

Hidden Bones

Murder in Swartz Creek

Crime Thriller

by

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Credits

Sally Beckner – Copy review and editing

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to our precious dog Roxy, who sadly passed away while writing this book. I based the dog character in this story on our dear Roxy. She was my writing companion and my wife's walking buddy. Roxy would often stay up late with me as I wrote. Little did I know that her time was limited when I started this book. She was a Shepherd, Collie, Poodle mix, and a super dog and friend to all who knew her. We miss her dearly. Rest in peace, Roxy. We loved you with all our hearts.

Roxy is pictured on the front cover

Chapter 1

The male teenager, with light brown hair and small stature, shivered in the cold air of the dark wooden barn. His hands were tightly bound behind him with a rope around a dark wooden post. His arms bore the scratches and slivers from being tied up for so long. A second rope was tied around his neck, preventing him from bending over, and an oily rag wrapped around his mouth to prevent him from screaming. Except for short periods when he was given water and minimal food, his mouth was gagged. The boy's legs were bound to the post as they ached from hours of standing. A crack in the barn door was the only thing that told him it was night.

Any effort to call out for help was muffled by the gag in his mouth. While he didn't know where he was, he knew it was somewhere in the countryside. The cold only added to his discomfort and feeling of helplessness. He feared the next time the doors opened, his captor would step in to continue the abuse.

Only two days prior, he had been in class at his high school. How could he have been so gullible to fall for the charisma and promises of his captor? Maybe the fact that he had few high school friends made him vulnerable to the faked friendship. Why did he agree to meet up with this monster? Of course, he didn't know him to be a monster at the time. The promise of a job with potential college credit sounded too good to be true. As it turned out, that was the case. And now, he only longed for his life and freedom. He worried about what his mother must be thinking. Was she trying to find

him? Would the police rescue him? Finally, exhaustion overtook his pain, his eyes grew heavy, and he slowly fell asleep.

The boy was awakened when the barn door opened. He could see it was early dawn as the sun brightened the eastern sky.

The man walked up to him and stared. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry, but today is your last day."

The boy's eyes widened with fear. He tried to speak, but the gag and dryness of his mouth prevented him from doing anything but making grunting noises.

"I can't keep you here, and I can't let you go. You'd go to the police, and that would be the end of me. And I'm not going to jail."

The boy shook his head back and forth, trying to communicate he would not tell anyone. He pulled his arms, hoping to break free of his bondage.

"It's unfortunate because I like you. But we all have our burdens to bear. Yours was to be my friend for a short time. Mine is that I must now kill you. Mind you, I don't want to kill you. I'm not the type of person that kills for no reason. I just can't trust you to keep quiet."

The boy's eyes were wide with fear as he continued shaking his head back and forth, still trying to convince his captor he wouldn't talk. He shivered from the cold air and increased fear of what was about to happen.

"I know," said the man as he looked into the scared eyes of the sixteen-year-old boy. "This is the hardest part."

The man reached up with both hands, cupping the boy's face with one hand on each cheek. He looked directly into the

boy's frightened eyes and smiled. He then gently slid his hands down to the boy's neck, one hand on each side. The boy shook his head back and forth while letting out a squeal.

The man looked him in the eye and said again, "I'm sorry. I really did like you." He then slowly tightened his grip around the boy's thin neck.

Unable to use his hands or feet to defend against the attack, the boy gagged, then soon succumbed to the iron grip strangling his throat. Once he stopped breathing and his body went limp, the man released his grip. He then cut the ropes holding the boy captive. He picked the boy up, slung him over his shoulder, and carried him out of the barn.

Chapter 2

Eighteen Years Later

It was mid-morning on a warm September Saturday in Swartz Creek, Michigan. The leaves on the oak, red maple, and sugar maple trees were morphing into the rainbow colors of yellow, orange and red. The changing colors and dark green pines created a mosaic of fall beauty. The creek, for which the town was named, rippled through town at a slower pace than in the spring and early summer when melting snow and spring showers filled the creeks and rivers. It was as close to a perfect fall day as possible in the little town of Swartz Creek, which was precisely why Dylan Hudson and his best friend, Jason Chapman, wanted to head to the nearby ponds to fish.

Dylan Hudson was fourteen years old and had just started his freshman year at Swartz Creek High School with his neighbor and best friend, fourteen-year-old Jason Chapman. Dylan was slender with blond hair and blue eyes, which he inherited from his mother. His friend, Jason, had darker skin, brown eyes, and curly black hair, the result of being a mixed race. His mother was African American, and his father was Caucasian. Jason's athletic

physique was like his father's. Both boys had planned to play in the woods along the creek and small ponds behind the property where Dylan lived. They often liked to look for turtles, frogs or fish, mainly for catfish and small sunfish. However, Dylan's mother, Karen, was hesitant to allow Dylan to go.

"You know I have to work today, right?" asked Karen Hudson, a physician assistant at the local Swartz Creek Clinic.

"Sure, Mom," said Dylan. "But we can't just sit home all day. It's beautiful outside. I promise we will be careful and back in time for dinner."

"Jason, have you talked to your mother about this?" asked Karen.

"Yes, she's okay with it," answered Jason.

Karen thought momentarily as she brushed her blond hair back behind her right ear. "All right, you can go if you stick together and take your sister and Roxy."

"Oh, come on, Mom, do we have to take Abby?"

"Yes. She is only twelve, and I don't want her to be alone all day. And you need to exercise Roxy. Plus, I'm more comfortable when Roxy is with you out in the woods," said Karen.

Roxy was a six-year-old mixed-breed dog the Hudson family rescued as a puppy. She looked similar to a Golden Retriever but was actually a mix

of German Shephard, Collie, and Poodle. Her color was a golden-reddish brown. She had a long snout and ears that flopped over, much like a Collie. Roxy was energetic and friendly, but Karen knew Roxy was also protective of the family. She still had vivid memories of the time three male teenagers went missing in Swartz Creek approximately eighteen years ago. She always believed the heartache and trauma caused in the community during that time influenced her sometimes overly protective mothering.

“And take your phone with you,” said Karen.

Dylan wasn’t happy about having his little sister tag along, but he knew Mom wouldn’t let him go otherwise. “All right, we’ll take Abby with us,” agreed Dylan.

“Good,” said Karen. “Your dad will be home around five o’clock. Be sure to be here by then.”

“Okay,” responded Dylan.

“And stay out of the water!”

“Okay, Mom.”

Having overheard the conversation, Abigail (Abby for short) was happy to be going. She liked going to the creek and ponds but knew Dylan would not be thrilled with her tagging along.

After Karen had left for work, Dylan told Abby she would have to watch over Roxy.

“For the whole time?” asked Abby.

“Yes. We don’t even want you to come. You’re only going because Mom won’t allow us to go without you.”

Abby stuck her tongue out at Dylan, then turned and walked away.

Jason returned after going home to get his fishing pole and small tackle box. “Are we ready to go?” he asked.

“Yep,” said Dylan. “Abby, are you ready?”

“I’m ready,” replied Abby as she descended the stairs from her upstairs bedroom. She had a small white nylon net in her right hand and Roxy on the end of a leash in her left hand.

“Where’s your fishing pole?” asked Jason.

“I decided to work on my insect project for school. You don’t want me around anyway, so I’ll look for bugs while you fish.”

“Fine with me,” barked Dylan. “Let’s go.”

The Hudson’s lived in a more rural area on the south side of town in a small cul-de-sac off Seymour Road. Their home sat on a one-and-a-half-acre lot that bordered a wooded area. The creek ran southwest along the backside of the wooded area. Between their home and the creek was a mix of woods, farmland, and several small ponds. About a half mile to the northwest was an old Indian burial ground, named the Chippewa Burial Grounds.

Dylan, Jason, and Abby hiked about a quarter mile to a small pond. Given the cooler night

temperatures, most of the summer algae had died. This was good, as Dylan knew less algae was better for fishing. While Dylan and Jason readied their fishing poles, Abby unleashed Roxy, allowing her to jump into the pond and splash around, as she so loved to do.

“You’re scaring the fish!” shouted Dylan.
“And I don’t think mom will like Roxy smelling like pond water.”

“She loves the water,” replied Abby.

“Well, take her somewhere else,” grumbled Dylan. “We’ll never catch fish with her splashing around.”

“Come on, Roxy, let’s go find somewhere else to play,” commanded Abby. Abby had to summon Roxy several times before she hopped out of the water, shook herself off, and saddled up next to Abby. “Let’s go look for some critters,” said Abby.

Abby headed north on a weed-covered path leading through a stand of fall-colored trees. After she left, Dylan and Jason baited their fishing lines with worms from a plastic whipped cream bowl, now serving as their worm container.

The boys fished the pond for catfish for the next hour or so. Jason caught two small catfish, while Dylan caught one. Neither boy kept the fish; they just enjoyed the process of catching them.

“Where did Abby go?” asked Jason.

“She went off looking for bugs or something,” replied Dylan.

“Yeah, but we haven’t seen her since she left,” said Jason.

Dylan cocked his head and thought for a moment. He then lifted his head, cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Abby, where are you?” He got no response. He yelled a couple more times and still got no response.

“Maybe she went home,” said Jason.

“Yeah, maybe,” agreed Dylan. “But I don’t think so. She would have told me she was going.”

“Roxy!” shouted Dylan, “Come here!” Roxy did not come.

“What do you think?” asked Jason.

“I’m getting a bit worried. Abby shouldn’t have gone so far away that she can’t hear me,” replied Dylan. “We need to go look for her. Come on.”

Dylan led the way as they headed north into the woods. They followed an overgrown path for about 200 feet. Dylan stopped and again called out for Abby. Still, no response.

“I hope she’s okay,” said Jason. “Where could she have gone?”

“I don’t know,” grumbled Dylan, “but it pisses me off for her to take off like this. She should have stayed home.”

“What if something happened to her?” asked Jason.

“Like what? She’s probably just lost and can’t find her way back.”

“I think Roxy could have found her way back,” replied Jason.

Dylan paused. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Now you’re making me worried. Let’s keep walking. If we don’t find her, I’m in big trouble.”

The boys continued walking down the path, occasionally pushing aside hanging branches. Dylan and Jason called out to Abby and Roxy as they walked.

“Maybe you should call your mom,” suggested Jason.

“No, we just need to find her. My mom would be real pissed if she knew we lost Abby.”

The boys continued for about fifteen minutes until they came upon an open field surrounded by wire fencing. Across the field, they observed an old, white, two-story farmhouse. An old green Ford F-150 pickup was parked near the house.

“Who lives there?” asked Jason.

“I think it’s some old man.”

“Do you think Abby might be up there somewhere?”

“No. Why would Abby go up to some old farmhouse? She knows better than that.”

“Where do we look from here?” asked Jason.

“Let’s go back. Maybe Abby’s returned and looking for us.”

The boys started the march back to the fishing pond, occasionally calling for Abby. As they drew closer to the pond, Dylan heard Abby calling out, “Dylan! Where are you?”

Dylan sighed and immediately felt a sensation of relief. He bent over with his hands on his knees, took a deep breath, and shook his head. He then stood up straight.

“Abby! We’re over here. Just stay where you are.”

After five more minutes, the boys reached the pond where the woods opened. Abby stood near the pond next to a wet and muddy Roxy, who had something significant in her mouth. Dylan could not make out what it was.

“Where have you been!” shouted Abby as Dylan and Jason approached. “I’ve been looking all over for you!”

“Me?” asked Dylan. “Where have YOU been? You were supposed to stay in this area!”

“I would have, but I couldn’t find Roxy.”

“What do you mean you couldn’t find Roxy? And look at her. She’s all muddy. What is that in her mouth?”

“I think it’s a bone,” replied Abby.

“A bone? Just explain what happened, Abby.”

“I was looking for bugs like I told you. I thought Roxy was close to me, but she was gone when I looked for her. It took me a while to find her. She finally came running to me with this bone in her mouth.”

“Where did she get this bone?” asked Dylan.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe Roxy found the old Indian burial grounds,” offered Jason.

Dylan looked at Jason. “You think this is from an Indian grave?”

“I don’t know. It’s just an idea.”

“Give me the bone, Roxy,” said Dylan as he took the bone from Roxy’s mouth. “This is a large bone. It could be from a cow or something.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Jason.

“You didn’t see where Roxy got this?” asked Dylan.

“No. She came running to me with the bone in her mouth.”

“Maybe Roxy can lead us back to where she got it,” suggested Jason.

“Maybe,” agreed Dylan. “But we need to get home now. We will have to shower Roxy off before letting her back in the house and before Mom gets home. We can always come back tomorrow and search for where she got it. She obviously had to dig for it. Look how muddy she is.”

“I can go after church tomorrow,” said Jason.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” agreed Dylan.
“We’ll pretend to go fishing again. Now, Abby, you can’t say anything about this to Mom, or we will all be in trouble. You got that?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t say anything.”

“Okay. Let’s stash this bone under a bush for now.”

“Why can’t I take it home?” asked Abby.

“Maybe tomorrow. I want to try to find out where Roxy got it first. There could be a whole cow or pig skeleton out there somewhere.”

“Or a dug-up Indian grave,” replied Jason.

“If that’s the case, we won’t be showing this bone to anyone,” said Dylan.

Back home, Dylan directed Abby to use the outside hose to clean the mud off Roxy. Meanwhile, Dylan and Jason discussed the bone.

“Roxy must have found some animal remains somewhere,” suggested Jason.

“Well, yeah,” agreed Dylan. “It will be interesting to find out what she dug up. I don’t think it was big enough to come from a cow, and I don’t know of any nearby pig farms. Most likely another dog or coyote. Maybe even a wolf.”

Dylan opened his iPad and searched for dog and coyote skeletons. Both boys studied the drawings and photos that popped up.

“It looks like it could be the large upper bone of a dog’s back leg,” said Jason. “At least that looks the closest.”

“Yeah, I can see the rounded ends like the bone Roxy found,” agreed Dylan. “That’s probably it. Maybe a coyote or wolf.”

“It could also be a human bone,” said Jason.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, in our biology class last year, we studied the human skeleton. It also looks kind of like a human bone. Your mom could tell us.”

“I’m not showing her that bone until we are sure Roxy didn’t dig up an Indian grave. We need to go back tomorrow to find out.”

The sliding back door opened, and Roxy hopped into the room with her tail wagging. She stopped in the kitchen and shook herself off, sending tiny water droplets everywhere.

“Abby!” yelled Dylan. “Why did you let her in all wet?”

Abby came through the door. “She shook off outside. I thought she was done.”

“Go get a towel and clean this up. Mom will be home soon.”

“Why do I have to clean everything up?”

“Because it was you who allowed Roxy to go dig up some bones.”

As she walked away, Abby stuck her tongue out at Dylan.

“Do you know where the burial site is?” asked Jason.

“Yes, I’ve been there before. It’s on a dirt road just off Seymour Road. Woods and farmland surround it. We probably passed it looking for Abby.”

“What time should we go?”

“We have church and then Sunday dinner at one o’clock. Be here at two, and I’ll be ready,” said Dylan.

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” replied Jason as he walked out the door.

Thirty minutes after Jason had left, Karen Hudson arrived home from work. “How did your fishing go?”

“We caught a couple of catfish,” said Dylan.

“What about you, Abby?” asked Karen.

“I just looked for insects and turtles.”

“Hmmm,” sighed Karen. “It looks like Roxy had a bath. Did you let her in the water?”

Dylan looked at Abby, hoping she wouldn’t say more than she should.

“No,” said Abby. “But she did get dirty digging in the dirt. I had to clean her off when we got back.”

“Thank you, Abby. I appreciate that.”

“We’re going to go again tomorrow if that’s okay,” said Dylan. “It was a lot of fun catching those catfish.”

“Not until after Sunday dinner.”

“Oh, we know. Jason’s coming over at two o’clock.”

Karen smiled, “Okay.”