

# THE PUMPKIN EATER

A Sam Dawson Mystery  
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*FOR CARRIE BUCK*

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# CHAPTER ONE

*NO ONE SUPPOSES THAT ALL THE  
INDIVIDUALS OF THE  
SAME SPECIES ARE CAST IN THE  
VERY SAME MOULD.*

—CHARLES DARWIN

**H**IS DEAD SISTER GAZED BACK AT HIM. She was smiling. Sam could not breathe. A cold veil descended over him and the night became silent.

The flashlight's beam that illuminated her face began to shake. Her long blonde hair spilled over her shoulders, her blue eyes appeared dark behind the thick glasses, and her toothy grin reflected the light's beam back at him. She was as he remembered her.

Julie had been dead for nearly twenty-five years. She had remained seventeen for a quarter century, and now in 1999 she stared back at him from the darkness, unchanged since 1975 when he was twelve and saw her last. Sam forced a breath and inched the flashlight's beam upward on the stone marker. The name Genève Defollett was chiseled sharply into the polished red granite. She had been born nine years before Julie, but had also died at the age of seventeen.

The lump in his throat hurt as he swallowed, its corners as sharp as those cut into the stone depicting the Ameri-

can sign language symbol for “I love you” next to Genève’s name. She had also been deaf.

Sam’s heart pounded painfully in his chest; his eardrums kept cadence. But the initial shock of seeing his sister’s likeness on the tombstone began to subside with the realization that he had been mistaken. He was a thousand miles and a lifetime away from his sister’s disappearance. He tried to shake off the coldness that enveloped him, but his eyes refused to be drawn away from the ceramic oval that contained the photograph of Genève Defollett. The resemblance to Julie was frightening.

A twig snapped from the darkness to his left. Instinctively, Sam swung the flashlight’s beam to the black wall of forest that bordered the cemetery. He shone the light in rapid, sweeping arcs against the impenetrable night. He heard the creak of barbed wire being pulled through fence staples as something pushed between the wire strands that separated forest from cemetery. Eye shine, eerie yellow reflections, stared back at him then began to move slowly toward him, flickering on and off at the edge of the flashlight’s beam. Sam’s fear was on the verge of panic as the golden dots became larger and brighter. The dog appeared magically within the shaking funnel of light, trotting slowly toward Sam.

“Elle!” he shouted, the sound of his voice strange and out of place in the dark cemetery. “Jesus, girl, you almost gave me a heart attack.”

The bloodhound, tail waving, greeted him as though he had been gone for days instead of minutes. Drool glistened in long strands from the corners of her mouth.

“How did you get out?” He had left her in the motor home, which he had parked in the small, town park adjacent to the cemetery. Bending over, he scratched her ears and hugged her to his knee. The unmistakable fetid smell of death flared his nostrils. She had rolled on something dead. “Cur bitch. You’re not riding with me,” Sam said, wiping his fingers on his pants.

Once more he shone the light on the ceramic photograph of the girl who could have been his sister’s twin. As troubling as the coincidence was, that’s all it was, he reasoned. Besides, that was not why he was there.

“One more time, Elle, let’s go see it one more time,” he said, stepping around Genève Defollett’s headstone.

Even in darkness, the older section of the cemetery was distinguishable. The giant oaks loomed overhead and the ground heaved around their bases, tilting headstones without reverence. The stones themselves were larger and more varied in style than in the new section. Gray and white were the colors, and none displayed pictures of the dead.

The tombstone he had come to see stood coldly on the dark hillside that sloped sharply toward the tangle of undergrowth and forest at the cemetery’s edge. Just one more time; he had to be sure. In the morning, I’ll come back and take pictures as proof, he said to himself. He shone the light at the face of the massive monument. It too was as he remembered it: Eugene Eris had died on August 4, 1930, and again on January 25, 1932. The two graves were nearly a thousand miles apart. The same epitaph etched deeply into the ashen granite of both headstones, the letters softened by

seventy years, lay close to the ground, dead grass partially obscuring the words: "Wellborn Are My Children."



The telephone receiver was cold against Sam's ear. He whispered the words of the epitaph again, this time more slowly. They had no meaning. He had repeated the words dozens of times since reading them.

First ring...

The names, the dates, even the identical tombstones could be explained as coincidental, but not the epitaphs.

Second ring...

"Pat, it's Sam. Sorry to bother you at home." He turned from the pay phone to see if anyone was watching. The small, town park was dark and deserted. The swings on long chains twisted slowly in the cold breeze blowing from the blackness of the cemetery. Dry leaves fell from the darkness above, clattering against the rusted floor of the merry-go-round. He turned his collar up and huddled close to the phone that hung against the gray cement block wall of the park restroom. The only light shown from the window of his motor home parked in the gravel lot beneath the silver water tower.

"It's Sam, Sam Dawson...No, I'm okay. Uh," he held his watch close to his face, "a little after midnight, Iowa time. Sorry, I didn't realize it was so late..."

"Oxford," he said, looking up, following one of the erector-set legs of the water tower into the blackness above



where the town name would appear with the morning sun. “Sort of east central, not too far from Maquoketa, if you know where that is.” He knew Pat did not know. A transplanted New Yorker, Pat had escaped from the publishing industry to start his own small press in Denver. Pat would have been hard pressed to locate Iowa on a map.

“No, I’m fine, really. Something has...” He twisted anxiously toward the teeter-totters, heavy planks over deep depressions in the sandy soil. Shards of green paint, cracked and jagged, heaved upward from the boards’ surface, foreboding even in darkness.

“Well, I..., I had this,” he paused not knowing how to describe what had happened or whether he should tell Pat.

“Uh, tomorrow, I’ll probably head out tomorrow, mid-morning. I should be back in Golden sometime tomorrow night. Pat, I’ve found...” He shook his head and scuffed rocks with his foot toward the dented oil drum that served as the park litter barrel. The word “trash” had been crudely hand-lettered with red paint across the side.

“It’s about fifteen hours. Look, Pat...No, I’m maybe half-finished with this season’s shots...Yes, I know there’s a deadline. But...No, the advance is fine. It’s not about money. I just need to come home. I had this, this...” He paused again. Revelation was the word he was searching for but reluctant to use. “I met a man in the cemetery here today. A caretaker, I think. Look, I’d just be wasting film until I get this figured out. I need my Colorado files, the negative files...”

“She’s fine. She stinks. She found something dead tonight and rolled on it. Look, Pat, this guy in the cemetery,

the caretaker, I've seen him before...Probably a dead squirrel or bird or something, I don't know. She's a hound. Who knows why? But I've seen him before. I've taken his picture... The caretaker...No, not here. It was in Colorado a thousand miles from here...Maybe, I don't think so. I'm pretty sure it's the same guy...

"A salamander. He looks like an old salamander, flat mouth and beady eyes. All day I tried to remember where I had seen him before. It drove me crazy. It was like a song, the melody playing over and over in my head but I couldn't remember the name. Then tonight I..., all of a sudden like I've been electrocuted or something, one of those eureka moments, a revelation." There, he said it. "It's the same guy I saw a couple of years ago when I was working on the Colorado book. I just can't remember which cemetery, the eastern plains or maybe the San Luis Valley. But I'm sure I have some shots of him in my negative files. I remember taking the pictures..."

"Nothing, I don't think there's anything you can do. But thanks for asking. I just needed to tell somebody, I guess. Your number was first on the list." The wind gusted loudly through the invisible tops of the giant oaks that towered above the playground. Dry leaves rained against the coarse concrete wall. T. C. plus J. I., ringed by a heart, was scratched into the paint on the side of the pay phone where Sam took refuge from the swirling debris. "There's something else, Pat. I found this tombstone..."

"No, I haven't talked to him. The guy's creepy, he gives me the willies." Sam gently rubbed his finger across the

scratched initials within the heart. “Pat, listen, I found this tombstone that’s even creepier than the salamander guy. I’m certain that I’ve seen the same tombstone before, in Colorado...

“Yeah, yeah, I know, there are only so many designs to choose from. But you’d remember this one. I thought it was unique the first time I saw it. This has, I’m pretty sure, the same name on it and same date of birth as the one in Colorado...I don’t know about date of death...No, I’m sure. I remember the birth date because it was the same month and day as my mother’s, just seventy-some years earlier. It stuck in my mind...Because, it’s a weird name on a weird stone, I remember it from Colorado. But here’s the clincher. It has the same epitaph. What are the chances?” Sam turned restlessly away from the phone.

“No, it’s not like that. It’s not one of the little-lambs-in-heaven or resting-with-God type of quotes. It says “Well-born Are My Children.” I thought it was odd when I saw it a couple of years ago...I don’t know what it means.

“Coincidence? Pat, are you hearing me? We’re talking same stone, same name, same date, and same epitaph. The only difference is the thousand miles between cemeteries...

“Look, I don’t know why I called you.” Why had he called Pat? Because there was no one else to call, he thought. Divorced, no close friends, obsessed with his career, and only a dog for companionship was the answer. “I guess to tell you that I’m winding up early here. I’ll come back mid-winter to get the snow shots. We’ll have to make do with what I have for the dead leaves shots...I won’t let you down.

Have I ever let you down? Don't try to put a guilt trip on me, Pat. We'll go to press next spring like we planned. And, Pat, one more thing, the advance was a joke. See, I told you I was feeling okay. I just needed to hear your fatherly voice." Maybe that was it: He needed a father. "I'll call you when I get back. Goodnight, Pat."

He stood staring at the silver oil drum, mentally tracing the letters of the word "trash." A red teardrop descended from the bottom of the S as if the serpentine letter were bleeding. He listened for any movement within. He could not look inside. He had not told Pat about the snake. He had not mentioned how Elle had refused to enter the Winnebago when they returned from the cemetery or of the deafening buzz the large timber rattler had made when Sam opened the motor home door.