

WHEN THEY WERE YOUNG

A Sam Dawson Mystery

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First printing 2017

ISBN: 978-0-9835894-8-8

LCCN: 2017945531

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For her

“Not everything can be categorized,
compartmentalized, pasteurized,
and homogenized into something that
we can swallow.”

~*Annie George*

CHAPTER ONE

GIRL

Her face was frozen to the icy ground. Her decomposing scalp had slipped forward in wrinkles above the dark sockets of her recessed eyes. Blonde hair, almost white, spilled over her pallid features as if she were hiding beneath it. His breath caught in the back of his throat. *Just a child*, he thought, *maybe ten or twelve years old*. Her body was curled into a tight fetal position, her wrists crossed under her chin, her knees touching her elbows. She had been cold.

Sam Dawson was cold too. He could taste the Wyoming air, sharp and metallic against the roof of his mouth. His nostrils flared against the sunless hollow, detecting the soft fragrance of pine, the pungent odor of decomposing aspen leaves, and the aroma of sage that drifted across the stream from the open meadows above. Tiny droplets of condensation formed under his nose as his breath escaped in foggy surges. He glanced at L2, who showed no interest in the corpse. Sam, not the dog, had found the girl. “You call yourself a bloodhound,” he mumbled softly, without knowing why. There was no one to hear him. The waters of Crow Creek swallowed his words and murmured its own incoherent whispers, the confused gossip of the stream spirits.

Sam leaned his rod case against a snow-covered boulder and placed his wicker creel on the ground. Bending down, he gently pushed her hair from her face. A gray eye, opaque, stared blankly from the blackness of its shrunken socket, a cloudy window to a young soul long departed. Her lips were pulled toward the ground as if sucked down by a subterranean vacuum. Her formless face reminded him of a freshly dipped taffy apple placed on a hard surface to cool. She had not been dressed for a Wyoming winter—black jeans, white sneakers, and a burgundy windbreaker.

Her back was huddled against the cold north-facing slope that rose sharply above her. An embroidered patch appliqué lay upside down next to her. Sam picked it up. It was a gray capital M, with Minnie Mouse standing coyly against the left leg of the block letter. Minnie's red polka-dot bow and oversized yellow shoes added splashes of color. A few broken threads remained along the edges of the patch, and the dark outline of the missing letter was clearly visible against the slightly faded jacket. Tiny oblong pellets—rodent feces—littered the nylon folds of the windbreaker where it met the earth. He had seen several ground squirrels on his hike into the canyon. They scampered among the boulders and pine trees that lined the narrow valley floor. Like Sam, they were eager for spring and were busy assessing winter's toll. It appeared the jerky little rodents had removed the appliqué with surgical precision. Nothing else had been chewed.

Sam sighed. "All I wanted to do was go fishing," he whispered. He looked upstream, then downstream. There was no place more desirable, more rugged or remote within a hundred square miles. He imagined a black woolly bugger, with a flash of red and a gold bead, arcing gracefully over the stream and then back over his head as he placed the wet fly into the swirling eddy behind a boulder. *Why me? Why always me?* he thought. *What is it with me and dead people? I've been here too many times before to think it doesn't mean something.* It was 2008. Only four months had passed since his grisly discoveries in northern Minnesota the previous November. Still, none of it compared to the mess in Colorado more than eight years earlier. *That's why I live in Wyoming,* he reminded himself.

He was only thirty miles from Cheyenne and even fewer road miles from Laramie, as the crow flies. But it would take at least an hour to reach the nearest trail or road. *What were you doing way out here, Little Mouse Girl?* he thought, staring down at her frozen remains. She had been some mother's daughter, some father's little girl. Somewhere, someone missed her. He would have. He knew about little girls. He had raised one. Sidney had been about six when Sam and her mother divorced. Now she was midway through her second year of law school and had become the self-appointed, live-in guardian of her father, whom she viewed as a dangerously inept societal misfit.

Sam pulled the small flip phone from his fishing vest. Sidney had insisted that he take the intrusive little device

even though cell service in the area was nonexistent. He held the phone at arm's length and slowly turned in a circle while watching for the little bars to light up next to the satellite dish icon. No bars appeared.

As usual, spring was coming slowly to the Laramie Mountains. Sunny days were separated by bitterly cold nights. Wind-packed snowdrifts streaked the north-facing slopes, while the south slopes portended new beginnings. It was late March, too early in the season for fishing. Sam knew there would be ice and snow. But it was spring break at the University of Wyoming, he'd had his fill of apathetic students, and he desperately wanted to go fishing. He suspected he was at a crossroads in his life, and brook trout would show him the way. Fishing was a diversion, an excuse to be alone, to think, to reconsider, to reconcile, and to change direction. He believed a midlife crisis involved choices, but he couldn't figure out what his were. Poverty had made his life simple. Now a dead girl in the forest was complicating it again.

Sam scanned the area. Dark clouds, almost navy blue, gathered in the west. The temperature was dropping. A huge old-growth ponderosa pine directly across the stream would serve as a landmark. Nearly four feet in diameter, it had escaped the logger's saw back in the 1880s, when the entire area was clear-cut for railroad ties to help push the Union Pacific west through southern Wyoming. The area, which had been too steep and rocky for draft horses to skid logs from, had also proved too rugged for a little girl, cold and lost. He pulled his pocket watch from his vest.

It would take him almost two hours to get to the nearest landline, his house phone. He looked at the dark western sky. It was going to snow. "Let's go," he said, slapping his leg for L2 to follow. He could not make himself look back at the lifeless body of the little girl frozen to the ground.