

Captain Walt Lincoln

## The Ghost of the Lagoon

by David M. H. Butler

Shots still ringing in his ears, a frenzied, wild-eyed man crashed into the cold, damp loneliness of a swamp. Hugging a tree he gazed back.

Had anyone been able to follow him? Was he safe? Was it timing or just bad luck that had foiled the careful planning of the last ten days?

With a wrenching shudder he thought of his buddy, dead outside a bank, his haunting expression staring up from the cold pavement. His last breaths played out, surrounded by the props of a ten cent detective novel; a gun, pooling blood, and a black valise, the wealth they'd plotted to steal lying silently within.

Walt Lincoln, how he hated that name and the tall blond man who possessed it. The murderer, the killer of his friend. This detective who had killed so many men in their quests of glory. Walt Lincoln, it wasn't a big name, it wasn't outstanding, but the man behind it ... where did he get his luck? Was there no stopping him?

Louis Nails, a name that had brought him jeers since his school days. "With Loose Nails yer house would fall down". Even one of the guys at the bakery had somehow heard of the old taunt and had picked up on it. Now he stood in the shambles of a plan made with a dead man, his brooding mind dwelling on the person who had foiled their plans.

The man slumped against a tree and looked around. He was safe for now but he had to move fast and make plans.

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## A Captain Lincoln Mystery

"..Name's Richard Casa." Police Chief Kennel's voice broke the silence.

Walt Lincoln glanced down at the body on the morgue table and scratched his ear. "Do we know who was with him? Any leads yet?"

"No luck on 'ski mask two' he seems to have gotten clean away and, so far, no one has reported seeing him without the mask on."

"If this guy's mask hadn't snagged on the door, they both would have made it down that alley before I could have gotten out of my car," Lincoln mused, "The motivation to risk armed robbery will never cease to amaze me."

"It's a complex world, Walt. One man's greed is another man's entrepreneurial spirit," Kennel returned. "Thanks for your help this afternoon, we'll keep you informed if anything develops."

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"The weather's been looking pretty good, and with business being slow and all, I've planned a little vacation at a lagoon not too far from here." Carl Adams looked up from his drink to meet Lincoln's eyes. "You know, a little camping, maybe some fishing to renew the old spirit."

"Sound pretty fine, been awhile since I've seen much detective action myself. Where is it your heading?"

"Lonely Lagoon, over near the county line. During hunting season the place is packed, right now it should be real quiet and peaceful; a different pace from that of a private investigator," Adams replied.

Walt downed his drink and waved a no-thanks to the waitress who was gesturing that they have a second round. "Ah, the great outdoors .. always been my first love. It's good to get away and do something different."

"Sure can't hurt me!" Adams chuckled.

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Lincoln awoke to his wife's gentle, but persistent nudge.

"What's up Jackie?" he asked groggily

"It's Jim on the phone. He wants to speak with you," She replied kissing him on the cheek.

He swung his feet over the edge of the bed and accepted the telephone. "What's up, Jim?"

"Carl Adams ... he was found dead this morning. Floating in Lonely lagoon." Chief Kennel's voice was solemn.

"Carl, dead ... why it was only three days ago I was talking him. What happened, an accident?" Lincoln didn't sound like he believed that.



"We're not really sure. He drown, but the initial investigation didn't turn up any sign of foul play," Kennel answered. "However a series of strange coincidences have occurred at this Lonely Lagoon. A police officer and another detective are both missing and last reported seen at.."

"Lonely lagoon," Lincoln finished. "I guess it's time I checked this situation out."

"I was hoping you'd feel that way, you are the best outdoorsman I can count on. And that's what we need for this stake-out. If you need any support from the department.." the Chief knew this offer would go untaken.

"Thanks, but no. I think I'll work a little better with the freedom that going alone provides."

Lincoln wasn't particularly a loner but he'd grown to be self-reliant and the death and missing person reports gave him a wariness to expose anyone but himself to the potential dangers. "A cool head and a low profile," he thought, "that's what is needed here."

"I'll be right down, Jim. As soon as I can get a briefing from your investigation team, I'll be on my way."

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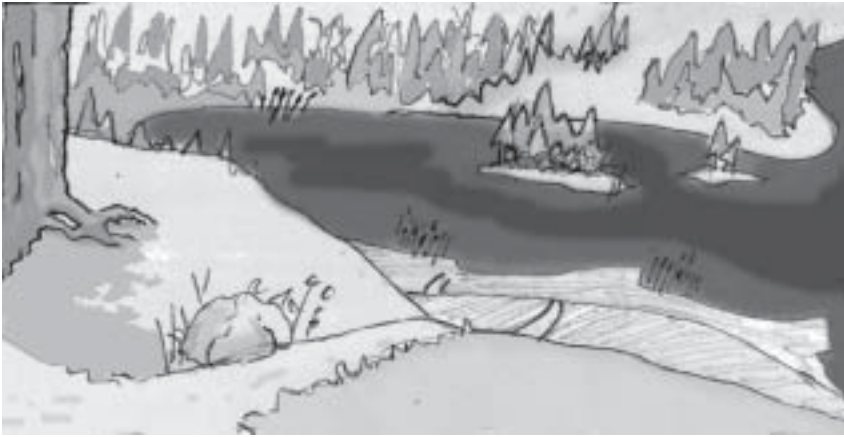
Rumbling softly below him, Lincoln's car rolled smoothly through the city and out onto the unincorporated county roads. It was late morning yet the morning's fog

## A Captain Lincoln Mystery

still hadn't lifted. It tended to feed an uncomfortableness Walt felt. He couldn't place the feeling; was it the death of a friend ... fear of something unknown ... was his mind trying to tell him something?

About a half-mile from the lagoon he parked his car and threw on a small backpack. He adjusted the shoulder straps, gave a pat under his arm to check for his gun, and started off down the road.

Reaching the lagoon, he made his first survey from the road above. The lagoon swung inland as an arm of a slow river, it actually got quite wide not too far off the highway, and there seemed to be a couple small islands encompassed by the lagoon.



One seemed a little higher and broader than the other. Lincoln could see a small trail leading from the road off around the end of the lagoon through a low brushy marsh.

“Not a lot of cover here,” He thought as he started down the trail towards the camping spot where Carl Adams had stayed. He

knew that the camp equipment had been removed by the police, but it served as a starting place and he might turn up some clue.

Nothing seemed to remain.

Lincoln's mind returned to a fact he'd learned in his briefing, not only was the camp intact, but Adams wallet and money clip were still in his pocket.

An accident? He didn't think so, and he couldn't forget the other two lawmen who were now missing.

As Lincoln looked around everything had a grey-green look about it, and the damp cool mist rising from the lagoon only made it grayer.

Walt kept circling out from the camp, scanning the ground for anything. A broken clump of cattails caught his eye. He tried to read the signs about the area, possibly a scuffle here or something being dragged. It wasn't much but he followed the faint signs in the hopes of finding something more substantial.

As Walt neared the edge of the lagoon he heard something a short distance behind him. He spun around to see something white, looking vaguely ethereal in the

mist, glide past about 30 feet away.

Lincoln crouched low to the ground and shook his head. “Whoa, baby, grab hold of yourself.”

A low, moaning wail filled the air around Lincoln’s head. He slipped off the backpack. He couldn’t see the figure anymore and he didn’t want to leave himself open to an unknown assailant. Lincoln slid silently into the water, listened a moment longer to the insistent wail, then ducked his head under and swam a short distance away to wait.

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Walt could hear the moaning getting further away as pulled himself from the water. The noise seemed to be out over the lagoon, then suddenly it stopped.

“Did it see me or was that just its daily constitutional.” the attempt at humor did small benefit to Walt as he stood there in his wet clothes and dampened mood.

Walt retrieved his pack and sat down to clean the water from his gun and have something to eat. As he worked his mind pondered the white shape. Ghosts or UFO’s seemed a little too fantastic a notion to believe. Was this connected to the death, some warped mind playing on peoples fears, or could it be just some practical joke.

Picking up his things Lincoln decided to try and follow the general direction the “ghost” had taken. He soon reached the waters’ edge. Looking out he realized that the larger island was not that far away and the larger trees on it provided much better cover than the marsh he was in. He judged the distance trying to decide whether to swim or find some sort of boat. If he swam he’d have to protect his gun and couldn’t easily take his pack, but in a boat, if he could even find one, he’d be an open target to a sniper on the island.

Wrapping his gun, shoes and some fruit from his pack in a double layer of plastic, Lincoln hid his pack in some brush and slipped into the lagoon as quietly as possible. It was a good three lap swim and Walt determined to do as much of it underwater as possible. Even being a strong swimmer, Walt’s clothes dragged at him and he found himself surfacing more than he wished.

Treading water to catch his breath before the last lap, Walt gazed about uneasily. He had a sudden feeling of being watched and ducked under before being ready for the last haul. He was forced to surface with about half the distance left to go.

A clap like thunder broke the calm and a plume of water just in front of Walt indicated where the bullet had struck. Walt gulped a half breath of air and dove under

## A Captain Lincoln Mystery

as a second explosion erupted from the island. Walt's mind was in turmoil he had to get to the island and get into the trees with out getting shot and with only a half lung full of air.

With a grim resolve and sure strokes, Lincoln angled slightly away from the direction of the gun-fire, as a fire began to burn in his chest. Reaching shore he left the lagoon running. The bullet hit him seconds before he made the safety of the trees. Pain knifed through his right arm as he dove head first into the brush dead ahead of him and rolled behind the trunk of a tree. Another bullet whistled through the underbrush and as the retort of the weapon faded, a mocking laughter rolled over the island. The realization that this wasn't a ghost but a lunatic gave Walt a greater anxiety than the reverse would have.

Walt pressed in close to the base of the tree a surveyed his situation. The fire that had been burning in his chest moved to his arm. Walt pulled back his sleeve and felt around the wound. The bullet had taken a hunk of skin with it but hadn't lodged or hit bone or anything vital. Ripping a piece from the tail of his shirt he made a tourniquet for his arm then sat back silently regaining his wind and allowing the chill of mild shock to pass.

As his strength returned he opened his plastic pack, put his shoes on and ate a small piece of fruit. He checked his gun and put it in his holster. His damp clothes made it hard to stay warm in the shade of the woods but the fog was lifting and with luck it would heat up before the afternoon was over.

Lincoln couldn't help but think that things were not going well. He was trapped for the present on the island, a participant in a deadly game of hide and seek. His opponent seemed to have the home court advantage and Walt felt a clawing pang in his stomach. He tried moving his arm and winced.

"Times up, though," thought Lincoln, "This can still be my game, I've still got a good arm and a couple hours of daylight. Time to find me a sniper."

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Over two hours past. Lincoln's head was beginning to throb. The blood loss wasn't bad, but the pain was draining him.

Lincoln cocked his head — "What was that .. the wind in the trees or was it? or was it —" He stopped short in the middle of his thoughts. Up ahead he could see a white something through the trees.

Silent as a cat Lincoln moved up. The dying sunlight cast forbidding shadows to surround him. As he grew nearer, a figure, that, in the gloom almost resembled smoke,



seemed to shimmer slightly as the wind and dying sun played on it. Without warning it suddenly whirled and aimed itself straight at Lincoln coming on in a rush.

Lincoln hit the ground and his automatic jerked twice spitting flame and lead. The bullets screamed through the air and were consumed by the smoke. Lincoln's eyes stood fixed; the figure still moved. An explosion of brilliant light burst over head, blinding Walt.

"A magnesium flare," He thought, rolling under some bushes to avoid detection. When he looked up again there was no one there.

"Is this ghost character the same who shot at me? If so why didn't he shoot just now. And I did see those two bullets hit dead center..." Lincoln made his way cautiously to the spot where the ghost had been. It was too dark and he couldn't tell if there was any blood around.



Walt looked around, then quickly moved on. A short time later he decided it was getting late and chances were slim that he'd find his quarry until morning. Finding a secluded area, he pulled some brush and branches over himself and soon, despite the pain, was asleep.

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The first thing Lincoln focused on the next morning, was his arm. He shook his head and hoped he could get to a doctor before the day was through. He ate his last piece of fruit and broke down his gun to make sure it was ready for the day ahead. Flicking a few specks of grit from the barrel, he snapped the gun back to one piece.

Walt glanced at his watch "7 am, a little later than I'd hoped," He thought, standing up and sweeping the area with a cautious eye. "I guess the place to start is back at the spot where we had our little conversation last night."

Reaching the area Lincoln made a quick but careful search. Indeed, he could find no sign of blood; but there was a slight track leading away from the area though the path seemed eerily devoid of any footprints. Rather than risking an immediate foray down the path, Walt pulled himself up into a nearby tree for a better view.

## A Captain Lincoln Mystery

There was a slight clearing just off to his north and no signs of movement on the island, but the island was far from being easily read. Walt could see across the lagoon, past the marsh and up to the road. Civilization was so close, he'd almost lost sight of that, maybe he should make an attempt to cross the lagoon and get to a doctor. But the very arm that needed attention was what kept him trapped on this island until the risk of the sniper had been eliminated.

Lincoln mused a few moments longer and began to descend from the tree, suddenly his eye caught a shape near the clearing that seemed both incongruous and yet appropriate. He scrambled from the tree and silently stole along the path towards the object.

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"A grave stone?" Walt touched the cold, grey slab. "A ghost... and a grave stone." This was getting strange. He'd been shot at by a sniper (was it the ghost?), he'd been attacked by a ghost who seemingly retreated when he had been shot at, and now this granite tombstone on a marshy little island. This was either an elaborate game or an amazing set of coincidences. Could this be the resting place of the two missing lawmen? or was it put here as a prop in this macabre game that was being played out.

Lincoln looked down at the inscription on the stone, the date on it showed that the marker had been put up for a man who had been dead twenty years. Walt took hold of the stone and pulled it toward him then pushed on it. The slab showed no signs of moving.

"Probably, this was stolen from some graveyard," Lincoln thought, mentally filing the name as another possible clue.

As he began to move around the grave stone, Lincoln's ears suddenly perked up and a chill ran down his back; but it was too late. He spun around just in time to see a rifle level on him. Behind the gun stood a white clad figure.

"Welcome to my parlor, Mr. Lincoln." the voice was almost the sound of the wind.

The "ghost" stepped up to the side of the of the grave and tapped the stone with his foot. Lincoln heard a spring click and a section of land sprung up like a door.

"Please enter," came the terse command from his captor.

Walt stepped onto a ladder and climbed down. The ghost followed quickly, rifle always on Walt. "Your gun — drop it to the floor," The unearthly voice of the figure demanded.



Walt pulled out his gun and dropped it to the ground. “Nice grave you’ve got here,” He forced a smile. “all the comforts of home.”

There was no reply from his captor, he merely began tying Walt’s arms behind his back. “Please don’t let the pain bother you. It won’t last long, as neither will you.”

“Ah, strangled or drowned, may I guess?”

“Mr. Adams was merely a pawn to bring the king in check.”

“Flattery will get you no where,” Walt coolly replied. Seeing his enemy answered a lot of Walt’s questions and gave him a strange feeling of relief. “it’s a king I am, well!”

“And soon a dead one, Mr. Lincoln, Have no doubts,” Sneered the ghost. “Richard Casa will be avenged and others like him.”

Walt recognized the name. “Um, So I’d risk guessing that you are ‘Ski-mask two’.”

The nickname seemed to shake the ghost, but he merely replied, “I am the spirit of all who oppose you.”

“And what of the other two law men — what has happened to them?”

“That, my friend, is no concern of yours,” Retorted the ghost. “Just worry about what is to happen to you.”

“Which is?” inquired Walt.

“Death.”

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Time dragged slowly. The ghost was obviously playing a waiting game, sapping Lincoln’s strength and will power. Trying to maintain a fear in him that would steal his spirit and leave every advantage in the hands of ghost. Walt could see this and marshaled his strength while trying to feign just the opposite.

Still, an uneasiness crept through him. This foe was clever, a twisted mind nourished on hatred. Walt kept his mind working on plans of escape, but there was little to work with. Would this ghost make his death look like an accident or would it be an outright killing? Would his opponent make any mistakes to give Walt his chance at a break for freedom, that one split second to gain control of the situation. Walt let his head seem to slump a little further.

## A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“Ready for the festivities?” The ghost’s eerie whisper came out with a hint of excitement. He carefully untied Lincoln’s feet, only to re-tie them with a hobble which allowed him to walk in short steps.

Lincoln looked carefully about keeping up his act of resignation yet not letting a thing pass unnoticed. “Wouldn’t miss this for the world.” He made it sound half-hearted but defiant. He was Walt Lincoln, after all.

He was led up the ladder and outside. From there he was taken to a high spot on the far side of the island. A stake stood lonely in the middle of a clearing.

“What is this?” Walt didn’t like the looks of this at all. “Are you going to leave me to starve and bake in the sun?”

“You’ll cook all right! Your sentence is specific; you will be burned at the stake. Your charred body will then be hoisted up and flown over your city hall on its flag pole,” Boasted the ghost.

Walt shook his head. “Egad man, you are mad — you can’t know what you are doing.”

“Oh yes, but I do — and I call it revenge!” Cackled the spirit.

“And this is what happened to the others?”

“Oh no, they were merely shot. Each is buried in his own backyard. They’ll turn up someday, I imagine.” the ghost sounded almost gleeful as he began to lead Lincoln to the post.

This is what Lincoln had reserved his strength for, he wasn’t made for passive resistance. He wouldn’t burn to avoid a bullet. His mind turned utterly cold, like that of a cornered animal, shutting out fears and reservations.

The ghost’s head moved forward a bit as he reached for some rope draped on the pole. Lincoln saw his chance. His opponent’s head was between him and the post. Walt’s entire frame catapulted forward. Catching him in the neck, Walt sent the ghost crashing against the post. Walt followed and pinned the man to it. A report issued from the rifle, Walt could see the barrel jump right in front of his face and felt the sound concussion in his ears, but the gun was pointed a full ninety degrees from its mark, and the bullet whistled into the forest.

Lincoln swung around with the shoulder of his bad arm and caught the ghost behind the ear, knocking him into the post again. The rifle dropped and Lincoln dropped with it. Hands still tied behind his back he grabbed the gun. Rolling sideways, he narrowly avoided his opponent’s foot which came crashing down beside him. Walt

## The Ghost of the Lagoon

rolled again and the crack of the rifle spoke twice.

Blood sprang from the throat and face of the muslin mask that the ghost wore. The ghost careened backward grasping for the sky as he slumped to the earth. Within seconds all sign of life had faded from the man's crumpled form.



Walt got to his knees then stood up taking a large and wonderful gulp of air. He looked around, searching for a way to unbind his hands and feet.

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Rubbing his finally freed wrists, Walt let the ropes drop and stood up. A sharp spot on the rifle and patience were all that he needed to cut himself loose. He'd considered going back to the underground hideout, but he had also wanted to keep an eye on his fallen foe.

Walt opened the white costume of the ghost. "Ah, as I suspected, he was wearing a bullet proof vest. That's why he didn't get hurt last night when I shot at him."

Thoughts of last night made Walt again aware of his lame arm. "Not too much longer now, just got to get to shore, maybe find a boat... H'mmm, I wonder who this fellow is ..."

Lincoln pulled out the man's wallet and looked at the name on the cards within. Walt chuckled. "With Loose Nails your house would fall down..."

The End

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