the introduction. "Maybe that's the best they could think of in the moment. They probably didn't think anybody would ever find her way out here."

Tunstall appeared to consider this for a moment before giving a slight nod.

"We'll begin processing it as soon as we get back to the lab and will let you know, Detective," said Jim.

"Please do," said Tunstall. "Are we done here?"

Jim and Sarah nodded.

The four walked out of the cabin and motioned to the coroner that it was safe to proceed with removing the body. Jim, Sarah, and Tunstall got in a boat and left. Maddox, since it was his refuge, stayed behind and helped the coroner load the body bag into the other boat.

Maddox stood on the dock as he watched them round the bend in the creek and travel out of sight. It was hard to believe that something so gruesome could mar such a beautiful place. Violence was an everyday occurrence in the refuge with its large population of black bears and wolves, but not against people. Deadly encounters were virtually unheard of despite the large number of hikers that came through each year.

Maddox glanced back toward the cabin with a gnawing feeling in his gut.

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