

WHEN GOOD MEN DIE

A Sam Dawson Mystery
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FOR TRAPPER

DEEP LAKE, MINNESOTA—1933

The noise grew louder, a low rumbling punctuated with an occasional shout. There were no children's or women's voices. It was a man-crowd. The volume intensified.

"Sounds like a logging truck on a foggy morning," Rubber Man said, pursing his lips over his toothless gums.

"More like a lynch mob to me. The kind that took my pappy when I was a young'n' in Mississippi," William said matter-of-factly. He rose from his kneeling position near the turnbuckles that kept the ring ropes taut.

The first figure dashed into the intersection at the far end of Main Street, then another, and suddenly an entire swarm of writhing humankind, jumping and shouting, loose around the edges and tight in the middle. Arms were held high in the midst of the throng of dark clothes and fedoras as everyone pushed their way toward the center. Clamorous but coordinated, the mass turned left and flowed slowly down Main Street toward the midway of O'Brien's Wonders of the World Travelling Show.

"Jesus jumped-up Judas Priest," Doc O'Brien whispered slowly when he spotted the mob heading toward them. He pulled the ever-present cigar butt from his lips; his mouth remained open. "What the hell is that?"

At first it appeared that the crowd was carrying something large high above them. But as the mass moved closer, the details snapped into focus.

“What is it, Doc?” Curly Martin, the carnival’s advance man, said, squinting into the sun low on the horizon. “Some guy on stilts?”

“A giant,” Doc said. “It’s an honest-to-God giant.”

“What’s he carrying?”

“Trapper—somebody find Trapper!” Doc shouted without taking his eyes from the approaching spectacle.

“What’s he carrying?” Curly repeated.

“Railroad ties. He’s carrying railroad ties, new ones, one on each shoulder. Trapper!” Doc shouted. “Where’s Trapper? William, fetch me the megaphone.”

“Just ‘cause I’m a Negro and work for ya, don’t mean I’m your boy. What do you say, boss?”

Doc stared at him for a moment, unbelieving. “*Please*, damn it, fetch me the megaphone.”

“That’s better,” William said as he turned and trotted toward Doc’s trailer.

“What’s he carrying railroad ties for?” Curly said, pushing his hat back on his head and scratching above his ear as the crowd slowly advanced.

“How the hell should I know?” Doc shot back. “Because he can, that’s why. Trapper!” he shouted again.

The giant approached from the west. The crowd’s noise contrasted with the ear-ringing silence that had settled over the mildewed tents of the carnival midway. Incoherent whispers of disorder drifted among the amusements. They were car-

ried on the mist of dust particles that rose and bent with the waves of heat escaping the bruised canvas. Raw-boned carnival workers stood silently, their gaunt bodies wet from last-minute preparations; their heads cocked, they listened. Operators, talkers, shills, and roughies faced west. Cigarettes hung limply from parched lips; eyes amid weathered faces squinted into the late afternoon sun setting behind the worn-out Minnesota town. There was anticipation.

“Jesus jumped-up Judas Priest,” Doc whispered again, the cigar butt clenched in the side of his mouth. He stepped toward Curly. “I thought you told me this town was wide-open.”

“I took care of it, boss—the town marshal, the mayor. I even bought off the ole hen that rules the local temperance roost.”

“What about the thumpers?”

“I didn’t miss a trick, boss. All we got is mackerel snappers and Lutherans. The priest was an easy mark. But I had to tell the Kraut there was no kootch show and contribute to their building fund. The rest of the townies were chumps. The place is greased, I tell ya.”

“Trapper!” Doc yelled, his voice desperate.

Hans Rudolf Gottlieb—“Trapper”—moved easily through the maze of motionless workers and tangled moorings that established both the ring and the tent protecting it. His calfskin wrestling shoes, with the laces tied together, were draped over his shoulder. He was a handsome man, almost baby-faced with a full head of light brown hair slicked back in a pompadour. At a distance he did not stand out; he melded

into crowds. But up close, it was easy to see why he was one of the toughest carnival wrestlers in the country.

“Strike the sidewalls of the ring tent!” Doc yelled. “Now!” he screamed. “Get all the canvas away from the ring. That mob will tear this center joint to hell and back.” Turning back toward the cheering crowd he found Hans standing at his side, also looking toward the oncoming mob. Doc stared at Hans’s cauliflower ears, chiseled features, and nineteen-inch neck. “What do you think, Trap?”

“He’s over eight feet, maybe four hundred pounds or better,” Hans said without looking at Doc. “Those ties weigh more than three hundred pounds apiece and those leather tie saddles strapped to his shoulders add another hundred pounds.” He paused, then added matter-of-factly, “He’s strong.”

“Jesus jumped-up Judas Priest. I hate these godforsaken logging towns with all their blonde-headed Norman, Norse, Scandinavian fish eaters. The whole town reeks of lutefisk.”

William suddenly appeared, slightly out of breath, and handed the megaphone to Doc, who took it without taking his eyes from the crowd. “What do you say?” said William.

Doc looked at him with astonishment. “Oh, where are my manners? *Thank you*, William.”

“You’re welcome.”

The noise had reached a fevered pitch as fists full of dollars were thrust toward the odds makers who flanked the giant, pencils furiously recording on notepads. The glint of brown beer bottles and quart jars of moonshine flashed in a kaleidoscope of moving bodies.

“They’re going to tear this place apart and the cops are going to let them.” Doc stared again at Hans, measuring him. “You’re paid to win. I’ll sell you like chattel to another show if you ever lose, but I’m thinking this one time, it might be best if you take a fall.”

Hans looked at him from beneath eyebrows of scar tissue and smiled. “They’re going to tear this place apart regardless of who wins.”

Doc said nothing for a moment and then a smile slowly appeared at the corner of his mouth. “Then kick his ass,” he said as he brought the megaphone to his lips. “All carnies, listen up!” he shouted, turning toward the workers. “Save what you can and retreat to camp. Protect yourselves and nothing else. They’ll most likely stay in the midway. If they follow, scatter into the woods and regroup here at dawn. Don’t give the authorities anything to charge us with. I want out of this town. I need the ring crew to stay behind with Trapper. All right, people, let’s move.”

“How do you want to play this, Doc?” Hans said, unbuttoning his shirt.

“I’m figuring the longer you keep him in the ring, the more worked-up the crowd will get. Put him down early and you might take some of the wind out of their sails. Two out of three falls will just drag it out and get them more agitated.” He looked squarely into Hans’s intense green eyes and smiled. “You’ll be Jack the Giant Killer for the rest of the season. We’ll pack the house in every stinkhole from here to Hannibal.”

“And if I lose?”

“You’ll be standing in line at a soup kitchen in Des Moines. You can come visit me at the poor farm on weekends. Get your shoes on. I’ll try to pitch ’em and do the outside talking, but I doubt we’ll get anybody to buy a ticket. If we get separated, we’re scheduled to play Fargo next Friday. Good luck, Hans.”

Hans offered a half-smile. Doc O’Brien only called him by his given name when he was drunk or dead serious.

The crowd numbered close to three hundred, an impressive figure for Deep Lake. Saturday-night lumberjacks and farmers blowing steam from a week’s worth of dragging logs and picking rocks. They sounded mean.

“Yawza, yawza, yawza!” Doc yelled into the megaphone as the tip of the throng started up the midway. “Ladies and gentlemen!” He dragged out each syllable and then realized there was neither in the crowd. “Step up. Don’t crowd.” He looked around to see if anyone was paying attention. “Don’t crowd? What the hell am I saying?” he said softly to himself. He glanced toward his trailer and saw Madame Marguerite watching from the doorway. He tipped his hat, and she turned and disappeared inside, shutting the door behind her.

Hans twisted from side to side as he stretched his torso in the far corner of the ring. He had shed his shirt and dungarees and stood bare-chested in his high-waist wrestling tights. He wore his trademark, snug-fitting, black leather hood and mask; his eyes appeared large, catlike. Broad, square shoulders and huge, bulging biceps helped shape the massive V that defined his chest.

Hans's attention was drawn to a distant figure standing in front of a storefront whose sign read "Thor's Trim, Cut, and Shave Barber Shop." The barber's white smock was illuminated against the dark mass that flowed down the sidewalk and street. Hans stared at him, captivated by the contrast—a white pebble on a black beach.

TIMBERLANE COUNTY, MINNESOTA—2007

DAY 1, 7:15 A.M.

“Them are good eats,” the waitress said, nodding toward Sam’s plate. She was thin and anemic-looking with recessed, dark eyes.

Sam struggled to not correct her grammar. “Those are,” he said, gently pushing the remainder of his breakfast away from him. “Could you please scrape what’s left into a doggie bag for my traveling companion?” Sam motioned with his thumb toward the antique vehicle parked in the gravel lot just outside the window. An aging billboard with a giant northern pike leaping from a reed bed, a red-and-white daredevil spoon hooked in its lower jaw, loomed over the restored 1953 Willys Station Wagon and 1958 Airstream Bubble. Sam’s dog, L2, sat rigidly in the passenger seat of the Willys, staring at him. A glistening strand of saliva stretched from her mouth to her shoulder.

The vintage rigs had been expensive distractions purchased with the proceeds from the sale of his perfectly good Winnebago motor home. He had spent several years and much of his savings restoring them. He found the Willys near Encampment, Wyoming, in the Sierra Madres, a “For Sale” sign on the windshield. The old prospector who sold it to him claimed it came from an abandoned mine near timberline. The vehicle identification number had been removed and there was no registration or title, but Sam paid the fees

and filed the applications and was now the proud owner of America's first SUV. He found the Airstream in Laramie. The elderly woman he bought it from was the original owner of the two-hundred-fifty-eighth Airstream Bubble to come off the assembly line. Sam had meticulously restored the fifteen-foot trailer to its original specifications even though the absence of air-conditioning, refrigeration, and a shower were an inconvenience. He liked seeing America from the back roads at speeds below sixty.

The waitress looked at him with total indifference, obviously not impressed by either the rig or the dog. The right side of her nose was inflamed from the tiny diamond stud that had been rudely punched through her nostril. "What kind of dog is that?"

"The hungry kind."

"No, what kind is it, really?"

"Bloodhound."

She turned and disappeared into the kitchen, apparently satisfied with her feigned interest and obligatory customer relations. She knew the tip would be between one and two dollars.

Sam sipped the dregs of his coffee and looked above the rim of his cup at L2. It was hard to believe she would be seven years old in a few weeks. It seemed like yesterday that Annie had surprised him with a puppy, a replacement for Elle, who had been struck down in her prime. L2 was still with him, but Annie was gone. He missed her. Neither spoke of Colorado and the trauma they had experienced there, nor of the love they had shared in Iowa. They still talked on

the phone, but it was becoming more infrequent. She usually started the conversation with “Jeez O’Pete, Sam, do you know what time it is?” The last time he called, Mark answered. Sam heard a muffled “It’s that old guy, your cousin” as Mark called Annie to the phone. The age difference had been a minor issue, he believed, but the genetic relatedness was like a bucket of cold water thrown on copulating dogs. “It’s just too creepy” was her final proclamation. Coitus interruptus was the story of his life, both romantically and professionally. At forty-four he was still alone, had no close friends, had spent most of his savings, and would rather sleep than work.

Minnesota had not been his idea. Sam’s vision of taking pictures of dead trees—snags, in remote high-altitude settings had not panned out. The boxes of unsold books in the publisher’s warehouse were a painful reminder of the public’s fickle taste. He resented the fact that his customers did not share his appreciation for the beauty of nature. His loyal alpine imagery fans had bought a few books and he had sold a few calendars in the usual venues, but not enough to pay the bills. He believed the real issue was the public’s fascination with electronic readers and the increasing obsolescence of books, especially expensive coffee table books. Pat, his publisher, had insisted the market was still ripe for Sam’s pictorials of obscure cemeteries, especially in the Midwest.

He had done the fall shots in southeastern Minnesota along the Mississippi drainage. The hardwood colors had been spectacular from Red Wing to Winona. The winter had been dry in the southern part of the state. He had captured

the starkness of small-town cemeteries from Moorhead to Mankato, grain elevators hovering over abandoned rail spurs in the background. Small towns on the verge of an uncertain death clung to their agrarian roots, hunkered down against the scouring wind and unpredictable economy. He knew how to find cemeteries around farm towns, but as Sam worked his way north in search of snow for the winter shots, he felt the anxiety of uncertainty descend on him. At the same time, he worried about pulling the Airstream on slick roads. His weight distribution hitch made the Willys squirrely unless it was in four-wheel drive. Duluth's cold wind off of Superior turned him westward. The thought of International Falls' boreal chill blunted his northward advance, and he decided to finish the seasonal shots that Pat demanded somewhere between Grand Rapids and Bemidji. Looking past the parking lot with the giant jumping pike, the small green highway sign read "Deep Lake 1 Mile." It had started to snow.