

The image features a dark, textured background with a collage of faces from the TV show 'Kingdom Come'. The faces are partially obscured by a jagged, torn paper effect. The central focus is a close-up of a woman's face with blue eyes, looking directly at the viewer. To her right, a man's face is visible, looking slightly to the side. In the background, other faces are faintly visible, including one of a man in a red shirt and another of a man in a dark jacket. The overall mood is dramatic and intense.

Kingdom Come

by Morgan
Briarwood

KINGDOM COME

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Prologue: The First Dream

Mary Winchester knew she was dreaming, because she had no body.

She was looking down on the scene from somewhere near the ceiling, and she had no body. She was a spirit in this place, or perhaps an angel, watching over her beloved son.

Sam was sleeping, but he shifted and moaned as some nightmare disturbed his rest. He lay on the floor, not a bed, with a thin, dirty blanket partially covering him. Beneath the blanket, he was fully dressed. His clothing was dirty, too: jeans with dried mud around the lower legs, sneakers caked with mud and a shirt with one sleeve ripped. His unshaven face was bruised down one side.

As Mary watched, someone else entered the room. The girl seemed close to Sam's age, perhaps a little younger. She was wearing what had once been a pretty yellow sun-dress, but it was soaking wet and the skirt was muddy, like Sam's jeans. She wore thin sandals on her feet; they left muddy footprints on the floorboards as she slowly crossed the room. She was shaking as she walked, whether with cold or with fear Mary couldn't guess. Her shoulder-length hair was wet and tangled. She was crying, tears cutting pale streaks through the grime on her face.

Mary thought perhaps the girl would wake Sam, seeking comfort, but when the girl crouched down beside the sleeping man she made no move to touch him or speak to him. She sobbed quietly, watching him sleep. She ran a hand through her tangled hair, whispering I can't, I can't under her breath.

That was when Mary saw the knife. The girl was gripping the hilt like her life depended on it, but she had been hiding the weapon in the folds of her dress. Mary could see it now because when she crouched down the skirt fell back. The knife was a poor weapon: small, the curved and pointed blade no more than ten centimetres long. The blade was rusted, or perhaps stained with dried blood.

With rising terror, Mary watched the girl raise the knife. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably but the knife hovered above Sam's exposed throat.

No! Mary screamed. Sam! Sam, wake up! But she wasn't really there. No one could hear her plea. She could do nothing to save her boy. She could only watch, helpless. Sam was about to die.

The blade touched Sam's skin, the pressure making an indentation in his flesh. Perhaps the touch woke him, or perhaps it was the water dripping from the girl's hair. Whatever it was, Sam finally opened his eyes. He blinked groggily, seeing the girl leaning over him.

"Lauren? What...?" Sam mumbled.

The girl's trembling was even worse than before. "I – I'm s-sorry." She struggled to force the words through chattering teeth.

Sam looked confused, but then he saw – or felt – the knife. Finally, he acted. He grabbed her wrist, forcing the knife away from his neck. The girl fought him, struggling to retain her grip on the knife and free herself. Sam fought her, too. Their struggles rolled them both over on the dusty floor until Sam finally pinned her down beneath his body. Suddenly he cried out in pain.

Sam! Mary screamed, unheard.

Mary didn't see exactly how Sam got the knife. She only heard the girl's shocked scream. Mary

didn't think Sam had even intended to wound her, not that first time. But as he tried to thrust her away from him, the girl gripped his shirt. There was blood soaking through her yellow dress. She dragged herself upward, still clinging to Sam. She whispered something, words Mary couldn't hear, but Sam recoiled in shock.

Something in Sam seemed to snap. He raised the knife and brought it down even as the girl cringed away from him. Again and again he stabbed her, raising the knife high with each blow. Drops of blood flew from the blade, spattering his face, his clothing and his hands.

No! Sam! Oh, god, no!

Mary woke in tears, trembling from the horror of the scene. She hugged herself tightly, afraid of waking John. Her heart was racing, her breath caught in her throat with each breath. Please don't let that be real. Oh, god please no. Sam wouldn't, he couldn't...

Slowly, she got herself under control and as the emotions of the dream faded, Mary could tell herself it was only a nightmare. Not real. Sam was safe at Stanford, not trapped in some filthy house with a crazy girl. Sam was a sweet and gentle boy. He wasn't a killer.

Mary looked down at John, who slept on peacefully at her side.

It was the morning of May 2nd, 2006. Sam Winchester's twenty-third birthday.

One: Secrets Revealed

For Mary Winchester, it began when her hands were big enough to hold a shotgun.

For John Winchester, although he did not remember until more than thirty years later, it began in May 1973.

For Sam Winchester, it began on November 2nd, 1983. He was six months old at the time, and knew nothing of it.

For Dean Winchester, it began on May 3rd, 2006. That was the day his brother vanished off the face of the earth.

Lawrence, Kansas

“Missing?” Dean repeated. “What do you mean, Sam’s missing?”

Mary shook her head, spreading her hands wide. “John’s on his way to Palo Alto. He’ll call as soon as he knows something new.”

Dean looked at her more closely, beginning to calm down. His mom was pale, her eyes pink and swollen from crying. Dean took her hand and led her gently to one of the kitchen chairs. “Mom, it’s okay. It’s Sam. He’s probably holed up in a motel cramming for finals with no clue anyone’s even looking for him.”

Mary smiled weakly and Dean knew she didn’t believe it any more than he did. Sam wouldn’t disappear without telling anyone. Especially not in the first week of his final exams. Sam had worked too hard for this to throw it away: he earned a full ride to Stanford and had managed straight A’s for three years. He was planning to apply to law school next year. But he still phoned home every week, and called Dean at least once every month. He called yesterday, to thank Dean for his birthday gift, and Dean was certain Sam would have called Mom and Dad, too. They were a close family.

“Why didn’t Dad wait for me?” Dean asked.

“He couldn’t wait. Besides, someone has to look after the garage.”

Dean muttered his opinion of *that* under his breath. Typical of Dad to leave him holding the bag. Dean paid for his share in the garage himself. Half of the money he’d saved from his own wages, and he got a bank loan for the rest. But Dad still treated him like he was an employee there, not one-third-owner. “I’m going to call him,” he announced.

“I’m fine, Dean. I’m just worried.”

“You’re not fine and we’re all worried,” Dean disagreed. He kissed his mom lightly on her forehead and went to fill the kettle. There was salt on the window sill again. His mom had done that for as long as he could remember. It was an OCD thing with her: when she got miserable or stressed she’d lay down salt on the windows. She claimed it was to keep insects out – an old wives’ insect repellent – but she did it in winter, too.

Dean set the kettle to boil and took a mug out of the cupboard. “Chamomile?” he suggested.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Dean made chamomile tea, gave the mug to his mom, then reached for the phone, hoping Dad had remembered to charge his cell phone.

In a few minutes, he had the full story as far as John knew it, though that was little enough. Sam spent the evening of his birthday with friends. They partied in one of the frat houses. Sam went

home with one of the girls, fell asleep in bed with her, but was gone when she woke. He hadn't returned home. He'd left his cell phone beside the bed. Most worrying of all, he was scheduled to take his first exam that day, and didn't show up. That was what prompted Sam's friend Darren to call his parents. Sam's car was still where he always left it. Nothing of his was missing. He was just...gone. John hadn't reached Palo Alto when Dean called, so that was all he knew. The rest of the call was John giving Dean instructions for the garage. Dean promised to keep the business going. But he wanted to be with John. He wanted to do something.

Where on earth was Sam?

Palo Alto, California

Jessica opened her apartment door, expecting to see Rachel and Brady. She stopped dead when she saw the man standing there.

"Mr Winchester!" she said in surprise. At once, she realised why he was at her door. She knew about Sam.

"Hello, Jessica. Could I talk to you for a moment?" Sam's father – they met last Thanksgiving when Sam took her to meet his family in Lawrence – looked haggard. Jessica suspected he hadn't slept.

She nodded. "Sure. Come in." She walked into her living room ahead of him, grimacing a little at the mess. There were art supplies all over the table. "Can I get you anything?" she offered to cover her embarrassment. "A coffee?"

He considered. "A coffee would be good, if it's no trouble."

"It's no trouble. Black, no sugar, right?"

He smiled, then, a sad and weary smile, but a real one. "Is that a guess or do you have a good memory?"

"Memory," she answered, but didn't explain. She had worked as a barrista during the summers in high school and remembering a coffee preference as simple as his was easy. "Make yourself at home, Mr Winchester. I'll only be a moment."

Jessica headed into her small kitchen, turned the kettle on and added ground coffee to the French press. Why was Sam's father *here*? Because Sam was missing, of course, but why come to her? She made coffee quickly, poured two mugs and added cream to hers.

John Winchester had removed his battered leather coat and folded it over the arm of the chair he'd chosen. He was wearing oil-stained jeans and a flannel shirt: work clothes.

John accepted the mug from Jessica, murmuring thanks, but he held it in both hands and didn't drink.

"I, uh," Jessica sat down on the couch, "I heard about Sam. I guess that's what you want to talk about?"

"Yes." John's eyes held gratitude, as if he'd expected her to avoid the subject. "The police won't do anything until forty eight hours are up, but your friend Darren said Sam missed his exam this morning. And no one's seen him since he left his birthday party."

Jessica nodded. That was what she'd heard, too.

"I'm confused about something. I hope you can explain it."

Jessica sipped her coffee. "Well, I'll help if I can, but I haven't seen Sam for weeks."

"That's why I'm confused, Jessica. I thought you two were close."

She swallowed. "Didn't Sam tell you? He moved out a month ago."

She could tell at once that this was news to him. John covered his surprise with a frown. "He didn't say anything to us. Did you have a fight?"

"No. I...I don't really understand what happened. I thought everything was fine, we were making plans for after we graduate. Then one day I came home and he was packing. He just said it was over. I..." Jessica stopped talking as a sob threatened. She blinked back tears, struggling to take a normal breath. It still hurt, so much. She swallowed hard and went on, her voice quieter. "I thought maybe there was someone else, but he hasn't been with anyone."

"That's not my Sam," John insisted. He looked down at his untouched coffee. "I'm sorry, Jessica, but Darren told me Sam left the party with a girl."

Fortunately, she was prepared for that, but it still made her stomach twist. "I know. He told me, too. Sam's a free man now, I guess." Jessica turned her head away to hide her tears.

John sat in silence for a while, which let her get control of herself. He shook his head. "I don't understand it, Jessica. At Thanksgiving, Sammy gave me the impression you'd be making wedding plans this summer."

Jessica's eyes widened. "He told you that?" She'd been hoping, but...well, it didn't matter now, did it?

"Not directly, but I know my son. Jessica, before he left you, was there anything unusual going on? Anything at all?"

Jessica shook her head. "Everything was great. At least, I thought so." She sighed. "There was..." she hesitated.

"What, Jessica?"

"Sam was having nightmares. The wake-up-screaming kind. For a couple of weeks before he left."

"Did he tell you what they were about?"

"No. He said he couldn't remember, but I didn't believe him. Is it important?"

John shook his head. "I don't know. When Sammy was a little boy, he had nightmares about a fire. Maybe they came back, but I don't see why that would make him do this."

"What did the police say?" Jessica asked.

John scowled. "He's a legal adult and it hasn't been forty eight hours. They wouldn't even let me file a report."

"Oh. But Sam missed an exam! He'd never do that."

"I thought the same thing," John agreed. "I've called every hospital and clinic: none of them has Sam or a John Doe matching his description. I called the morgue, too."

Jessica had been about to take another sip of coffee; she set it down abruptly, feeling nauseous. She hadn't even considered that. Oh, god, what if Sam was...

"But I don't think," John went on, "that Sam would have missed his exam unless something happened to him. Jessica, do you know anywhere Sam might have gone if...I don't know. If he needed to get away, or to hide?"

"You think he did something...?" Jessica blurted, shocked.

John answered quickly, "I don't. But I'm trying to cover all the bases before I go back to the police. Please, is there anywhere?"

Jessica thought about it, but truthfully, if Sam were in some kind of trouble she would expect him to head home, to Kansas. He loved his family. "We used to go to a beach about twenty miles south of

here. If Sam wanted to be alone, he might have gone there.” She reached for her laptop. “Here, I’ll show you.” Jessica opened the laptop and called up a Google map of the Palo Alto area. She turned the laptop toward John, pointing out the place and the right road to take.

She was interrupted by the doorbell and stood to answer it. “I’m sorry. I’m expecting friends,” she explained.

John nodded. “It’s fine. I won’t impose on you any longer.” He followed her to the door. “Listen, this is my cell phone.” He offered her a business card. “If you remember anything…”

“I’ll call you. Of course,” she agreed, accepting the card.

It was Rachel and Brady at the door, as Jessica expected. She let them in and John out. He hesitated, as if he had something more to say, then turned to go.

“Mr Winchester!” Jessica called after him.

He turned back.

She was conscious of her friends listening, but made herself say it anyway. “I still love Sam. Please, if you find him…”

“I’ll let you know,” he promised, then smiled, “right after I kick his ass for leaving you like that.”

Lawrence, Kansas

Though Dean had an apartment of his own these days, he moved back into the family home while John was away, both to be nearby if there was any news and so his mom wouldn’t be alone.

On the third night, Dean had trouble sleeping so he snuck downstairs to raid the refrigerator. He heard a noise from the living room and approached cautiously, hoping he wasn’t going to find a burglar. It was Mary. She sat at the computer in the living room, working with only the light of the screen illuminating the room. The sound that alerted him was the printer. Dean was reasonably familiar with the use of the internet, but he hadn’t known his mom was into late-night surfing. As far as he knew, they only had the PC for the garage accounts. But Mary had a stack of printouts on the desk, with more in the printer.

Dean spoke softly from the doorway. “Mom? What are you doing?”

She turned to him, and in the light of the screen he saw tears shining on her cheeks.

Dean ran to her side. He hadn’t heard the phone. Surely there couldn’t be worse news. Not in the middle of the night. He knelt beside her chair. “It’ll be okay, Mom.”

Mary shook her head. “No. It’s not okay.”

Dean felt cold. “Is…is Sam…?”

“No,” she answered quickly. “No news. I just… I know.” She took a sheet of paper from the desk. “It’s been so long, Dean, but I guess you never forget.”

He stared at the paper in confusion. It was a map of California, with weather information marked. There was a lightning storm over Palo Alto. The date was May 2nd. What on earth did the weather have to do with anything? “Mom…what?”

She was silent for a long moment. “Dean, would you get me a drink, please?”

Dean rose to his feet. “Sure. Tea?”

“No, I think I need something stronger. John has a bottle of Glenlivet 12 in the bureau. Get one for yourself, too.”

Truly worried now, Dean did as she asked. The Glenlivet was Dad's special drink; shared only at Christmas and on birthdays. Dean poured a single measure for Mom because she rarely drank anything stronger than wine, and a double for himself because he had a suspicion he was going to need it. He added ice to both glasses, then carried them both to Mary.

Mary sipped her whiskey. "When I first met John," she began, "I knew he would be the father of my children. And when I first knew I loved him, I made a promise to myself. I swore I would never let our children know the things I have to tell you now." She finished her drink in a single gulp. "I'm so sorry I have to bring you into this, Dean."

"Into what? You're not making sense."

Her attempt at a smile was merely a stretching of her lips, a grimace. "I know. And I know you won't believe me. Maybe you'll think I'm crazy. But this is the truth, baby. I promise it's the truth."

Dean took the glass from her hand, set it down, and enclosed her hand in his. "Mom, you're exhausted. Whatever it is, you can tell me in the morning, okay?"

Mary shook her head. "No, Dean. It has to be now. For Sam's sake, it has to be now."

"Okay." Dean didn't understand, but he would go along. "Okay, I'm listening."

"My father – your grandfather – died in 1973," she began.

"I know this story, Mom," Dean said patiently. "Grandpappy had some kind of psychotic break and killed your mom, then he came after you..."

"No, Dean. That's the story I told everyone. Even John. But it's not what happened."

Dean listened, but he wished he hadn't. He didn't know what to make of it at all.

According to Mom, a demon (seriously, a freaking *demon*) with yellow eyes murdered the grandparents he had never known. The same demon made some kind of deal with his mother, a deal she thought had something to do with Sam's disappearance. If she hadn't been his mother, Dean would have dismissed the whole thing out of hand, or called the men in white coats. But her story made him think of some things in a new light. The odd trinkets she collected, her habit of putting salt on the windows...it made a weird kind of sense. Dean remembered seeing an episode of *The X-Files* in which they said salt could be used to ward off vampires. He'd even teased Mom about it, asking if that was why she was always laying down salt.

But this couldn't possibly be true. Demons weren't real.

"Why do you think this is connected to Sam?" Dean asked finally.

"There was an electrical storm in Palo Alto the night Sam disappeared." She handed him the weather report again. "And this, the same night." Mary gave Dean another printout, this one from a newspaper website. It was a report of two people murdered behind a bar in Palo Alto. It was horrible – a man and a girl stabbed to death – but it was nowhere near the Stanford campus or Sam's apartment and Dean didn't see what it could have to do with his brother.

He shrugged. "So?"

"They are demonic omens."

"Wait. Are you saying you think *demons* kidnapped Sammy? Mom, that's..." He couldn't say *crazy*. Not to her. But it was the word he wanted to use.

Mary laughed, but there was no humour in it. She sounded a little hysterical. "Oh, Dean. I wanted you to grow up ignorant of all this. I should be happy that you're sceptical. It means I raised you right."

"Have you told Dad any of this?" Dean wondered how his practical father would react to her story.

"Not yet. This isn't something I can tell John on the phone."

That was a relief. But it wasn't a help. Dean didn't know how to respond. It was clear that Mary believed every word she was saying. He understood that losing her parents the way she had must have been horribly traumatic, and maybe she'd invented this stuff about demons as a way to cope with that. Her story was consistent, but Dean didn't believe it. He couldn't. He had some great horror movies in his DVD collection, but demons weren't real.

Mary seemed to know what he was thinking. "You need proof, don't you?"

"I believe you, Mom. I just don't believe...I mean, *demons*?"

Mary nodded. "Most of my father's old contacts are dead. It's been over thirty years; that's not really a surprise. But there is someone who might help us. My cousin, William. Can you leave the garage for a few days?"

"No!" Dean protested instantly. "With Dad gone, too?" He frowned, automatically going over the work schedule in his mind. Actually, there were only two big jobs outstanding and Eric could probably handle them. If he called Mike to cover for him, it might work out. Mike used to be Dad's partner in the business; he still owned a share but he was retired now because he suffered from arthritis, making it tough for him to work as a mechanic. But he was a good supervisor.

"Mike's a father," Mary said, echoing Dean's thought. "I think he'll help out if we tell him it's about Sam. Please, Dean?"

He nodded, reluctantly.

"Okay. If Mike will cover for me, we'll go find Cousin Bill."

Nebraska

"This is the place," Mary said at last, although this stretch of dark road looked no different from the last hundred miles. "See the lights up ahead?"

Dean saw, but the sight wasn't very encouraging. The lights were a business sign of some sort, yellow bulbs surrounding a painted sign. The lights were uneven, some faded or flickering, others broken, a few very bright. That the lights were on at all suggested the place was open, but it didn't seem inviting.

Nevertheless, he looked for the turn-off and steered the Impala toward the building under the lights. There were other cars parked around the building but there was no parking lot – just a field. Dean winced as his car bounced on the uneven ground, slid her into a space and shut off the engine.

"Are you sure about this, Mom?"

"It's the right place." Mary turned to him, her expression serious. "Dean, I need you to trust me. It's been a long time, but I can handle myself around these people. Just follow my lead, okay?"

"Sure, Mom," Dean answered, though he didn't understand her worry. What did she think he was going to do?

Mary nodded and climbed out of the car.

Dean's apprehension only increased when he walked into the saloon at Mary's side. The first thing that hit him was the smell: cigarette smoke, alcohol, unwashed bodies, gasoline and more he couldn't immediately identify. The interior was dimly lit and smoky. The patrons, mostly men, sat in groups of two or three and as Dean and Mary walked in someone from every single group looked their way. Dean had the impression that he was examined, assessed and judged to be insignificant as each man's gaze returned to his companions. He didn't like it.

Mary made a beeline for the bar. Dean, following, tried to study the men around them without seeming obvious about it. Men in jeans or military surplus clothing with heavy boots. He saw

several guns in evidence: high-calibre handguns in belt-holsters, sawn-off shotguns laid on the floor beneath tables and even a high-powered rifle leaning against the wall beside a group of men and one woman playing cards. What the hell kind of place was this?

Behind the bar, a woman was serving drinks. After a moment she turned to Mary. "What'll it be?"

"Two beers," Mary answered and laid some money on the bar. When the woman returned with two open bottles, Mary added, "I'm looking for William Harvelle."

The bartender's smile froze. "Are you a cop?" she asked bluntly.

"No, I – "

"He get you pregnant? Or your daughter, maybe?"

Mary laughed. "Goodness, no. Does that happen frequently? William is family."

The bartender's look was sceptical. "Really?"

"We haven't seen each other for a long time. My name is Mary Winchester. My family name is Campbell. My mother was Deanna Harvelle."

The woman leaned over the bar. "I'm Ellen Harvelle, Bill's wife. And if you're telling the truth, you can tell me his mother's name."

Mary glanced at Dean, beckoning him forward. "This is Dean, my son. I only met Uncle George's wife once; she died when William and I were both very young. It was pneumonia, and her name was some variation of Alice. I think it was Alicia."

Ellen's expression softened. "Okay, you pass. The way I heard it, you're not a part of this any more."

"I quit hunting when I lost my parents. I still remember the life. Please, is William here? It's important."

Ellen nodded. "He's in the back. A piece of advice: don't call him that or he won't even hear you out. It's Bill." She looked around, then bellowed, "Jo!"

Dean glanced the way Ellen was looking as a blonde girl at the table of card players twisted round in her seat, a hand of cards cradled against her chest. "Not now, Mom!" she complained.

"Now," Ellen returned implacably. "Watch the bar."

The blonde muttered under her breath, but threw down her cards and rose to obey.

Ellen lifted a section of the bar to admit Jo. "Come with me," she said to Mary. Mary followed. Though he hadn't been invited, Dean followed, too. He wasn't going to let Mary out of his sight in a place like this.

William Harvelle was Mary's first hunting partner: they hunted an imaginary wendigo through the cornfields of Nebraska when Mary's parents brought her on a visit. She was six years old. When she was eight it was vampires in Lawrence, the intrepid pair sneaking out of the house after dark to pursue their imaginary prey. When she was twelve, the spirit wasn't imaginary at all, and Mary steadfastly refused to make a game of hunting on William's next visit.

In their teens, their friendship became somewhat awkward, in part because Mary began to plan a future for herself that didn't involve hunting. The family visits became less frequent, and Mary chose not to go along when her father travelled to Nebraska. Since she met John, she had seen William only once.

Mary knew hunters and she should have been ready for anything, but nothing in Ellen's voice or demeanour suggested there was anything untoward happening.

Ellen led them through a narrow hallway to a room that looked a little like a doctor's surgery. There was a glass-fronted cabinet that took up the whole of one wall and contained medical supplies: not only bandages and bottles of pills, but things you don't usually see outside a hospital, including a gas tank with a face mask, and what looked like a portable defibrillator.

At the table, two men were seated at right-angles to each other. One of them – it had to be Bill, Mary thought – was bent over the other's arm, carefully sewing a wound closed. A bowl on the table contained a lot of blood-soaked cloth.

"Jesus," Dean muttered, and Mary shot him a *shut up!* look. Too late.

Bill's head jerked up. "This ain't a spectator sport," he growled.

"Need you, Bill," Ellen said shortly.

He returned to his task, drawing the dark thread slowly through the other man's flesh. "Talk fast," he ordered.

Mary stepped forward. "I'm Mary Campbell. Do you remember me, Bill?"

"Faster than that, babe," he snapped.

He'd grown up to be a real charmer, she thought, but answered quickly. "My son is missing. I believe a demon took him."

Bill stopped what he was doing and looked up at her. "Possessed?"

"I don't know. There were omens."

"Fine. We'll talk when I'm done. Now anyone in this room who ain't a doctor, get out." To his patient, he added, "Except you."

Good enough, Mary thought. She said, quietly, to Dean, "Let's go." As they left the room, she said to Ellen, "We would have waited."

Ellen shook her head. "If I made you wait, Bill would have given me hell for that, too."

"He was such a sweet boy when we were kids," Mary said, wondering what turned William into such a bastard.

"He still is," Ellen smiled, "when it suits him." She gestured to another door. "You can wait in there if you don't want to go back to the bar."

"The bar is fine."

"Mom, maybe – " Dean began.

She smiled at him. "This isn't your world, I know. But it used to be mine." She could see Dean's eyes, a storm of conflicting emotions. She knew she was asking a lot of him. Maybe she was asking too much. She had already told him about the demons, but she hadn't meant to repeat her suspicions until Dean was a bit more comfortable and she certainly hadn't wanted to speak as bluntly as Bill forced her to say it.

She could only pray Dean would have the courage to stay the course...for Sam's sake if not for hers.

They found a table in a relatively quiet corner of the bar and sat down to wait.

Mary tried to make conversation at first, but Dean drank his beer in silence and barely responded to her feeble small talk. She gave up. Perhaps it was better to let him process all this. She let her thoughts drift a little while they waited, idly watching Ellen working behind the bar. The silver bracelet Mary wore jingled a little as she raised the beer bottle to her lips. It was the charm bracelet her mother made for her so many years ago. Not just jewellery: the charms were protective

symbols from different world religions, including an anti-possession charm and a tiny bottle that could be filled with holy water – just enough for a test. She hadn't worn the bracelet since she married John.

She wondered about Bill. That back room clinic was too well equipped to be anything but a long-term fixture. Was Bill really a doctor? That took time and training. She'd expected him to be a hunter. Yet this place, Harvelle's Roadhouse, was a hunters' meeting place, so Bill and his family were clearly still a part of that world.

Eventually, the man Bill had been sewing up emerged, spoke briefly with Ellen, then joined three other men at a table. Bill appeared shortly afterwards. He was walking with a cane and as he came out from behind the bar Mary understood why he'd chosen to become a medic: one of Bill's legs was missing below the knee. He wore a prosthetic with no attempt to hide or disguise it. It didn't appear to slow him down, though; he walked across the saloon with a confident stride.

Bill sat down opposite Mary, leaning the cane against the table. He looked older than his years, deep lines around his eyes and mouth, but his hair was the same bright blond Mary remembered, and his eyes sparkled blue when he smiled, giving Mary a glimpse of the boy she once knew.

"Cousin Mary," he said, all sign of irritability gone from his voice. "I haven't seen you since..."

"My parents' funeral," Mary supplied. "Bill, I'm sorry we butted in –"

He made a dismissive gesture. "I ain't mad at you, cuz. I'm tired of patching up that jerk."

"Not a friend of yours?"

Bill grunted. "You know how it is. Hunters get hurt. But a hunter who gets hurt every time out oughta get the message." He leaned forward, meeting her eyes. "What's happened to your son?"

Straight to business. Mary summarised what she knew of Sam's disappearance: the breaking off of a relationship with a girl he'd hoped to marry, followed by his going missing the day he was due to take the first of the final exams so essential to the future he wanted. Police had no leads. She explained the omens she'd found: a couple murdered on the night of Sam's disappearance, and the brief electrical storm the same night, but she did not add the connections she had made to her own past. She would confess all later, if Bill agreed to help.

Bill listened, his expression turning grim with each new piece of information. "Sounds like our kind of thing," he agreed when she finished. "Mary, I wish I could go and search for your boy, but..." He tapped his leg, the prosthetic giving a hollow sound.

"I understand," Mary told him.

"I can still help. I'll track things online, and I can keep an eye on the police investigation, just in case they turn anything up. But you need a demon expert and that's not me. I always hunted creatures." He grimaced. "Until one of 'em hunted me."

"You zipped when you should have zagged, huh?" Mary teased lightly.

"Something like that."

Dean looked shocked by the conversation. Her son carried injuries of his own, and was very self-conscious about it, careful to cover his scars even in the hottest days of summer. Mary would never have made light of Dean's scars or how he earned them, but Bill's obvious display of his disability clued her in. Besides, he lived among hunters. If it didn't kill you, it wasn't significant.

"I do know someone," Bill volunteered, "but I don't know if he'll be willing. Do you have a place to stay?"

"We came straight here."

Bill nodded as if he'd expected that. "Thirty, thirty-five miles if you drive east from here, there's a motel. It's cheap, but clean and the desk is open twenty-four-seven. Come back tomorrow – any

time after ten – and I'll have a better idea how I can help." Bill reached across the table for Mary's hand, surprising her. "I think about you a lot, you know? Have you been happy, Mary?"

She squeezed his hand, then let go. "I've been very happy, Bill."

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Two days later, they were in South Dakota.

The house looked very familiar, Mary thought, though she had never been there before. She looked around as Dean steered the Impala through the junkyard: rusting hulks of cars piled high like barricades. Which, she supposed, was exactly what they were: a wall of rusting iron protecting a hunter's home. She directed Dean to park some distance from the house and they both got out of the car.

Dean was looking around warily. "I don't know about this, Mom. If this guy is anything like the characters in that bar..."

Mary smiled. "He will be. Don't worry, Dean."

He frowned. "I'm supposed to protect you – "

"I don't need that kind of protection. Just remember what I told you and let me do the talking."

"Yes, ma'am," Dean responded, but he didn't look happy, and he hovered really close to her as she approached the door.

It opened swiftly to her knock. Bobby Singer was grey-haired and grey-bearded, but the lines around his eyes were not deep. He was younger than he appeared at first glance.

"You're Mrs Winchester?" he asked, his tone challenging.

Mary smiled nervously. "I'm Mary Winchester," she confirmed. "This is my son, Dean."

Singer barely glanced at Dean. "I told Harvelle I'll hear you out, but don't expect more'n that. Come in." He turned away from the door.

Mary followed him into the house. Singer obviously lived alone and he made no attempt to make the place look normal. There were books, some of them ancient books, stacked haphazardly on shelves. Dust lay thickly in neglected corners. She saw salt at the windows but not on the threshold. There was no sign of guns or other weapons, but Mary could see the places they would be: the same kind of hiding places her Dad used.

"Can I get you something?" Singer offered. "Coffee? Beer?"

"Just water for me, please," Mary answered. She glanced at her son, silently reminding him of her instructions. If Singer wanted to test them with holy water he was entitled, and they should pretend not to know he was doing it.

"I could use a beer," Dean agreed.

Singer vanished into his kitchen and returned with a glass of water and two bottles of beer, already opened. He handed a bottle to Dean and the glass to Mary, then nodded toward the table. "Have a seat."

Mary sipped her water and sat down. "My mother – and Bill Harvelle's aunt – was a hunter," she began without preamble. "Deanna Campbell. She and my father, Sam Campbell, were killed by a demon with yellow eyes in 1973."

"Sam Campbell," Singer repeated. "Before my time, but I've heard the name."

"He raised me to be a hunter. I know the life and I've got the skills. But it wasn't the life I wanted for

my children. So when I married, I left hunting behind me. My husband, my boys, they don't know anything about it."

Singer grunted. "No one in their right mind ever chooses this, so I can't blame you there. But why drag your son into this now?" Again, he barely glanced at Dean.

"Because sometimes this life chooses you." Mary extracted her research from her pocket. If Bobby Singer was as good as Bill said, he would make the connections. "After my parents were killed, I found this." She slid the first printout across the table.

Singer picked it up and read it. "This happened in '72."

"Six months before he killed my parents."

"You made a connection?"

Mary nodded.

Singer scowled. "Then there's something you ain't telling me. Spit it out, lady, or I can't help you."

Mary took a deep breath. She wished she didn't have to repeat this story in front of Dean. She wished she didn't have to bring Dean into this at all. She had told him a little, but not enough for him to understand, truly, what she had done. "It was the night John meant to propose to me. We were in his car, down by the river, when the demon came. It was possessing my father..." As briefly as she dared, Mary related the story again. The demon killed John – snapped his neck like a twig – and then offered to restore John's life in exchange for what it wanted. Not her soul: it wanted something more nebulous. But in exchange it promised her the normal life she craved: John to be her husband, a home, children. Safety. All it wanted was her consent.

"Consent for what?" Dean demanded.

Mary addressed her words to him. "I still don't know, exactly. He was vague. But I think we can guess now."

Dean got it at once. "Sam? You think this demon wanted *Sam*? Ten years before he was even born?"

"When Sam was six months old, he woke up screaming one night. Nothing I could do would settle him down. For days, he did nothing but cry. The doctor couldn't find anything wrong with him, but I found one clue. I found sulphur in his nursery."

"And you didn't do anything about it?" Bobby growled.

"I couldn't think why a demon would possess a baby, but I did check. He was my baby – of course I checked! Sammy seemed fine, except for the crying. I started laying down salt around the house. I almost told John everything but...more than anything I wanted my children to feel safe. So in the end I kept it to myself."

Singer nodded. He glanced down at the article again. "Where is Sam now?" he asked.

"He's missing," Dean said.

"And you think this yellow-eyed demon is responsible."

"Mom does."

Mary offered the rest of her paperwork. "The omens around Palo Alto when my son vanished match the omens my father found around Lawrence just before he was killed."

Bobby looked through the papers. Then he turned to her, his slate-blue eyes boring into hers. "Do you know what you're doing, coming to me with this?"

Mary swallowed. She didn't know what kind of man Bobby Singer was. It was possible she was putting her son's name on a death list. It was also possible she was talking to the only man who

could save him. "I think I do," she answered eventually.

"Then I'll ask you again. Why'd you drag your son into this?"

"Dean's been very supportive, but I know he thinks his Mom has lost her mind. If I'm right about this, I need Dean to believe because it's going to take both of us to convince my husband."

"You ever face down a demon before?"

"I've fought one, and I've been with my father when he did an exorcism."

Singer was silent, watching them both. Finally, he nodded. "Happens I've got a job to do. Could be risky, but if you and your boy want to come along and you can keep him out of my way, I can show him the real world."

"Mom, this is crazy!" Dean protested, his voice just above a whisper. He glanced back to where Bobby was loading up his car.

Mary moved closer to him. "I realise it seems that way, but – "

"No. Mom, this is too much! He's a complete nutjob and he's gonna make us both accessories to...god knows what!" Dean turned to her. "Someone's going to get hurt. I can't just go along with this and let that happen."

"Good. That's the right attitude." Mary took the gun from her belt. It was her father's revolver, old but cleaned, oiled...and loaded. "Dean, I promised you proof. Please, just trust me for a few more hours. If you're not convinced, we'll go home." She offered him the gun.

Dean wouldn't take it. "No way! What do you take me for?"

Bobby walked toward them. "Have you ever used a gun, boy?"

"I'm not a boy!" Dean bristled. "I'm 26 years old."

"You look younger. And you act like a kid. Answer the question."

"I can use a shotgun. And I shoot rifles at the range, or I used to. I don't play with handguns."

Bobby turned to Mary. "Keep your pistol, lady. He'll only hurt himself with it." He patted the Impala's roof. "You both ready for this?"

"No," Dean answered firmly. "Not until you explain exactly what we're going to do."

"Hopefully, we're going to save a girl's life. Get in the car if you're coming. *My* car." Bobby turned away.

Mary looked to her son. "Please, Dean."

He sighed and headed for Bobby's car.

As he drove, Bobby talked. "Your mother's right about one thing. Something real nasty is coming and it looks like your family is caught up in it."

"What do you mean, something nasty?" Mary asked.

"In a normal year, I hear about two demonic possessions. Three at most. This year, I've come across *fifteen*. And it's only May."

"Something's building," Mary said thoughtfully.

"There's more," Bobby added. "Signs. Nothing that adds up yet. If your son is part of it, do you know why? Is he...more than human?"

"That's ridiculous!" Dean burst out.

Mary let his answer stand, though she had another one. She thought Sam might be different. He'd inherited that from her and she went to a lot of trouble to keep her own gift a secret. Being raised a hunter, Mary knew that any psychic ability put a target on your back.

"Sam's a normal kid," Dean went on hotly. "He's a brain, he's straight, he doesn't do drugs and he doesn't do monsters! What the hell, man?"

Bobby shot a grin at him. "Just a question. So does this saint have *any* faults? Odd habits?"

"Why?"

"You want to find him, don't you?"

Mary spoke up. "Sam's a good boy. He's ambitious. He wants to be a hot-shot lawyer."

"We'll talk about him later," Bobby nodded. He turned the car onto a dirt track. "Amelia called me this morning. I've had my eye on things here for a few days."

"What's happening here?" Mary asked. It was strange how familiar all this felt. Bobby could almost be her father.

"A farm hand died in a freak accident. One of the children is in hospital. She swallowed six razor blades."

"Jesus," Dean muttered.

"Witchcraft," Mary said.

"That's what I thought. I thought it was over. But Amelia called, begged me to come back. Wouldn't say why. Sounds like a trap to me."

Mary frowned. "And you're walking into it?"

Bobby smiled at Mary. "Yep. Can you draw a devil's trap?"

"In my sleep," she answered confidently.

"Good. That's your job, then."

"And what's mine?" Dean asked. Mary could hear the wariness in his voice.

Bobby shrugged. "Stay out of the way and try not to piss yourself. Think you can manage that, boy?"

A few hours later

Dean sat on the hood of Bobby's car, trying to take slow breaths and trying very, very hard not to think. He saw his mother coming toward him and his first impulse was to start running. It took an effort for him to stay put and wait for her.

Mary brushed her blonde hair back and wiped sweat from her brow. "Are you okay?" She tilted her head to one side.

"No! A world of no." Dean shook his head. "What the fuck was that? Her eyes...and all that smoke..."

"It's not like the movies, is it?" she suggested gently.

"Mom, just tell me."

She nodded. "It was a demon. Or, more precisely, a person possessed by a demon. The eyes – that's how you can tell. The smoke is the demon's true form in this world. You see it when the demon is exorcised..."

“Stop!” Dean begged. “Mom, this is crazy!”

“You saw it with your own eyes, Dean.”

“But...” he began, then let out a long breath. “How do other people not know about this?”

Mary smiled. “People are good at ignoring things they don’t want to see. Just listen to yourself, Dean. You saw it, all the proof you need, with your own eyes. And you *still* don’t believe.”

Dean took a moment to consider that. Finally, he nodded. “So...what do we do about it?”

“We go home. We talk to John. Then we find Sammy.”

Lawrence, Kansas

Two weeks later

She’d been expecting the knock, but Mary pulled the curtain aside to see the visitor before she went to the door. She smiled a greeting when she recognised Bobby Singer.

Two weeks had changed her family completely. Dean had acquired several guns and applied for a carry permit for a sidearm. He’d bug her every chance he got, asking about demons and what else was out there. He wanted to know how to protect them all. John was still angry that Mary concealed so much from him. Like Dean, he’d begun to think in terms of weapons and protection. It was the life she’d prayed her children would never have to live.

Mary opened the door and invited Bobby inside. He was carrying a large plastic box. “Got somewhere I can put this?”

“Anywhere you like. It’s good to see you again, Bobby.”

“I have some news for you, about your missing boy.”

Mary couldn’t tell from his tone, so she asked, “Good news or bad?”

“Depends on how you look at it. It ain’t real bad.”

She relaxed a little. “John and Dean are at work. They’ll be home in an hour. Would you like a drink or a snack while we wait?”

“I’m fine. But if there’s time, would you have a wall where I can pin some of this stuff up? It’ll be easier to show what I’ve learned that way.”

“The kitchen,” she suggested.

The box turned out to be full of Bobby’s research. Mary helped him pin about half of it to the kitchen wall, following his directions. She could see it was about much more than Sam’s disappearance. He had a USA map and push-pins to indicate locations. One of them was Palo Alto, but there were many others.

“Bobby, what is all this?” she asked.

“Connections,” he answered. “I’d rather wait. Explain it to everyone at once.”

Mary agreed, but it wasn’t easy to wait. She had home-made soup simmering and bread in the oven, so when John and Dean got home the meal would be ready to go. The one good thing about all this was having Dean home again. She understood why he moved out; a young man needed his independence, but she was glad to have him home again.

She hugged her husband as he came through the door. John smelled of oil and gasoline, but she didn’t ask him to shower and change as she normally would have.

“Bobby’s here,” was all she said.

John nodded to the man standing behind her. "I guessed," he said dryly. He offered his hand to Bobby. "John Winchester."

"Bobby Singer. Thank you for letting me into your home."

"If you can help find our son, you're more than welcome. The police in Palo Alto have been useless."

As she served dinner, Mary couldn't wait any longer. "Bobby, can you tell us your news? What do you know about Sam?"

Bobby nodded. "What I know is it ain't just Sam. I've found eighteen kids across the USA who have vanished in the past four months. All of them Sam's age: 22 or 23. All of them just gone without a trace."

"Why haven't the cops, or the authorities, found out about this?" John asked.

"Cops know about the disappearances. They just haven't connected them. No reason to."

"But *you* have."

"Hunters make different links, John. Sam's disappearance was my starting point. I set out to prove it was an isolated incident, because that would give me an easy starting point. But it's not isolated at all." Bobby tore his bread, dipped it in the soup and ate. "This is really good, Mary," he smiled, then resumed his story. "What Mary told me suggested this was set in motion a long time ago, so I checked into the histories of all the missing kids. Found something...curious."

"What did you find?"

"Mostly there's no connection between the kids. Nothing they've all got in common except their ages. They're different ethnicities, background, educations. The disappearances, though, they're near carbon copies. In each case, there was a bloody murder in the vicinity when they disappeared. The kids are all the same age. They all vanished off the streets or from their own homes, no witnesses. But there's one more thing. Three of them have the same odd incident in their past. A fire killed their mothers. And all three fires happened when the kid was six months old. Exactly six months."

Mary shivered. Bobby's discovery touched one of her most frightening memories. When she was pregnant with Sam, she was haunted by a recurring nightmare of a terrible fire. It was horribly vivid: she felt the flames, smelled her own flesh and hair burning before she woke, screaming, in John's arms. She believed at the time that it was a true vision of her own death. But when weeks, then years passed with no fire, she relaxed a little. Still, Mary remained certain that someday, when her time came, it would be fire. Was the fire she dreamed fated to happen when Sam was six months old? If so, what had prevented it?

Sam was six months old on November 2nd, 1983.

November 2nd 1983. Why did that date mean something to her?

Then she remembered and felt the blood drain from her face.

"Mary," John said sharply. "Mary, what is it?"

"When...when my parents died, there was a man. Another hunter." She frowned, struggling to remember. "I think he was a psychic or something. He said the weirdest thing to me." She had the attention of all three men now. "On November 2nd 1983, don't get out of bed. That's what he told me."

"He told you this in 1973?" John said sceptically.

"That's why I forgot about it. But that date is the night Sam was six months old." Then the other connection fell into place. "It's also the night Sammy got sick, remember, John?" She turned to Bobby. "And I found sulphur in the nursery."

Bobby nodded grimly. "That fits. A demon marked these kids as babies. And now they're disappearing."

"Why?" Dean asked. "You think they're possessed?"

"That's one possibility. Seems a lot of trouble to go to for a meat suit. There are six billion of 'em to choose from."

"Well, what else could it be?"

"I don't know yet." Bobby turned to Dean. "But I'm goin' to find out."

Two: Answers

Dean poured a generous measure of whiskey – the regular stuff, not Dad’s best Glenlivet – added ice and carried it out to the back porch where Bobby sat. Bobby didn’t look his way as he approached, but Dean saw his shoulders tense, his hand move out of sight. Bobby heard him coming.

“Hey. I thought you could use a drink.” He offered the glass.

Bobby took the glass. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Is my brother dead?” Dean asked bluntly.

Bobby froze with the glass halfway to his mouth. He lowered the glass slowly, his eyes never leaving Dean’s face. “Sure you want to know? Your mom doesn’t.”

“I want the truth,” Dean insisted.

Bobby gazed at him silently, for so long Dean began to squirm under the scrutiny. If someone looked at him like that in a bar, he’d think he’d scored. Finally, Bobby nodded. “Mary showed us a report about a church massacre in ’72. If she’s right to connect that to these missing kids – and I ain’t saying she is – you’d better *hope* your brother’s dead. That’d be the best case scenario.”

Dean digested that. Every time he thought he’d hit his limit, someone hit him with something even more extreme. What could be worse than Sam being dead? Sam being possessed? Surely if that happened, there was a chance to save him?

Dean didn’t ask any of his questions. He had a feeling Bobby wouldn’t answer. “If that’s true,” he said firmly, “I want you to teach me. Everything you know.”

Bobby snorted. “You freaked out over one little exorcism. You ain’t got what it takes, boy, and I’m not gonna be the one to get you killed.”

Dean rounded on him. “Bite me. So I had a little trouble with finding myself in the middle of a horror movie. I’m over it now, and I can handle it. Bobby, someone’s got to take care of my family and find Sam if he can be found.”

“Your mom was raised a hunter. *She* can handle it. Your dad’s a vet. He can learn, if he has to. You’re a *mechanic*.”

“So are you, by the look of your place,” Dean retorted.

“Not the point, kid.”

“Quit calling me ‘boy’ and ‘kid’. You sound just like my Dad, do you know that? He thinks I’m somehow less of a man because I didn’t rush to join up after 9/11, but I don’t think you have to be a marine to be a man. What is it you want? Proof I won’t run away screaming if things get scary?”

“That’d be a start.”

“Fine,” Dean spat the word angrily. “I’ve been a volunteer firefighter since I turned eighteen. Got called to a house fire a couple of years ago. We’re supposed to leave the dangerous stuff to the full time ’fighters but I saw my partner go down – the floor collapsed under him. I saved him. Spent six weeks in hospital and nearly a year in physiotherapy for doin’ it.” Dean didn’t like to talk about the incident. It seemed like boasting, and Dean didn’t feel like a hero. “Didn’t stop me fighting the next fire, either,” he added.

Bobby nodded and there was new respect in his eyes. “It ain’t just demons,” he said gruffly.

Dean stifled his smile of triumph. “I never thought it was.”

“Can you buckle down and follow orders? Even if you don’t agree with me?”

"I've been following Dad's orders all my life."

"That's business. This is life or death."

Dean understood. "I'll follow your orders."

"Even if I order you to go home," Bobby insisted.

Dean hesitated. "Fine. Yes."

"Bullshit."

"Give me a chance, Bobby. You know I'm only gonna find someone else if you won't help me."

Bobby scowled. "You follow my orders, or I'll put a bullet in you."

Dean grinned. "Deal."

Dean had been staring at the display all over the kitchen wall for a long time.

Mary moved up to his side. "The next step is to establish connections," she suggested.

"Connections?"

"There has to be something these missing people have in common besides their age."

"How do you find it?"

"In the old days, we'd go talk to their families, friends. We'd try to find out about them. It's a lot like police investigating a crime, but in our case the suspect isn't human. Today...I think the best place to start is the internet. Most 22-year-olds are into MySpace or something, aren't they?"

Dean smiled at her fondly. "You dig MySpace?"

"Goodness, no," she said nonchalantly. "I just saw it on the news."

Dean's smile widened. "You already checked, didn't you?"

Mary chuckled. "You know me so well."

Dean's smile vanished. "I'm not so sure I ever did."

That hurt her, though Mary tried not to show it. "They're mostly just normal youngsters as far as I can tell. There's nothing that links all of them. But I did find one thing that...well, it might be something to look out for."

"Which is?"

Mary pointed to part of the display. "This girl, Lauren Chambers, is a new-ager. She had a website with a lot of stuff about auras and crystals. Nonsense. But she also had an online diary – "

"A blog," Dean supplied.

"In which she claimed just before Christmas that she'd been given the gift of automatic writing. Now that's *not* new age nonsense. It has a long history."

"So? I don't see the connection."

"Well, it's not the same thing, but Sam had true dreams. Not often, but he did. And Jessica told John he was having nightmares before he left her." Mary wondered if Sam saw something bad happening to Jessica if he stayed with her. It was the one thing that might make sense of it: when he brought her home for Thanksgiving last year he'd asked Mary about his grandmother's ring. She agreed to have it re-sized for Jessica.

Dean was frowning at the display on the wall. "Mom, are you saying you think all of them are psychics?"

"I think it's something worth checking." She looked at her son. "You're going with Bobby, aren't you?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"I don't want you to be a hunter, Dean."

He shook his head. "I don't think I have a choice. Mom, this feels right. Like it's what I'm supposed to do."

"I suppose it is." Mary felt tears threaten, but Dean wasn't a child any more. He had the right to make his own choice. She took a deep breath. "Another of the missing kids is from Kansas. John and I will look into that one. If you and Bobby investigate some of the others, maybe we can make some progress."

"I'll tell Bobby."

It was, Mary explained as they drove out of Lawrence in the pickup truck John used for work, the last case her father worked before he died. Tom Whitshire, who owned the farm at the time, died under somewhat odd circumstances and her father thought something supernatural could be responsible. Though Mary didn't remember all the details, the dead man's son had told her a story that was very similar to what happened to her a few days later – the night her parents were murdered by a demon with yellow eyes.

"And we're turning over this old rock because...?" John asked.

"I want to know if Chuck Whitshire has a 23-year-old son. And if he does, whether anything happened when that son was six months old."

Although John accepted Mary's story, what he couldn't figure out was how a drive out to the Whitshire farm could lead them to Sammy, which was really the only part of all this John cared about. Demons, monsters, other people's kids disappearing – none of it mattered to him. He needed to find *his* son. He needed to know his boy was safe.

There was thick, black smoke rising in a column above the farm. From this distance, John couldn't tell which of the buildings was burning but he was sure it was a building, not the fields.

"Mary, you'd better call 911," he suggested urgently. He hadn't heard sirens and he saw no sign that anyone out there was fighting the fire.

Mary plucked his cell phone from the dash and made the call quickly, reporting an out-of-control fire at the Whitshire Farm. While she talked to the emergency services, John turned the pickup into the farm's private road. If no one from the farm had called for help, maybe it was too late. But he had to try. The pickup bounced on the uneven road as he accelerated toward the burning farm.

It was the main farmhouse burning, and John could see it had been burning for some time. Most of the roof was gone. Why had no one called for help? Even if the family had been trapped inside – a horrible thought – shouldn't there be farm workers around? This whole thing was giving John the creeps.

Mary was opening the truck's door before it fully stopped. She ran toward the house, calling out, careless of her own safety.

"Mary! No!" John rushed after her, having shut off the engine but leaving his keys dangling from the ignition. The heat of the fire was unbearable. He pulled Mary back, enfolding her in his arms as much to shield her body as to comfort. "There's nothing we can do, Mary." He gazed back at the soaring flames, frowning to himself. There was something...not right. Something about the smell...

John pushed Mary toward the pickup. "Move the truck," he ordered. "This heat – the tank could explode. I'll check the other buildings." He took off, trusting her to move the pickup and stay out of

danger. John was worried the flames would spread to the other farm buildings. He was a little surprised they hadn't already. He couldn't do a damn thing to prevent it, but he could at least make sure there was no one else in danger.

The first outbuilding held tools and farm equipment. There was a tractor and an old plough. Along one wall, four large barrels probably held gasoline. The sight of them increased John's urgency.

Next was a stable. The smell hit John as he approached the open door. Not fire. Death. Blood.

"Hello? Anyone in here?" John called out. He walked in, trying to breathe shallowly. The smell made him realise what was so creepy about all this. It wasn't just that there were no people. He had seen no signs of life at all. This was a working farm: he should have heard horses panicking in the stable, dogs barking. He hadn't even heard birdsong or seen wasps.

John saw what lay in the first stall and clapped a hand over his mouth, fighting to keep from throwing up. Acid burned the back of his throat. The horse – he assumed it was a horse, it was hard to be sure – had been ripped apart, its guts all over the floor. That mixture of blood, guts, urine and faeces was the stink filling the air...god, at least it wasn't human. He couldn't have kept his breakfast down if it had been human.

"Is anyone here?" he called again, then wondered if it was a good idea to advertise his presence. Certainly nothing human could have made that mess, and his purpose here was to save lives, if anyone needed saving. Suddenly, he wished he were armed, and *that* was a new feeling. John hadn't felt the need to pack a gun since he was in 'Nam. He could still shoot, and he'd taught both his boys shotgun, but John avoided guns most of the time and never kept them in the house. He looked around for a weapon and found a curved piece of metal on the wall which was probably part of a harness. He pulled it down and hefted it in his hand. It made him feel a bit better.

He moved on to the next stall. It was empty, but the third one wasn't. Had a rabid wolf been through here or something? For the first time, Mary's talk of monsters truly sank in for John. She wasn't crazy or kidding. This carnage wasn't caused by a wolf. *Something* did this to the horses.

John moved on to the final stall, already steeling himself for the sight of another mutilated horse. He glanced down, looking for tracks but not really expecting anything. The ground was hard-packed dirt, not concrete. There were deep lines scored in the ground in groups of four parallel lines. They looked almost like claw marks, but what could possibly have claws that huge?

Then, as John watched, another four parallel lines scored themselves into the dirt.

John's mouth went dry. His head jerked up in an instinctive, futile attempt to see the thing that made that mark. His rational mind simply couldn't accept he was face to face with an invisible monster. An ominous growl rumbled through the stable. John felt its breath on his skin. Adrenaline took over and John turned to flee. He felt those invisible claws rip through his shirt and into his flesh. The impact of the blow bore him to the ground and John lost his grip on the harness. It clattered away from him as he hit the ground. John groped for it desperately; it was a lousy weapon but he had nothing else. The thing clawed at his side. John grabbed for the harness. As his fingers closed around the cold iron, he rolled onto his back and thrust it into the empty air above him with all his strength. He felt it hit something solid, resist for a moment, then penetrate. As the thing roared in deafening agony, for an instant John saw it – a black shape writhing – and it was gone.

Breathing hard, John scrambled to his feet. He looked around wildly, but of course he could see nothing. He ran.

"Invisible?" Mary repeated.

They were back in the pickup, watching the fire from a safe distance. The fire fighters were still working on the blaze at the farm, but it was clear no one could be alive in the farmhouse. John

knew he and Mary would probably be questioned when the police got around to investigating.

Despite the heat of the day, John wore the old denim jacket he kept in the pickup: it covered the wounds on his back from the invisible beast.

"Invisible," he said again. "But from the claw marks it had to be the size of a grizzly. At least."

"But that's..." Mary began. She went very pale. "Oh, god, John. It must have been a hellhound. That would explain why the harness hurt it."

"Honey, I'm convinced on the Hell part. But you need to explain what you mean about the harness."

"Iron, John. Hellhounds are, well, what the name suggests. Demonic hunting dogs. I don't think they can be killed, but salt or iron would hurt it. Maybe send it back to Hell."

"So, you're saying a hellhound started that fire.?"

"No, that must have been a demon." Mary shivered. "It killed all those people so we couldn't talk to Chuck."

"Don't you think that's a bit paranoid, love?"

Mary took her eyes off the fire to look at him very seriously. "I sound like my father, don't I? No, John, I don't think it's paranoid. In fact, I'm worried we're not being paranoid *enough*." She reached out to him; he squeezed her hand briefly and rested their joined hands on his thigh.

"John, how badly are you hurting?"

"I'll live."

"Typical, John. Can't you tell me the truth just once instead of being so damn stoic?"

John flashed her a grin, but said nothing more.

Mary sighed in defeat. "Do you want me to drive?"

John hesitated, but he knew his hesitation was as good as an answer. Mary knew him too well: if he even considered the question, she would know he was hurting, badly.

"Keys," she said firmly, extracting her hand from his and holding it out, palm-up.

John gave her the keys and she climbed down from the truck, leaving him to slide over to the passenger side. He did appreciate the offer. He knew Mary hated driving the truck. She found the size awkward and the steering too heavy for her. But she started the engine without complaint and they began to drive back to Lawrence.

By the time they reached Lawrence, the truck was running low on gas. Mary stopped to refuel at a gas station that had a supermarket and pharmacy next to it. She bought painkillers for John and a box of first aid supplies which she planned to leave in the truck. She had a feeling it might be needed.

Mary was glad to reach their home. It was familiar and real. Here, she felt safe. She glanced at John, silently offering her help, but he waved her off. He climbed down from the truck, his movements slow and stiff. They went inside and John actually checked the salt line without Mary asking. That broke her heart a little, but she knew they were on the same page at last.

"Kitchen, John. Now," she ordered. She pulled her box of first aid supplies from beneath the sink and sat John down at the table. She helped him remove the denim jacket and gasped. His shirt was saturated with blood but it had begun to dry, sticking the shirt to his skin. She could see that, beneath the material, his skin was cut, but she couldn't tell how badly, except that there was a great deal of blood. Mary knew the sensible thing would be to take John to the ER, but how on

earth could she explain this?

“John, I’ll have to soak this off with warm water. It’s going to sting.”

John gave his quick smile again. “A little pain won’t kill me.”

Mary set some water to boil and poured cold water from a bottle into a clean bowl. She added some liquid antiseptic.

“Did you learn this from your father, too?” John asked. His voice betrayed the pain he was struggling to hide.

“The first aid? Mom taught me the basics, but that was a long time ago. I stayed in practice by being a mom myself.” It was true. The only difference between the cuts and scrapes of boys’ rough games and the mauling on John’s back was a matter of degree.

“Yeah, I guess you did. I just don’t know how your parents could do that to you. Raise a kid to patch up bullet wounds and hellhound maulings?”

Mary shook her head. “Dad had his reasons. I didn’t agree with him, that’s why I never told you or our boys about...my upbringing. But now I wonder if Dad was right all along.”

The water was boiling. She took it off the heat and poured some into the bowl, testing the temperature with her fingertips. Satisfied, she soaked a towel in the warm water, wrung it out and laid it on John’s back.

“My dad used to talk about a family legend. It was the reason he kept us away from other hunters, but he always said he would tell me when I was older. When I was old enough, I didn’t want to know. Maybe if I’d listened...”

“You can’t think like that,” John told her. He was gripping the table hard. “Maybe that legend would make a difference, Mary, or it might have nothing to do with this. But what happened to Sammy when he was a baby, *you knew*. You should have told me then.”

“I’m sorry, John – ” she began.

He cut in, “ – But I understand why you didn’t. Doesn’t matter now anyway. We – ” he broke off as someone knocked on the front door.

They looked at each other and Mary read her own worry in her husband’s eyes. She forced a laugh. “This is silly. I’ll go. It’s probably some kid selling girl scout cookies.”

She left John with the wet towel still on his back and headed for the front door. She would just have to get rid of whoever it was quickly.

The young woman who stood there was a stranger and she definitely wasn’t selling cookies. She smiled widely as Mary opened the door. “Hi, Mary!” Her blue eyes turned absolutely black. “Bye, Mary.”

Mary started to close the door. In the same instant she heard breaking glass and John, panic in his voice, yelling her name. The demon woman threw something. It hit the door as Mary slammed it closed. Instinct made her dive for cover.

The explosion rocked the whole house. Mary screamed in terror, hardly aware she was doing it, trying to protect her head with her arms as plaster fragments and splinters flew around her. Searing heat burst around her, turning the air to flame and Mary was frozen in terror, her old nightmare coming to life.

The second explosion came from behind her. The kitchen.

“John!” Mary screamed, her ears ringing painfully. Her fear of fire was overtaken by her terror for John. She began to crawl through the debris of her home to see what was left of her husband.

Dean walked stiffly through the door, fighting an urge to rub his sore back. He made his way to the table, sat down and began to strip his gun so he had an excuse to be sitting there. He was embarrassed and angry with himself for getting hurt, and it showed in the movement of his hands.

Bobby spoke from the doorway. "Don't beat yourself up about it, Dean. You've only been doing this a few weeks."

"I don't need to beat *myself* up," Dean retorted. "That damned poltergeist did it for me!"

Bobby sat down at the table. "You told me it was just bruised."

"It is. I'm fine."

"Then you've had a lot worse. Suck it up, kid. It won't be the last time some critter tosses you across a room."

Dean finished dismantling the gun and rose to get the cleaning kit. As he stood, his bruised muscles cramped. Pain shot through him and he doubled over.

"Dean!"

He felt Bobby's hands on his shoulders, even through the pain. Dean couldn't respond for fear he would cry out. He gritted his teeth, holding the pain inside. After a while, he felt his muscles begin to relax, the pain fading. He let Bobby help him up.

"That's more'n a bruise, kid. Better let me check you out."

"Quit calling me 'kid'," Dean complained reflexively. He'd become used to Bobby calling him 'kid' and 'boy' but he still told him to stop it. He had the impression he had to prove himself before Bobby would.

Bobby ignored his objection, which was also routine. "Upstairs," he ordered. "And take your shirt off."

Uh-oh. That was so not a good idea. Bobby was only trying to take care of him but Dean had been fighting his less-than-appropriate feelings for Bobby since they left Lawrence. But he couldn't argue with Bobby's order without admitting his feelings.

Bobby led Dean into his own bedroom. It was the only real bed in the house; Dean had been sleeping on an old fold-out in another room. Dean managed to get his shirt off and, following Bobby's directions, he lay down on the bed. Bobby's bed was a metal-framed king-size, the mattress firm and comfortable. It was covered not with a comforter but wool blankets and a quilt. Dean recognised the quilt as hand-made, because his mother made them, too. He realised the quilt must be a remembrance of someone. A woman...sister? Wife? The cotton was cool against his skin as he lay down, wincing when his back muscles twinged again. He rested his face on his hands.

Bobby sat beside him. "Keep still. I'm just going to check these bruises."

Dean felt Bobby's warm fingers trace lightly across his shoulder. The touch seemed like a caress at first, more sensual than exploratory. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking. He knew Bobby was seeing his scars for the first time.

"You've got some colourful bruises," Bobby informed him, "but it looks superficial." His touch became firmer, his fingers dug into Dean's muscles.

It was painful, but Dean endured it without a sound until Bobby probed one particular spot. Dean yelped involuntarily.

"Ah, that's it," Bobby said in a satisfied tone.

"That hurt!" Dean grouched, thinking that at least the sumbitch could apologise.

"It would. I think you've torn the muscle a bit. Did you fall awkwardly?" His fingers, gentle again,

stroked the painful spot slowly, repeatedly.

"I don't know," Dean admitted. "Maybe."

Bobby grunted, still stroking Dean's back. "Well, I've got some liniment that might help."

"Snake oil," Dean groaned. "I'll heal."

"Not for the first time," Bobby remarked and his hand swept over the area of Dean's scars.

Dean drew in a shaky breath. "Uh, Bobby?" He moved away from the man's touch, confused. Was he imagining more than a friend's concern in that touch? Was it just his fantasy intruding into real life? Living in such close quarters with Bobby with little opportunity to hook up elsewhere had left Dean thinking about Bobby as more than a friend. He always had liked older men. But he had never picked up even a hint from Bobby that the attraction might be mutual...until now. He didn't want to make a wrong move and screw this up. Hunting was too important. Finding Sam was too important.

He rolled over, moving further away from Bobby but it allowed him to see the man's face. It also made the erection tenting his pants pretty damn obvious if Bobby chose to look that way.

"No," he said quietly. "It's not the first time. I told you about the fire."

"How old were you?"

"Twenty three. It's not as bad as it looks. Second-degree burns, mostly. Not muscle-deep, it just messed up my skin." Dean began to relax, the familiar conversation pushing his confusion into the background.

Bobby shook his head, half-smiling. "You didn't learn not to run into burning buildings?"

Dean grinned. "I learned not to wear clothing that melts."

Bobby chuckled. "Might want to remember – " He broke off, his eyes rising to meet Dean's, the smile gone.

Oh, hell. Caught. Dean knew hesitation was a really bad idea at a moment like this, but he didn't know what to *do*. If he were sure Bobby wouldn't react badly, he would make his interest clear. But this felt too unpredictable. He found he was holding his breath, desperate for Bobby to make a move – any move – so he'd be off the hook.

Dean tried for a smile. "Bobby, I – " If only he could figure out what Bobby was thinking!

"Seems unlikely to me," Bobby said slowly, "that a boy with your looks would have trouble getting laid."

It wasn't much of an opening. Dean answered, feigning a confidence he didn't feel, "I do okay with girls. Never had much luck with men." *And quit calling me 'boy'.*

To his amazement, Bobby smiled. "Yeah. Me too." And he laid his hand over Dean's erection.

Dean threw his head back, taking in a sharp breath. The warm touch, the acceptance, shot to his centre with an unexpected intensity. He closed his eyes, reaching out blindly toward Bobby. His fingers encountered denim, stretched tight across Bobby's thigh. He squeezed and slid his hand upward as Bobby rubbed Dean's cock through his pants. He felt an answering shudder from Bobby and opened his eyes.

He found Bobby watching him intently. Dean mouthed a word, *Please*, and Bobby drew his zipper down. Dean sighed, able to relax now he was sure they wanted the same thing. Bobby eased Dean's cock out of his pants and stroked him firmly. Dean gave himself up to the pleasure, thrusting into Bobby's fist. Words spilled from his lips, words Dean couldn't think clearly enough to control. Dean arched his back, chasing orgasm and cried out in mingled pleasure and pain as his muscles protested the movement. Right then it happened; he came, spilling himself over Bobby's

hand.

As his body relaxed, Dean became aware of a renewed pain in his back. He ignored it, reaching out to return the favour.

But Bobby stopped him. "No, Dean. You're hurt. Some other time, okay?"

Disappointed, Dean nonetheless had to concede the point. He wasn't up to anything strenuous tonight. "Another time," he promised.

Morning found Dean feeling like he'd gone ten rounds in the ring, but he also felt more relaxed than he had for weeks. Aside from his injury, which wasn't really all that serious, the hunt went well, and he was proud of his part in it. Best of all, he and Bobby seemed to have an understanding on a personal level, and Dean felt incredibly good about that. So he was smiling as he headed downstairs, ready to face whatever fresh horror Bobby had for him.

When he reached the main room, Bobby was at his computer. He was concentrating hard on whatever was on the screen and looked very grim. His head jerked up as Dean entered the room.

"Hey, Bobby. What's wrong?"

Silently, Bobby beckoned him over and turned the screen around so Dean could see. Dean leaned over the desk and read the article displayed there. His stomach churned. Three paragraphs in, Dean ignored the rest and pulled out his cell phone. It showed six missed calls, all of them from his father's cell phone. That number had always meant garage business to Dean, so he ignored them without thinking and dialed the home number instead.

"I already tried the house," Bobby volunteered unhelpfully. "Line's dead. Does your mom have a cell?"

"No." But Dad did, Dean realised, remembering those missed calls. He called the cell phone. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only just found it. I was about to call you when you came in."

The phone went to voicemail. Dean swore, disconnected without leaving a message and hit redial. "Answer, you son of a bitch!"

Finally the call was answered, but not by John. Mary's voice came, heavy with sleep. "Hello?"

"Mom? Mom, I just saw the news. Why didn't you call me? Where's Dad? Is he okay? Are *you* okay?"

"Dean. Thank god. I'm fine. John's hurt, but he's going to be okay."

"The newspaper says you're both dead! What the hell happened?"

"Demons came after us. We had to run. I tried to call you last night but your phone was going straight to voicemail."

Shit. Those missed calls. "I'm sorry, you're right. We were..." Dean glanced at Bobby. This wasn't the time to mention to his mom that he'd been hurt. "...hunting," he finished. "Where are you?"

"In a motel." Mary laughed, and it sounded weird. Not like Mom at all.

"Mom?"

"I'm sorry. It's just...this is exactly what my Dad would have done. I'm having trouble with the irony. We lost everything yesterday."

"Not everything," Dean reminded her.

"No, you're right." She paused, apparently pulling herself together. "John's sleeping; he's on some

heavy pain meds, and I need to sleep, too or I can't drive. But once we're rested we'll come to you and Bobby. Is that okay?"

"I'll check." Dean turned to Bobby. "They're both alive. Mom says demons attacked the house. Can they come here?"

He expected Bobby to say yes, no problem, but instead he held his hand out for the phone. A little worried, Dean handed it over.

"Mary, are you both okay? Really?" Bobby demanded. He was quiet for a moment, listening. "Where are you, exactly? Are you both safe?" Another pause. "Okay. Yes, of course, but don't come here. Can you make it to Harvelle's?...Good. We'll meet you there. Do you need money, Mary?...You sure now? Okay. I'll see you soon." He didn't hang up, but offered the phone back to Dean.

"Mom?"

"We're fine, Dean. We'll see you soon."

"Okay. Bye, Mom." Dean waited until he heard the click of her hanging up. "Why wouldn't you let them come here?" he accused, anger flaring.

"Because we need to be in Nebraska by tonight, and I figured you'd want them with us. And if they've got demons on their tail, Harvelle's is safer."

Dean relaxed. "What's the hurry? Why do we have to go to Harvelle's?"

"Bill has a lead on your brother."

Ellen Harvelle closed the saloon door behind the last man to leave. She locked the door, pocketed the key and reached up to slide the bolt home. Then she turned to face the people who were left: Bobby Singer and his new protégée, Dean Winchester. Dean's parents, Mary – Mary Campbell, whom Bill claimed as a relative – and John. She didn't like having so many strangers in the Roadhouse, but Bill insisted. Family was family, however distant. The old hunting families supported each other.

She headed back to the group gathered around the pool table, and kissed her husband. "I'm going to bed. You'll be okay here?"

Bill kissed her back. "We'll be fine, love. Don't wait up for me."

Ellen nodded and left them to it.

Bill watched her go, then it was time to get down to business. He'd kept everyone waiting long enough. He pulled the rolled-up maps out from beneath the pool table and spread them out over the baize. He used a couple of balls to weigh down the corners. "So," he began, "I've been tracking the omens since we talked," he nodded to Bobby, then looked around at all of them. "What I found...well, it's got me scared. So it's between us, here, you understand?"

"I got it," Bobby agreed.

Bill waited for everyone else to nod or agree before he went on. "First, your boy," he nodded to Mary and John, "and all those other kids who disappeared. Coincidental with each disappearance, there was an electrical storm over this area." He indicated a county of South Dakota on the map.

"That's my backyard, Bill," Bobby objected. "I would have noticed."

"Not these, you wouldn't. Not unless you were searching the way I was. These are micro storms, not the kind you'd notice in the weather." He leaned over the map. "Just about the only thing in the area is Cold Oak."

"What's Cold Oak?" Dean asked.

"It's a ghost town," Bobby answered. "One of those old frontier towns that died when it wasn't the frontier any more. Cold Oak is literally a ghost town. It's supposed to be haunted."

"No one lives there?" Dean frowned.

"An occasional idjit thrill seeker camps out in the street. No one lives there permanently."

"Is it really haunted?"

"Beats me. No one lives there, so if the ghosts are real, they ain't hurtin' anyone. Most likely it's just stories."

"And you think," John said, wincing as he leaned forward to examine the map, "the missing kids are there?"

"I think they were *taken* there," Bill corrected. "I ain't sayin' they stayed put."

John nodded, accepting the distinction. "Why would anyone do that?"

Bill shrugged. "I know you don't want to hear it, John, but demons mostly kill, maim or torture. Whatever they want with those kids, it ain't good."

"So we're going to Cold Oak." John looked at Mary. She nodded, pale and tired.

"Before you make travel plans," Bill interrupted, "I found something else you should see." He turned to Bobby. "You know what the demonic omens have been like recently. Impossible to track because they're showing up everywhere."

Bobby nodded. "Storm's coming. We all know it."

"Yeah. Well, like I said, they're everywhere. Except an area about a hundred miles across, in southern Wyoming."

Bobby sat up straight. "What are you sayin', Bill?"

"I just said it. The one part of the continental US where there's no demons at all is southern Wyoming." Bill drew the second map from beneath the first: this one was a state map of Wyoming, but he didn't lay it out, not yet. "Do you know what's there, Bobby?"

"Nope," Bobby answered at once. "Quit making such a production of it, Bill."

Bill smiled. Can't help myself on this one. 'Cause if you already know about this, man, I'm pissed as Hell you didn't tell me. But if you don't...Singer, I am about to blow your mind."

"Get on with it," Bobby growled.

"Okay, okay. So, you ever hear about the Colt?"

Mary's eyes widened, but she said nothing. She was a hunter's daughter, born to the life. Naturally she knew the legend of the Colt.

Bobby nodded. "I heard the story. But I've been hunting a long time, Bill, and I never met anyone who's ever seen it or even knows for sure it's more'n a fairy tale."

"If anyone had the Colt," Bill pointed out, "they sure as Hell wouldn't admit it. A lot of hunters would kill for that thing."

"What's the Colt?" Dean asked. He sounded irritated.

Bill took a breath to answer the question, but Mary spoke first. "I'll tell you the story later, Dean." She turned to Bill. "What does the Colt have to do with my son's disappearance?"

"Southern Wyoming," Bill answered, and he unrolled the map of the state. "Samuel Colt built five churches across the state." He had already marked each of them on the map.

"A perfect circle," John observed.

“Oh, it’s a bit more than that. That circle is a hundred miles across, and Colt didn’t just build churches. He built railroads to connect all five of them.” Bill produced a pen and drew the lines of the railroads on the map. “Just like this...” He drew a large, five-pointed star, a pentagram, connecting the churches already marked.

Bobby gave a low whistle.

“That’s genius,” Mary whispered.

“And for those of us new to demon hunting?” John prompted.

“It’s a devil’s trap,” Mary answered, but it was obvious her husband didn’t get it. “It’s what we use as protection,” she explained. “You can trap a demon inside the sigil. Or use it to keep them out.”

John studied the map. “So, which is this one doing?” he asked after a moment. “Keeping demons out...or keeping something in?”

Bill exchanged a look with Bobby. “That’s a real good question, John.”

“What about this Colt?” Dean asked.

It was almost 3am and they were in the motel parking lot. Mary could tell John was in a lot of pain. She wanted to get him into bed and check his wounds, change the bandages if necessary. The hellhound attack, followed by the explosion at the house had taken a toll on him that was more than physical. The injuries would heal, though there was still a risk of infection. Emotionally, though...Mary wasn’t sure. There was a new hardness in John she didn’t like seeing.

Bobby said quietly, “That can wait until tomorrow, Dean.”

“No,” Mary answered wearily. “It’s late and we’re all tired, but there are still some things we need to discuss.” She bit her lip, worried about Bobby’s reaction, then added, “As a family.”

Bobby looked at her, his face unreadable. “And I’m not family. Fine. At least one of us will get some sleep, then.” He turned toward his room.

“Bobby, I didn’t mean – ” she began apologetically, although she had meant exactly that. She had promised Bobby honesty, but there were some secrets she was not ready to share with him. Her father’s paranoia again: he had never trusted other hunters.

He turned back. “It’s fine, Mary. Really.”

Mary turned to Dean. “I know you’re tired, Dean, but please?”

Dean nodded curtly, clearly not happy. He led the way to Mary and John’s room.

Once they were inside, Mary gave John some painkillers and insisted he take them, then she sat down, watching Dean checking the salt lines. She hadn’t needed to ask him to do it.

“The Colt,” she said. “It’s an old legend. Back in 1835 Samuel Colt made a gun for a hunter. This gun is supposed to be able to kill anything. Demons, vampires. Anything.”

“Bobby seems to think it’s just a story,” Dean shrugged.

“It’s not. I mean, I can’t vouch for what it can or can’t kill, but I know the Colt exists. I’ve seen it.”

“What?”

“Do you remember, John? Just after my parents died.”

John frowned, then he nodded. “Yeah, I do remember. An antique revolver. There was a star carved on the grip and something etched along the barrel. Spanish?”

“Latin,” Mary corrected. “*Non timebo mala*. I will fear no evil. Thirty years ago I returned the Colt to a hunter from Manning, Colorado. If he’s still alive, he still has it.”

"Think he'd give it to us?" Dean asked, then answered his own question. "Not likely, is it? That thing must be priceless."

"I don't know, Dean. Tell Bobby. I can't remember the hunter's name but Bobby might know him. There's more I have to tell you, though, and this you *can't* tell Bobby." She looked at John. He didn't know what she was going to say, but she thought he would understand why she wanted it kept in the family.

John met her eyes briefly and nodded. "Your word, son."

"I trust Bobby!" Dean protested.

"So do I," Mary agreed, "but not with this. You'll understand when you hear it."

Dean looked at her, then at his father. "Okay. I promise."

Mary sighed with relief. "The night before you left with Bobby, I told you that Sam has true dreams."

"I remember," Dean agreed warily.

"Sam inherited that gift from me. I've had these dreams since I was a teenager. Not all of them are things I can check on but of those I could, only once have I ever been wrong. It's a true ability, Dean."

Dean sat down heavily. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Because I was raised a hunter, and most hunters don't trust psychics. That's why you can't tell Bobby. I didn't even tell John until recently."

"Why tell me now, then?"

"Because I know what's happening to Sam. I've been dreaming it."

Dean stared at her. Mary waited for him to say something.

"Tell us," John urged. "Is he still alive?"

She nodded, though John must surely have known she couldn't have hidden it from him if she thought their son were dead. "Yes. I think so."

"This is bad, isn't it, Mom?" Dean looked grim and she wondered what inspired that look.

"The demon is taking these people to...a place. It's a deserted settlement, maybe it's this Cold Oak, but I can't say for sure. At first they are simply abandoned there. They're left to find each other, to...to begin to bond. Then..." Mary tried to continue, but the words wouldn't come.

She felt John's warm hand enfold hers. Mary met his eyes, drawing strength from him as she always had. She took a deep breath.

"The demon tells them that only one of them will be allowed to leave. Last one standing. He's making them kill each other."

Dean paled. "Sammy?"

"In my first dream about this, I saw a girl try to kill him in his sleep. Sam woke up, there was a struggle and he killed her instead." With John holding her hand, she could say the words, but she couldn't explain the horror of that scene, or how Sam seemed to lose control, how he stabbed the girl over and over again in some kind of frenzy.

"Self defence," Dean said firmly.

"Yes, it was. That time. But Sam's still alive and he's still...killing."

"No! Sammy wouldn't do that. Come on! He won't even swat flies!"

Mary felt tears sting her eyes. "I couldn't believe it, either. But it's what I've been dreaming. And

one thing more." She swallowed, then forced the words out. "I dreamed about Sam standing in an old cemetery. He had the Colt."

Three: Devil's Gate

John loaded the gun, fitting the custom-made bullets into the clip one by one while Mary watched. They were anti-demon bullets, hollow rounds made of iron and filled with holy water, but they would kill a human target as easily. John slid the clip home, jacked a round into the chamber, checked the safety then aimed the gun, checking the balance and weight.

There was a determined look in John's eyes, one Mary didn't enjoy seeing. She felt she was seeing, for the first time, the John Winchester who went to war: the side of himself they both believed he left behind in Vietnam. After everything they had been through, Mary couldn't even blame him, but she hated seeing John like this.

"John," she began, but broke off. She didn't know how to continue.

"It's a precaution," John said, meeting her eyes with a look that said she should be carrying, too.

"We're only going to see what's there," Mary pointed out. She had given her father's pistol to Dean, and while she wouldn't go unarmed, she didn't want to pack a gun. Her weapons were different: holy water and Latin.

"And what's there could be anything from an empty field to a pack of those hellhounds," John pointed out. Unconsciously, he flexed his shoulder as he spoke, testing the healing wounds on his back. "If we're not going prepared, Mary, we're not going," he added firmly.

She moved to stand behind her husband. He was sitting at the motel room's only table, with the gun-cleaning equipment spread out on a canvas sheet before him. Mary laid her hands on his shoulders, hoping to massage away some of the tension he was carrying. John leaned back into her touch and laid the gun down. He sighed theatrically as she worked her fingers into his muscles. "Mm, that's good."

"Putty in my hands, honey." Mary bent to kiss his cheek and John turned his head to capture her lips instead. She kissed him back with a little laugh. John used to do that when they were young and she enjoyed the reminder.

"In your dream, Mary," John asked seriously, "was it night or day?"

The brief moment of lightness vanished. Mary didn't need to ask which dream he meant. "Neither," she answered, sitting down on the motel bed. "I mean, it was half-light, but it could have been twilight or dawn. I don't know which."

"If we leave now, we'll be there before twilight."

Mary shivered, though it wasn't cold. "No reason to wait," she agreed.

As soon as Dean saw Cold Oak ahead, he understood why Bobby called it a haunted town. It looked as if some terrible disaster happened there. It was summer, but the trees around the town were bare of leaves, as if it were winter. The houses stood empty and abandoned: some intact, many others with holes where roof beams had collapsed or trees fallen in long-ago storms. The road was a narrow track through the trees and Dean had to drive slowly to avoid scratching the Impala's paintwork.

"Pull over here," Bobby ordered.

Dean would have liked the car closer to town, in case they had to make a quick getaway, but he had become accustomed to obeying Bobby. Bobby always had a reason for his orders, even if he didn't share it.

Bobby took the shotguns from the trunk. Dean checked his – it was loaded with rock salt – and tucked it under his arm. The two men walked side by side into the abandoned town.

Dean didn't know what to expect. He was both afraid they wouldn't find Sam here and, after what Mom told him, just as afraid they *would*. If they found Sam, if he was still alive, he couldn't be the brother Dean remembered. So Dean did not call out his brother's name as they approached.

The first body they saw was lying on the steps of one of the first buildings. It was a young woman, Sam's age, her long, mousy hair covering her face. A gaping hole in her chest was obviously what killed her but Dean couldn't see how that happened to her. It didn't look like a gunshot wound. Bobby signalled Dean to stay put and examined the body carefully. Dean was happy to stay away; he didn't know how Bobby could stand touching her.

"She ain't been dead long," Bobby announced, standing. "A day. Maybe two."

"I'll check inside," Dean offered, figuring he needed to pull his weight.

The door was made of wood and stood partly open. Dean pulled on the handle, but found the door stuck in place. It had probably swollen over the years and now wouldn't budge. Dean thought he could probably force it open, but the gap seemed wide enough so he squeezed his way in. He repositioned the shotgun so it was held at his side, pointed down but ready to aim if the need arose.

Inside, Dean found a large room containing a table and an old bureau. There must have been chairs, once, but they were gone. The fireplace had a stone plinth and the old tools – a poker, a toasting fork and suchlike – stood beside it. There was a further door leading into another room. Everything was covered with a century's accumulated dust. The only light came from a dirty window and the half-open door through which Dean had entered.

Footprints in the dust told Dean that someone had been here recently. He thought they were three different people but none of the footprints was big enough to be Sam's.

Dean crossed to the next room and before he reached the door the smell reached him. He did not want to enter that room. It was dark inside and he couldn't see clearly, but he saw enough to know there were more human bodies within. He thought he saw three. Dean had no choice. He had to know if one of them was Sam.

But, god, that smell! Dean pulled the sleeve of his coat down over his hand and used it to cover his mouth and nose. He breathed through his mouth as shallowly as he could. Carefully, Dean walked inside.

These three had been dead for longer than the girl outside. Flies buzzed around them and Dean saw the slinky movement of rats. He considered firing the shotgun to get rid of them, but he knew what Bobby would say to that. They didn't know for sure that Sam was here but they did know that demons were. A gunshot would attract attention. Dean pulled out his flashlight instead and clicked it on to examine the dead.

The closest body had dark skin: African American. The second was female. Since Dean's only interest was in finding his brother, he ignored them. The third body was too big to be a girl and the hair was dark, like Sam's. Dean took a few reluctant steps toward it, but he just couldn't tell for sure. He was going to have to touch it, turn it over.

For a long moment, Dean stood there. He knew what he had to do, but he couldn't quite make himself do it.

"Dean!" Bobby called after him.

"I'm okay," he answered, but the words stuck in his throat. He took a deep breath and tried again. "I'm okay!"

Come on, Dean. Just do it. He crouched, grasped the shoulder of the corpse and pulled it toward him to roll the body onto its back. The flesh was squidgy beneath his fingers. It resisted at first, almost like a living body, then suddenly fell toward him, revealing half a face. The other half was a crawling mess of maggots.

Adrenaline took over and Dean stumbled backward, almost falling over the female body in his haste to get out of there. He dashed for the exit, past Bobby and into the street. He fell to his knees and dragged a breath of fresh air into his lungs before his stomach rebelled and he threw up in the dirt.

Bobby's hand was cool on his shoulder. "Let it out, son," he advised gently.

Dean raised his head and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Not Sam. It's not Sam," he croaked. The only thing that really mattered.

Bobby looked grim, not relieved. "Then we keep lookin'," he said, and offered his hand to help Dean stand.

The road came to an end in a green field and John shut off the truck's engine. "I think we're walking from here," he suggested.

Mary took three of the water bottles and added them to her bag, a simple messenger bag she could wear across her body, thus keeping her hands free. She also carried some spare ammo. Her clothing was practical: jeans, a warm sweater and sturdy boots. She climbed down from the truck and spread Bill's map on the hood. She set the compass on top of the map and traced the road with her finger.

"Looks like five, six miles," John said.

"If the map is accurate, it's wild country, but it looks flat. It won't be hard," Mary agreed. She folded the map and packed it.

Crossing the field was easy, but on the other side was a wood and there the terrain was rougher. The wood encircled the cemetery that was their destination, but Mary didn't realise that until she saw the stone wall and iron gate ahead.

"Seems like a lot of trouble to go to for a graveyard," John commented.

"Depends what's buried in it," Mary suggested.

John grunted an acknowledgement and reached for the rusty gate. He lifted the heavy chain that held it closed. Even if they had a key, the padlock was so corroded it would never open again.

Unperturbed, Mary stepped forward, tested the strength of the gate with her foot, then climbed over it. She landed lightly on the other side and looked up at the sky while she waited for John to follow her.

It was almost twilight.

The windmill was the worst.

The dead boy hung from the windmill, suspended upside down by one foot and swinging gently in the wind. His other leg was badly broken. There was no sign of blood or other injuries and from the expression on his face, the dead boy had been alive when he was strung up there. Dean couldn't help wondering how long it would take to die like that. It must have been agonising.

The dead boy was not Sam.

"I swear to God, I'm gonna kill that yellow-eyed son of a bitch for this," Dean muttered under his breath. He had lost count of the number of bodies he had seen in this godforsaken town. If Cold Oak had not been haunted before, it surely was now.

Bobby emerged from the final house. In his years as a hunter Bobby had seen, if not worse than this, surely other scenes as bad. You wouldn't think so to look at him. His mouth was set in a grim line, his eyes weary and furious at once.

"Nothin'," he said when he reached Dean. "Your brother ain't here."

Dean should have been relieved. Sam wasn't here. It meant Sam was probably still alive. But if their mom was right about what happened in this place – and they'd found strong evidence that she was – Sam could only be alive if he killed these kids. All of them.

The dead boy swung from the windmill, the wood creaking slightly under his weight.

No. No way. Sam couldn't have done this. Dean frowned, his eyes drawn to the dead boy once more. Sam was a big guy, strong and athletic. If Sam's life were in danger and he had to defend himself, maybe then he could kill. Maybe. But Dean's little brother who rescued spiders from the bath before Mom or Dad could squish them, who cried when Bambi's mom got shot and who wanted to be a lawyer ever since he read *To Kill A Mockingbird*...he couldn't have become a person capable of stringing a kid up and listening to his screams for hours or days until he died.

This *had* to be the demon's work. There was no other explanation.

"Dean," Bobby said, breaking the silence. "Are you up to this?"

"Up to what?" Dean asked confused. He tore his gaze away from the body above them. "If he's not here..."

"We ain't done. We have to burn the bodies."

"What? No!" Just the thought of going through those houses again, facing all those bodies again, was unbearable.

"You want this many pissed-off spirits haunting this town?" Bobby demanded. "You're a hunter now, kid. This is our responsibility."

Dean swallowed. "We'll need a lot of wood to burn that many bodies."

Bobby's gaze swept the whole street. "Wood's all around us, boy. We have to burn the town."

"Right," Dean agreed, relieved. "There's gasoline in the trunk. I'll get it."

Using flashlights, Mary and John examined every grave marker in the cemetery. If something was buried beneath one of them, there was nothing to give it away. They found no X marking the spot. Not even a familiar name on a headstone.

Mary had left the mausoleum until last because it seemed too obvious. A huge stone structure with an ornate decoration, it didn't seem like the kind of place you'd hide a secret. But when she finally approached it and ran her flashlight over the decoration, she realised her mistake.

"John!" she called.

He was at her side at once.

Mary played her flashlight over the front of the mausoleum again. The decoration looked like a kind of mandala: an elaborate design in concentric circles. But in the centre was a five-pointed star, and the design around it, if you looked carefully, enlarged that star.

"It's a devil's trap," Mary explained. An unusual one. I think whatever we're looking for, it's inside here." And it was demonic: a devil's trap wouldn't hold anything else.

"Mary, someone – Samuel Colt – went to a lot of trouble to lock something in. Whatever it is, I don't think opening it is a good idea."

"I agree. We have to make sure it stays closed," Mary agreed.

"I wish you hadn't said that." Sam's voice came from behind them.

At the sound of her son's voice, Mary felt only joy. She turned, her lips curving into a smile, a

greeting on the tip of her tongue. What she saw made her freeze, the words unspoken.

Sam looked haggard. His eyes were dark bruises in his too-thin face. His beard was unshaven, which accented the hollows of his cheeks. But it wasn't just his face that showed how much Sam had suffered. There was something about the way he held himself, coiled tight and tense, that made Mary think of a rattlesnake about to strike. She was afraid of her own son.

John, too, sensed something. He took a step forward, subtly placing himself between Sam and Mary: a protective gesture.

"Sam. We've been worried about you," John said. His voice was wary; not a good way to begin.

Mary deliberately moved from behind John's protective stance. "Sam, I'm so glad you're safe." She began to move forward.

His bark of laughter stopped her. "Safe! No one is safe."

She raised one hand, both to show she was unarmed and to reach out for him. "I know about the demon," she began.

"You don't know anything!" Sam snapped back.

"He forced you to kill," Mary said. "We know, Sam. But you're safe here, in this place. You have a choice. Whatever the demon wants –"

Sam looked at her as if she'd claimed the sky was pink and the sun blue. "You have no idea," he said contemptuously. Then he looked at his father. "You should both go," he instructed. "I don't know what will happen when I open this thing, but –"

"I can't let you do that, son," John answered carefully.

"Do you think you can stop me?"

"If I have to." John sounded so confident. He glanced at Mary and she saw a question in his look. John's hand hovered near his gun. Would he really use it? Against Sammy?

No! Mary thought, praying John would understand from her expression what she didn't dare to say aloud. But the thought of John's gun reminded her of her dream. She had seen this place, this moment, and in her dream, Sam had the Colt. Did he have it now? She saw no sign he was armed. Had her dream been wrong, then?

Sam's face twisted as if he were in physical pain. "You *have* to let me do this! Please, you don't understand..."

"What will happen if we do?" Mary asked him. She felt calm, suddenly, because Sam was *asking*, not demanding. She could still reach him. The demon didn't own him completely.

"I don't know," he admitted, but then his voice rose to a shout. "And I don't *care*! I know what will happen if I *don't*! Get out of the way. Please!"

Sam didn't wait for them to move. He strode forward and shoved John aside, taking him by surprise. John hit the ground hard and Mary heard his grunt of pain.

"Sam!" Mary cried, shocked. She knew Sam was strong, but so was John, and that seemed effortless. Sam now stood between her and John. Mary gazed into his eyes and saw pain. She tried, one more time. "You can choose, Sam. We can help you."

"I can choose," he repeated flatly and turned his back on her as he stepped toward the mausoleum.

Sam's movement revealed the Colt, pushed through his belt at his back. Mary gasped, surprised to see it even though she had foreseen this moment.

"The Colt," she said urgently. "It can kill the demon."

Sam looked back over his shoulder. "What good is that?" he asked bitterly. "It can't kill all of them." He took the gun from his belt and reached out to touch the mausoleum.

Abruptly, Mary understood her dream. Samuel Colt built this place. He built the mausoleum. He protected it with the world's biggest devil's trap. And Samuel Colt created that gun, too. He didn't create it as a weapon. Maybe it *could* kill demons, but the legend of the Colt was a smokescreen to conceal its real purpose. The Colt was a *key*.

"No!" Mary started forward, but it was too late.

From somewhere deep beneath their feet a low rumble began to build. The ornate mandala began to move, its parts spinning like dials. Mary heard the creak of machinery long unused beginning to move and the clunk as ancient tumblers fell within a magical lock.

She stared at Sam, horrified. *Oh, god, what have you done?*

The world exploded.

The rumble beneath the cemetery turned into a roar. The mausoleum split in two. Heat blasted out of it, followed by a tornado filled with thick, black smoke. Mary saw the glow of flame just as the force of the blast slammed into her, lifting her off her feet as it blew her backward. She hit the ground with a bone-shaking impact. Pain darkened her vision and she fought to draw a breath. When she did, it tasted of sulphur.

And there was more. Whatever magic, or force, or power had protected this place was gone. Mary hadn't known she could feel that protection until she felt its absence. The smoke billowed upward, endlessly, like ash from an erupting volcano. There was power in it, flashes of blue-white energy. The noise was deafening.

Demons!

"Mary!" The sound of John's terror reached through her own and she rolled painfully over, looking for him. When she saw him, she began to crawl toward him across the grass. She didn't trust herself to walk. John met her halfway and for a moment she clung to his hands like a lifeline.

A moment was all they had to comfort each other.

"We've got to get it closed!" Mary yelled over the din.

"Are you crazy?" John objected. "We can't get near!"

"No choice! That's a door to Hell." Mary gestured to the thick smoke still flooding out of the mausoleum, but John didn't understand and she had no time to explain. "Help me!" she demanded, and struggled to her feet.

Mary fought her way to the open mausoleum. It was like trying to walk against a gale-force wind, but she made it. She was grateful to see John on the other side of the gate. He didn't understand, but he would help her. Mary threw her weight against her half of the devil's gate. It barely moved. She braced her feet and shoved with every ounce of strength she had. She felt the skin scrape from her hands, felt the pain of muscles protesting and she screamed with the effort, barely aware she was doing it. Slowly, the gate began to move. Sweat and tears poured down her face. The gate moved by inches and with every second that passed more demons were fleeing Hell.

Then suddenly, some imperceptible tipping point was reached and the gate moved much faster. It slammed shut with a deep, booming clang. The whirl of machinery from inside promised that the lock was engaging once more.

There was something more she had to do, but Mary could no longer think. She slid to the ground, weakly. The gate was closed, and that was good, but she knew they'd been too late. Bobby told them he'd heard of fifteen possessions this year. There were about to be many, many more. How many demons were in that enormous torrent of smoke? A hundred? A thousand? Mary had no way to count them, but she knew it was a legion. An army.

It was the end of the world as she knew it.

The fire spread swiftly through Cold Oak, the old, dry wood catching light quickly with the aid of the gasoline. Leaning on the hood of the Impala with Bobby at his side, Dean watched the flames spread until he was sure every building was burning. Flames licked toward the height of the windmill and Dean relaxed. It was done.

He opened the car door without saying another word. He was more than ready to leave. He wanted to forget he had ever been here, but knew he could not. The things he had seen today were branded into his memory.

Bobby, too, was silent as Dean drove down the narrow track away from the abandoned frontier town. Dean was grateful for the silence; he needed it to process everything. He felt as if something fundamental within him had been changed by Cold Oak. He was different. His perception of the world was different. Everything in his life was changed by this day.

When they reached the junction to the main road, Dean broke the silence. "Which way?" he asked, expecting Bobby to direct him to a motel for the night.

"We need to go to South Wyoming." Bobby looked at Dean. "How fast can you drive, boy?"

Dean turned the car toward the highway. "What's the hurry? Mom and Dad are going to meet us –"

"Dean, think!" Bobby snapped. "Whatever was happening in Cold Oak was over a day ago. Maybe two. The demon got what it wanted. If Mary's right –"

"It wants whatever's in that devil's trap!" Dean interrupted. He felt cold. He hadn't even thought of that. His parents were there. He floored the gas.

The first Mary saw of him was his legs. They were clad in black denim worn over scuffed cowboy boots and it seemed they just appeared in front of her. She wondered if she had lost consciousness for a few seconds. Confused, she looked up. He was standing so close. She saw a heavy silver belt-buckle. Mary felt a shock of recognition when she saw the Colt next to that bright buckle. Her eyes continued upward and she saw a dark shirt, open at the neck to reveal pale skin and a pendant on a leather thong. Finally, she saw his face. It was an unremarkable face; a stranger's face.

He smiled, a flash of white teeth in the darkness. "Howdy, Mary." He greeted her like an old friend.

With the words, she knew him and knew he was no friend of hers. Adrenaline surged and she tried to back away, but the mausoleum was at her back. She had nowhere to go.

"You!" she gasped.

He blinked slowly and Mary saw the sickly yellow of his eyes revealed.

This demon killed her mother and father. It forced her into the deal that was tearing her son apart. It stole her son. And she was more afraid of him than any other creature that existed.

There was no warning.

The demon moved too quickly for her to get away. Its fingers closed around her throat, cutting off her air. It lifted her effortlessly. Mary grabbed his wrist, struggling to breathe. Her protective bracelet touched the demon's skin and where it touched his flesh smoked, but it didn't slacken his grip at all.

Dimly, Mary heard John shout her name. She saw the demon glance his way – just glance. "Wait your turn," the demon snarled.

Mary would have begged him not to hurt John, but she had no breath. Dark spots danced in her

vision. Her fingers pulled weakly at his wrist. Her pulse pounded in her head. She was dying.

“No.” Sam’s voice was unnaturally calm. “I did what you asked.” Sam said something else, but the blood rushing in Mary’s ears drowned out the words.

Abruptly, the demon released Mary.

She fell to the ground. Her lungs spasmed and she drew a breath. Cold air sucked in through her damaged throat was both agony and blessed relief. She collapsed for a second time, coughing weakly. The grass was cool against her cheek.

Blackness rolled over her and she knew no more.

Mary woke cradled in John’s arms. Both Sam and the demon were gone.

Four: Apocalypse

An army of demons had broken loose from Hell.

This wasn't just a war. It was *the* war. The final battle. The Apocalypse.

The house in Lawrence was gone. Mary and John were both believed dead. They could not go home, but they had nowhere else to go. They spent hours talking about what they could do before Bill reminded Mary about the old refuge her parents kept: an isolated house on the edge of what was now a huge industrial farm. Mary hadn't even seen the house since her parents died, but it was freehold land and she owned it.

Bobby acquired fake IDs for them with the names Mary and John Campbell. Dean waited long enough to be sure no one in Lawrence suspected him of killing his parents, then he returned home. The plan was for Dean to salvage what he could of their possessions, including, if possible, their savings. It meant killing their business, but in the face of what they had all seen – Dean at Cold Oak, John in Wyoming – even John accepted the necessity. Once that was done, Dean would return to the hunt with Bobby.

Meanwhile, Bobby accompanied Mary and John to check out Sam Campbell's old safe-house. Mary expected the place to be run-down: it had been abandoned for thirty years.

John looked up at the old house, his eyes taking in the broken windows and peeling paint. "Wow. Mary, it's a real palace."

"If you're a rat," Bobby added under his breath.

Unperturbed, Mary headed for the front door. "It needs work, but what did you expect? At least the roof is still on." She knelt and ran her hands over the dirty tiles. The fourth from the right should have been loose, but wind and weather had covered the tiles with a layer of hard-packed dirt. Mary pulled out a penknife and used it to scrape the dirt away, then carefully pried the tile loose. Beneath it was the front-door key. It was made of brass, so it hadn't rusted.

Mary unlocked the door, but didn't go in. She turned to Bobby. "I know it doesn't look like much, but my dad made this house as safe as he knew how. John and I can fix it up so it's liveable."

His look said *rather you than me*, but Bobby nodded. "I'll go into town and get you some traps," he offered. "You're gonna need them."

"And some firewood," John suggested. He walked past Mary into the house.

Mary thanked Bobby and followed her husband.

The nearest town was the city of Wichita, thirty miles away, so Bobby would be gone for a while. They used the time to assess what needed to be done to the house.

It was a mess, but actually not as bad as Mary anticipated. The structure of the house was still strong. It had been built with an iron framework and fittings for protection and though there was some rust the framework and walls were intact. There were a few tiles missing from one corner of the roof, but otherwise the roof, too, appeared to be sound. Some of the floorboards were rotten and would have to be replaced and the wallpaper was peeling off the damp walls. The kitchen seemed in good shape. There was an old wood-burning oven and the cupboards were solid wood, worn but not damp. The floor was filthy and there was no mains water, but otherwise they had a working kitchen.

The rest of the ground floor was not so good. The house was fully furnished, but most of the soft furnishings were beyond saving. So were the rugs. Several of the windows had broken panes and debris had blown in from outside: twigs, leaves and other plant-matter as well as dirt.

Mary found a broom and began sweeping the floors clean of that debris while John went to check

out the generator. Bobby was right about the rats: Mary didn't see one, but she found rat droppings and other signs of their presence. She didn't care. Vermin, she could handle.

John returned with the news that the generator was rusted solid. Useless.

Mary wasn't surprised. "Well, we can make do with candles for a while. How do you feel about moving some of this furniture out?"

"Smells like most of it needs burning," he suggested.

"Probably," she agreed. "But for now let's just get it outside." She had swept the dirt and debris into a big pile in one corner. She wanted to give the floor a good scrubbing, but that would have to wait until she had the necessary cleaning materials. She went to examine the fireplace.

It was huge, an iron grate and surround with a solid stone plinth. The surround was dirty, but Mary saw no rust and she was sure it would be functional. She got down on her knees and peered into the chimney. She couldn't see light above. There should be a chimney brush somewhere...

By the time it began to get dark, they were finished for the day. Bobby, who had stayed to help them for a while, was on his way to join Dean in Lawrence, so Mary and John were alone. There were rat traps all around the ground floor. The stove was working and clean enough that Mary managed to produce supper. It was only canned soup with bread and cheese, but she considered it a victory. They ate sitting on a pile of blankets in front of the fireplace, with an open fire burning merrily, casting dancing shadows on the walls.

John set his empty bowl down and shifted toward Mary, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Remind you of anything?" he asked.

Mary wasn't sure what he meant at first. But then she saw the open fire and remembered. "That time we went on vacation with Julie and Mike." She smiled and leaned her head on her husband's shoulder. She felt John kiss the top of her head.

"I hope all that work hasn't left you too tired," he murmured against her hair.

Mary looked up at him, surprised. "Why, John, that almost sounds like a proposition," she teased.

"Almost?" he repeated. "Then I'm sayin' it wrong." John leaned down to kiss her lips. Mary kissed him back warmly and he laid her down on the blankets.

It was a while since they last made love. Like so many couples, that part of their relationship diminished over time. Neither of them was still young. It didn't matter. Mary was still as in love with John as she ever was, and she knew he felt the same way about her. She didn't need sex to prove it. But that night, Mary welcomed John's passion and matched his with her own. Perhaps it was the losses of the past weeks. Perhaps it was because she finally felt safe. She wanted him; she needed him. And finally, she fell asleep in his arms in front of the open fire.

As the weeks passed, they began to get their lives into some semblance of order. John acquired an old Chevy truck. It was an ugly, boxy thing but it had a sturdy body. He started work reinforcing the frame and restoring the engine. When he was done, it would be the closest thing to a tank he could build.

Once the house was clean enough to live in, Mary divided her time between the house and the libraries of Wichita, an hour's drive away. She was researching survival. Managing without mains electricity was one thing, but what about other essentials like food, clothing and medicine? When the infrastructure of civilised society was gone, how would they live? The library had internet access and she did much of her research online. How to live off the land. How to slaughter an animal for food, and how to preserve the meat with salt or smoke. How to tan leather without specialised equipment. Herbal medicine and how to distinguish helpful plants from poisonous ones. She bought notebooks made from acid-free paper and wrote down everything she learned.

"You're very optimistic," John commented one night, closing Mary's notebook. He was sitting on their new – second-hand – bed while Mary sat in a nearby chair. The bed was in the main downstairs room, because it was warmer that way: the fireplace heated the room and provided light.

Mary looked up at his words, uncertain whether he meant that sarcastically. She met his eyes, confused.

"I mean," John explained, "if you think the world is going to get so bad all this will be needed, Mary, do you really think we'll be there to see it?"

Oh, John. Denial doesn't look good on you. "I know we will," Mary told him, "even if no one else is."

John frowned. "Mary, these visions of yours..."

"I'm not saying this because of a vision, John."

For a moment, he didn't answer. "Because of...?" he began finally, but didn't finish. He didn't like to say Sam's name since they last saw each other at the Devil's Gate.

But Mary remembered that Sam saved her life before he vanished from the cemetery. She clung onto that, because she could not believe her son would willingly turn to evil.

"Why else is he doing this?" Mary asked quietly.

John opened her notebook again and flipped through the pages. "This is all good for where we are now, Mary, but if you're serious about this, it's not enough."

"What do you mean?"

"If the world is going to end – God, just saying it, even now, sounds crazy! But, Mary, it's not how we survive after the end. It's how we survive what will come *first*. The breakdown of civilisation. In cities you'll see riots, looting, maybe worse. Probably martial law at some point. We'll need to be prepared for that, either fortify this house or have a place to go where the worst of that won't touch us. Even here, we're too close to the city. And that's before we try to predict what the demons and whatever else is out there will do."

"You're talking about anarchy."

"No, love. I'm talking about civil war."

For Mary and John life settled into a simple routine. They continued work on the house, cleaning out the upstairs rooms one at a time. Furniture that was beyond saving John chopped up for firewood or added to a bonfire outside. Anything that could be restored, they fixed, painted and polished. Mary still spent her mornings in the library; John used that time to work on the truck and, when the truck was finished to his satisfaction, there was no shortage of other work to be done. He found a stash of weapons in the attic: everything from pocket knives to land mines and remarked to Mary that he was glad he hadn't known who Samuel really was when they were dating.

Dean "inherited" what was left of their lives in Lawrence, legally. Evidently human remains were found in the wreckage of their home – the bodies of the demons, Mary assumed – and the police hadn't been too conscientious about identifying the remains. Horrible as that was, it made it much easier for Dean to take possession of the land and their savings. He turned it into cash – selling the land to a local builder – and gave the money to Mary and John. Dean sold his share in the business, too, for much less than it was worth but it was enough to get him square with the bank. He then gave up his apartment and moved into Bobby's place in South Dakota. Dean visited his parents as often as he could, bringing news of the demon army and occasional sightings of Sam.

None of the news was good, but in those first few weeks it wasn't as bad as Mary feared, either. In fact, it was almost anticlimactic. She knew this was the calm before the storm, but she was grateful

for it.

Their apparent deaths couldn't have fooled the yellow-eyed demon. He had seen them at the Devil's Gate, days after they supposedly perished. Mary was convinced he was the mastermind of all this, and she suspected that the attack on their home was intended to tie up loose ends: to kill them because they knew something about him. But either their disappearance had been successful or the demon no longer wanted them dead. As the weeks passed with no further attack, and as they reinforced the anti-demon protections around the house, Mary began to relax.

None of them, not even Bobby, saw it coming.

The first sign Mary recognised – though when she looked back, Mary knew there had been others they all missed – was a massacre. It happened in Austin, Texas. According to the story she and John heard on the radio, it began in a popular downtown nightclub. The killers – a youth gang, according to the police – blocked the doors and slaughtered everyone inside. One witness said the scene inside was worse than any horror movie. The “gang” then moved on through the streets, killing everyone unlucky enough to be on their route. By the time the police got involved, the number of the dead was already uncountable. Near dawn, local police and SWAT cornered the gang, fully prepared to gun them down thus ending one slaughter with another. Though several of the gang members were shot, not a single one of them was captured or killed. Yet several of the SWAT officers were injured in the confrontation, including one by friendly fire.

“Werewolves,” Mary concluded when John snapped the radio off, his expression sickened.

“Werewolves?” he repeated.

“It's a guess, but last night was a full moon. They were very careful not to give details about the bodies in the nightclub. Werewolves rip out the hearts of their victims. It's the kind of detail the police would hold back. And regular weapons couldn't hurt them.”

“I guess SWAT don't carry silver bullets,” John frowned.

“Even if they did, it takes a heart-shot. That's not easy when you've got a moving target.” Mary shuddered. “But why such a blatant display? I don't understand it.”

The following day Dean and Bobby arrived, en route to Austin. They had a supply of silver ammo and Dean insisted John keep some of it. They also brought news of other, smaller attacks in four other cities. Mary knew better than to ask Dean not to go. She knew hunters too well, and Dean had the hunt in his blood. Now he had discovered it, Dean was discovering himself, too. But she worried herself sick all the time he was gone.

They returned a few days later. Dean was badly affected by what he'd seen. The worst part, he said, sitting on the floor and drinking whiskey straight from the bottle, was knowing that the same thing would happen again next full moon.

“Were there demons?” Mary asked tensely.

“I couldn't tell for sure,” Dean answered, frustration evident in his voice. “There were omens, but I didn't find any sulphur.”

“Demons working with werewolves,” Bobby interjected. “You ever hear of anything like that, Mary?”

It felt strange to be consulted as if she were an expert, but she answered as seriously as she could. “Never. But the ones who escaped Hell could have powers we've never seen before.”

Bobby nodded grimly. “He wasn't there. I know you're wondering.”

Mary hadn't dared to ask. She felt relieved by Bobby's reassurance. “What happens now?” she asked.

“We're going to Harvelle's. Maybe we can figure out where they'll strike next month.”

“And do *what?*” Dean burst out. “There must have been twenty or more of them. Unless you've got

enough silver bullets to fill an Uzi..."

"I don't know, kid. Evacuate. Call in a bomb threat. Something."

Mary was upstairs, scraping wallpaper off the wall of one of the bedrooms. It was beginning to get dark and she was thinking it was time she stopped work and got their supper ready. Outside, the sunset was gorgeous, its red-orange light streaming through the window to tint the room. Mary set her scraper down and pulled on one, stubborn piece with her fingers. It tore away from the wall as she tugged.

That was when she realised the light was all wrong. This window faced east, not west. She turned to the window, frightened.

The horizon as far as she could see was glowing. Above the horizon, the clouds reflected a light below that seemed bright as the sun. Mary hugged herself tightly, cold spreading through her body.

"John!" she called.

From below, she heard the truck's engine rev again.

"John!" she screamed.

"Mary?" he sounded startled.

"Come up here!"

John appeared at a run, taking the stairs two at a time. As he burst through the door the stark terror on his face changed to relief. He gazed at Mary, catching his breath. Then he looked out of the window. Slowly, he walked toward her, his eyes taking in the view.

Mary moved into his arms. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know." John held her close. "It looks like...but that's impossible."

John's evasion frightened her more than the burning sky. Mary had to try twice before her voice would work. "What, John. What does it look like?"

"Wichita." John's arm tightened around her shoulders. "I think it's Wichita burning. Come on," he urged.

Downstairs John turned the radio on but all they heard was static. He tried a different channel, then another with the same result. He turned the tuner slowly from one extreme to the other. There was nothing but white noise. They looked at each other.

"It's starting," Mary said.

"We'd better call Dean," John agreed, but he sounded dubious. If there was no radio signal, there was a good chance the cell signal was down, too.

John tried anyway. Then he tried again. And a third time. Then he snapped the phone closed with an oath. "Damn it!"

"No signal?" Mary asked, unsurprised.

John offered the phone to her. "It's showing three bars, but it won't connect. No voice telling me it's unavailable, either, it's just silent." As Mary took the phone from his hand, John looked toward the window. "Maybe we should hit the road."

Mary understood his need to get moving. She wanted nothing more than to see her son. But she shook her head. "When Dean can't get through to us, he'll come here. If we leave, we might miss each other."

"Maybe Dean will expect us to – " John began to argue.

"If we were still in Lawrence, yes," Mary interrupted. "But *this* house is demon-proofed and Bobby added protections against a lot of other things last time he was here. They expect this to be a safe-house for *them*."

Neither of them slept that night. The strange glow in the sky remained, even after the sun went down. John tried every half hour to phone Dean but with the same result every time. The phone wouldn't connect.

It was a little after 2:00am when Mary made her way upstairs once more. She wanted a better look at whatever was outside. From the upstairs window she could see the corn fields that stretched for miles in every direction, the tall corn swaying slightly in the breeze, lit by the glowing clouds. Mary shivered. She was raised a hunter, but nothing in her upbringing or training truly prepared her for this.

John moved quietly into the room and slid his arms around her waist from behind. He rested his chin lightly on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She was so far from okay, she'd forgotten what okay felt like. She was terrified. But she leaned back into his warm body and answered, "I'm just tired."

"We can go to bed if you want to."

"I'd just toss and turn."

"Maybe if –" John broke off suddenly and Mary felt his body tense. "What's that?" he asked urgently.

"What? I don't see anything."

John pointed to the cornfield.

At first, Mary didn't understand. All she saw was the swaying of the corn. Then it was as if the shadows shifted and she saw the movements of the corn in a whole new way. Something was moving through the field toward the house.

"I see six," John said tensely.

That was two more than Mary saw. Were they people? They almost had to be, but all she saw was the tall corn waving as they moved through the field. They were coming for her and John.

Was there time to run? She moved closer to the window, straining to see around the corner. There were more of them, drifting through the corn, encircling the house, moving inexorably toward them. The house was surrounded.

John reached the same conclusion. "Downstairs," he ordered curtly. "We need the guns." Then he hesitated. "Are you...?"

"I'm a hunter's daughter," Mary reminded him.

While John went for the guns, Mary locked and barricaded the doors. She dragged a heavy box, kept there for the purpose, to block the rear door. There was a reinforced wooden beam that fitted across the front door. The windows were iron-framed and barred. If these creatures were coming in, it would be through the doors. Mary took the shotgun John thrust into her hands, automatically checked the load – two barrels, both loaded – and primed it to fire.

"We can't watch all sides, so stay close to me," John instructed.

Mary wasn't sure that was the best strategy, but she accepted John's leadership. She was the hunter, but he was the one with combat experience. For both of them, their respective experiences were the distant past. Mary moved to the window at John's direction, pressed herself against the wall beside it and waited.

If these were werewolves...Mary bit her lip, remembering the reports that came out of Austin, but it

wasn't a full moon night. If they were demons, they would not be able to get inside the house. They shouldn't be able to get on the property, even. Unfortunately, that left a long list of other options – including human predators – that could be surrounding them. No matter what, they were horribly outnumbered.

John knelt on the other side of the window, a position that allowed him to cover both the door and window. On the ground beside him was a second gun and a small pile of ammo. He was ready.

They moved like shadows in the red-tinged darkness. They appeared, one by one, black, human-like shapes surrounding the house. They were not demons, then. Mary expected them to attack at once, but for a long time they merely stood there, a silent circle, watching and waiting...but waiting for what?

"There are too many of them," Mary said quietly.

"What are they waiting for?" John asked, speaking aloud, but to himself.

"I don't know." Mary answered him anyway.

"Mary." John waited for her to meet his eyes. "I'll make a path for you. Get to the truck. The keys are inside. Don't wait for me."

"I won't leave you behind!"

"Mary. Please."

"No!" If they were going to die, she wanted to die as she'd lived: with John.

He sighed. "Go for the truck," John repeated. "I'll be behind you."

Mary knew he didn't believe that, but she nodded.

Above them, glass shattered, followed by a thud. Mary gasped. Something came through the window! She raised her shotgun.

As if that were the signal they'd been waiting for, the shadows outside began to move. It was a blur of dark-clad bodies rushing the house as if they thought they could just barrel through the walls. A face appeared in the window beside Mary. Adrenaline flooded her and she fired, shattering the glass. The face vanished. But she'd seen the red-rimmed eyes and the flash of white fangs.

Vampires!

Knowing their guns were useless, Mary abandoned her shotgun as more glass shattered above. She ran for the weapons chest. Behind her, she heard John shooting, the rhythm of his gunfire steady and calm. Fire. Fire. A pause while he reloaded. Fire. Fire. Pause. A black-clad body blocked Mary's way. She tried to go around him and the vampire caught her. Cold hands closed on her arm and dragged her to him. The momentum of her headlong rush made her trip and instantly the vampire was on top of her. Mary screamed, seeing fangs descend as it bent toward her.

The vampire's head exploded in a rain of blood and bone. Revolted, Mary shoved the still-twitching body away and glimpsed John above them. He'd shot it, almost point-blank. Another vampire went for him and he fired again. Mary was unarmed; she could not help him. She scrambled for the chest and flung the lid open just as another one reached her. Desperately, she grabbed for the first weapon she could see. It was a hatchet. Decapitation was the only way to kill a vampire and the hatchet was too small for that. She whirled, aiming for the vampire's head. The hatchet cleaved its skull. In the second of time that bought her, Mary pulled a machete from the chest and swung, screaming, with all her strength.

It fell, but now the house was full of them. Mary couldn't hear gunfire any more. She couldn't see John. Blind rage filled her and she started forward, ready to meet the next one.

Consciousness brought with it an awareness of pain and the smell of blood and death. Mary was lying on her back, with something soft beneath her. Her clothing was damp with blood. Was it her blood? Groggily, Mary struggled to sit up. Her head swam and she felt pain in several parts of her body. She remembered the vampires, but the battle was a blur in her memory. She recalled swinging the machete, falling, the pain of fangs sinking into the flesh of her shoulder. Her eyes flew open and she grabbed for her shoulder. She found the wound covered with a white bandage.

"It's okay. You're safe." The voice, all the more frightening for being familiar, came from behind her. Mary whirled around.

Sam stood there, beside the iron fireplace, his arms folded across his face. There was blood on his clothing, too.

"Where's John?" Mary demanded, not feeling safe at all.

"Dad's fine." Sam nodded toward the makeshift couch and she saw John lying there, apparently unconscious.

Relief allowed her to focus on Sam. "Sam? Why are you here?"

"Isn't that obvious? You were in trouble." He detached himself from the fireplace and moved toward her. "I was almost too late. You locked out my backup."

Mary's mind raced as she struggled to understand. She locked out...oh. He meant the demons. Suddenly she realised what Sam's presence in the house could mean. Whatever hold the demons had on him, they couldn't come here. Just like the devil's trap in Wyoming.

Sam crouched beside the bed, his expression very serious. "I know what you're thinking, Mom, but nothing's changed."

His words cut her deeply, destroying her moment of hope. "Everything has changed," she corrected. Her eyes were drawn to John again. Was he really okay? She saw his chest rise as he took a breath and was grateful for it.

"Sam," she tried again, "we can help you. I know how to fight them and Dean –"

"You can't fight *him*. If you could, *mother*, I would never have been born, would I?" His eyes narrowed as he leaned slightly toward her. "I know what you did."

Mary felt herself blanch. "Sammy..." she began, but what could she say? *I was just a kid. I was desperate. I didn't understand what the demon wanted.* It was all true, but no excuse could change the ultimate truth of her sin. She sold her unborn son to a demon.

"It doesn't matter," Sam said. "Not now." He held a folded piece of paper in his hand. He held it out to her. "There's a place in the north. If you leave soon, you can get there before..." he stopped, then went on, "...while it's still safe to travel. In this place, you'll be safe."

"What place?" Mary asked, confused. "And, before what?" She didn't take the piece of paper.

Sam shook his head. "It's a place you and Dad will be safe," he repeated.

"Just me and John? What about Dean?" *What about everyone else?*

Sam made a dismissive gesture. "Him, too. Anyone. But go soon." He let the paper drop, stood and turned to go.

"Sammy!"

Sam turned back. "I don't know if I can forgive you," he said bleakly, "but that makes us even. I know you won't forgive me." He stepped over the body of a vampire and continued to walk away.

Mary couldn't let him go like this. She scrambled up and pain shot through her as a wound she hadn't been aware of ripped open. She ignored it and stumbled after him. "Sam! Please, Sam, wait!"

Outside, he turned back to her. The strange glow in the sky was still there, but faded now so she could barely see his face. Mary walked to him. She had to keep him here. Somehow, she had to get through to him.

“Sam, you don’t have to do this. You have a choice.”

“Not any more,” he answered.

“I know what he did to you in Cold Oak, Sam.”

“Cold Oak?” It seemed a genuine question.

“The ghost town where the demons held you. I know you were forced to kill...”

“Stop,” he ordered. “Stop talking like you understand. You don’t understand anything.”

“Then tell me,” Mary begged. “Sam, we can help you.”

Sam shook his head. “You had a choice. When you made your bargain with Azazel, you had a choice. Maybe not a good one, but it was something. Free will.”

Azazel. Oh my god. Mary prayed he couldn’t see her face. She knew that name. Was that the yellow-eyed demon? Azazel?

She knew Sam was waiting for an answer, so she tried to speak. Her voice came out a whisper. “I chose John. I didn’t know...”

Sam interrupted. “I had a choice, too. I chose to break Jess’s heart because if I didn’t, she would be dead. In that place, I chose to live, knowing – *knowing*, Mom – that to live meant I would have to kill, over and over. And I chose to follow Azazel. I have my reasons for that, too.”

“What does he want from you?” she asked, more to keep him talking than from any real curiosity.

Sam gave a short, bitter laugh. “I’m not fool enough to think he’s told me what he really wants. I’m telling you I’ve made the choice. I can’t unmake it now.”

“Of course you can!”

“No. And now *you* have a choice, Mom. You can trust me, and go north, or you can stay. Your choice. I can’t do any more.” He looked back over his shoulder. “I have to go now.” Sam turned and began to walk away.

“Sam!” Mary ran after him, but before she could reach him, Sam whirled. He raised his hand and Mary found herself airborne, flying backward. Her back hit the wall, driving the breath from her body. When she was able to stand, she was alone.

Mary gazed around her home. All of the windows were broken. Part of the staircase had collapsed. The headless bodies of vampires lay everywhere: over the bannister, across the floors, in her kitchen. The iron scent of blood pervaded the air and Mary didn’t think any amount of cleaning would get it out. The fire still burned in the grate, providing light as well as warmth. On the couch, John was stirring.

She made her way to her husband’s side, her feet sliding on the bloody ground. She knelt beside the couch and reached out to brush the hair back from John’s face. A dark bruise above his left temple explained why he had lain unconscious for so long. “John?” she said quietly.

His eyes flew open at her touch, but he relaxed when he saw her. He sat up, started to say something, then saw the carnage all around them. He stared, speechless.

“Sam was here,” Mary said.

“Did *he* do this?” John asked the question, but his voice was oddly indifferent.

"I'm not sure. The last thing I remember is a vampire about to bite me. Uh, no. It did bite me. Then I woke up in bed." She touched the bandage on her neck. "With this. And Sam was here. He was alone, so I suppose he must have..." She gestured, unable to put it into words. She had no idea how many vampires attacked them. It felt like hundreds at the time. She knew John had killed at least one, as had she, but there were many more of them strewn around the room. She couldn't count them. Seven...ten...maybe more.

John nodded, absorbing the information. "He's gone now?"

Mary nodded.

"And you're okay?" He grabbed her arm suddenly, looking intently into her eyes.

"I'm fine. Bruised, but..."

John looked at the dressing on her neck. "You never told me about vampires. If you were bitten, does that mean...?"

Understanding, Mary shook her head. "No. A bite won't infect me. You have to ingest their blood to turn into one." She looked over John quickly. She knew he'd been hit on the head, but were there other injuries? "What about you? Any injuries I can't see?"

He paused before answering, and she knew he was taking a mental inventory of his own body. John was nothing if not methodical. Finally, he answered, "Just my head, I think. Last thing I remember is something black flying at me."

She would check him over later – and herself, too – but for now Mary accepted John's answer. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

The question focussed John's attention and he sat up straight. "Leave. Change your clothes, first, and wash if you want to. Then start packing. The kitchen is yours. Salvage what food you can, but nothing that won't travel. There are water containers in the shed. Fill as many as you can."

Mary nodded. She decided she needed to wash, as would John: they couldn't travel looking like they'd been through a massacre. It would not be pleasant: the kitchen was as much a bloody mess as the rest of the house. Mary stripped off her shirt and used it as a rag to clean the sink before filling it with water to wash. At the same time, she filled a pot with water and set it on the fire to boil, intending to make a warm drink to take with them. She moved through the simple tasks mechanically, automatically. All the time, she was struggling to keep from vomiting as the smells of blood and death permeated everything around her. She had never become hardened to this, even when she went hunting with her Dad. Now, although she could hold it together in a crisis, the aftermath left her in shock.

She stripped off the rest of her clothing, laying it on the kitchen floor to stand on while she washed the worst of the blood and gore off her body. She found her hair was thick with it, and used soap to wash her hair, too. The thick, dark stuff rinsing off her hair brought a new wave of nausea and she swallowed back, hard, then lost her fight and retched over the sink. She cleaned that up, too.

Finally, she walked, nude, to the bed where her fresh clothing was stored. She found John shoving their clothing into a duffel. John was efficient at this: he rolled large items of clothing rather than fold them, stuffed socks and underwear into shoes and could fit far more into a bag than Mary could. When he was done, the duffel would probably be so heavy she could barely lift it, but it would be full. John had already laid out clean clothes for Mary to put on.

"Mary?" John asked, concerned, as she passed him.

She gave a weak smile. "I'm good," she promised.

Mary sat on the bed to pull on the pants John selected for her and the folded piece of white paper on the ground caught her eye. Abruptly, she remembered Sam dropping it there when she refused to take it from him. She reached down to pick it up. Sam had said there was a safe place in the

north. She expected to find a map or an address, but the paper held only numbers: 48.34-121.45. She recognised Sam's handwriting, but didn't understand.

"John," she said, offering the paper to him. While she dressed, she recounted her conversation with Sam. "...But I don't understand. Is it a phone number?"

John smiled. "Not enough numbers. No, I think it's co-ordinates. A map reference. Wait here." He zipped up the duffel and hauled it onto his shoulder before disappearing outside. He returned a few moments later with the road maps he kept in the truck.

John spread the road atlas out on the bed and turned pages until he reached the map of Washington State. "Here...looks like it's in the mountains." He put his finger on the map, indicating a point some distance from any major highway.

"How did you recognise that so fast?" Mary leaned over the map, examining it closely.

"I taught both the boys how to do it. You know," John added thoughtfully, "it's as good as a cipher. Anyone can read a map, but not everyone knows how to locate co-ordinates like this. Maybe Sam meant this as a secret message. One the demons wouldn't understand."

"You think we can trust him?" Mary said uncertainly. The area John indicated seemed very isolated.

"I don't know. I think Sam's motives are...suspect. But we know he wants to keep us both alive. We can trust that."

When the sun came up, they were ready to leave. Everything they could salvage was packed into John's re-fitted truck. He insisted Mary arm herself, so she was wearing a loaded semi-automatic in a shoulder holster and a knife in her boot, both well concealed by her clothing. She felt like Bonnie of Bonnie and Clyde. Or an elderly GI Jane. Or something.

She saw no reason to lock the ruined front door, but buried the key in its place under the tiles anyway. The house might be needed again, unlikely as it seemed in that moment. She lifted her bag containing the last of the food supplies and a flask of hot tea for the road and headed for the truck.

John nailed a piece of paper to the front door before he climbed into the truck's cab. "For Dean," he explained. "I gave the co-ordinates of Lexington. That's where we'll stay tonight, and another night if we don't hear from Dean or Bobby. He'll figure it out."

"Maybe we should go to Bobby's place first," Mary suggested.

"Not a chance. If they're looking for us, that's where they'll expect us to go. We're going northwest, Mary. We can swing by Bill's place if Dean doesn't find us, but we can't risk staying there, either. I don't know if this thing of Sam's is good, but we'll see what's there and then decide."

Mary wanted to trust Sam, but she was worried. Sam had saved their lives twice. But every time she tried to give him a choice, he'd chosen the demons. Maybe he was sending them into a trap. Or maybe he wanted them in this place so he would know where they were. But she had no better suggestion to offer, so she acquiesced.

John started the engine, put the truck into gear and began their long drive north. Behind them, the house glowed red with the light of the rising sun.

Five: Haven

The United States of America as Mary knew it was dying. There was no television or radio. Phones no longer functioned. They tried to take the highway across Kansas but found the road impassable: an early stretch was blocked by crashed vehicles piled up across the road and when they went around that and tried to rejoin the highway further north they found it full of abandoned vehicles. There was no sign of the people who once drove those cars. The third time they tried to get onto the highway they found it destroyed, as if by a massive earthquake.

Instead, they travelled on the back-roads. They passed small towns that appeared untouched by the apocalyptic events, but people eyed them with suspicion and fear. They didn't stop in such places. Two of the towns they passed were inexplicably empty. Others had barricades erected and patrolled by armed guards, forcing Mary and John to detour still further. It lengthened the journey considerably: just getting across Kansas took two full days. Motels and gas stations were closed and deserted. John had no compunction about breaking into a gas station to refuel, but Mary refused to sleep in the abandoned motel John found: she felt it was abandoned for a reason. Instead they spent the night in the truck, too exhausted to care about the discomfort.

The following day, they finally reached Harvelle's Roadhouse.

Even from a great distance, Mary could see there was something wrong at the Roadhouse. The shape of the building was just...wrong. John saw it, too, because he began to accelerate as the Roadhouse came into view. The truck, however, couldn't get much above fifty despite John's best efforts.

Mary peered through the windshield as they drew closer to the Roadhouse. The sign above the building was still there, but below it the Roadhouse was a burned-out husk. Most of the roof was gone. Parts of the walls and supports remained, blackened and fragile. There was no smoke, so the fire must have been out for a while.

"Oh, god. John..."

"I see it," he said grimly. "There are a few people there. Someone survived."

"Slow down," Mary ordered. It should have been good news, but the presence of people didn't necessarily mean they were survivors. They might not be *people*. She reached for the salt-filled shotgun. "We don't know who is there," she explained.

John didn't accuse her of paranoia this time. He slowed the truck. "There's no cover out here. They know we're coming."

Mary understood that. "John, even if it's Ellen and Bill, we have to be sure it's really them."

"Holy water?"

"Yes. It doesn't take much. Just a splash on the skin."

He nodded, eyes narrow as he looked ahead. "I see Bill: his walk is distinctive. Four...five others. One is Jo, I think."

Mary waited tensely as they drove toward the ruined building. John had better eyes than she, but Mary identified Bill, Ellen and Jo. The other three were men she didn't recognise. Mary felt relieved to see them, but her doubts remained. The Roadhouse had been a gathering place for hunters for a long time: what better place to lay an ambush?

Ellen came toward them as the truck drew close. Behind her, Bill was with Jo: she was leaning against the Harvelle's car, her face turned away from Mary's view. Mary jumped down with the shotgun in her hand, ready to aim.

Ellen raised a hand. "Mary, relax. We've been through enough today."

"I'm sorry, Ellen," Mary answered. "We have to be sure."

Ellen frowned. "Back at you."

John reached Mary's side, opening a bottle of holy water as he walked. He poured some into his right palm and offered his hand as if for a handshake. Ellen smiled and took his hand. Water dripped from their joined fingers and Mary relaxed her grip on the shotgun. Ellen was herself.

"Your turn," Ellen said firmly, still holding John's hand.

Mary raised her hand, displaying her silver bracelet to Ellen. It included an anti-possession charm, which she showed to Ellen. "Do you have holy water or salt? I'll take any test you like."

Ellen glanced back over her shoulder. "Just walk this way."

Mary looked down and smiled, understanding. She stepped over the iron chain which, she guessed, formed part of a devil's trap.

Someone – some demon, Ellen believed – had walked into the Roadhouse with eight grenades and thrown them in all directions. The attacker died, of course, but so had anyone in the saloon at the time. Bill and Ellen had been in the back so escaped the initial explosion. Jo was behind the bar when it started. She dived into the cellar when she saw what was happening and had been trapped down there for a long time; it was a miracle she didn't run out of oxygen. She had inhaled a lot of smoke and was still coughing; Mary worried that her lungs were damaged.

Nothing was left of the Roadhouse except burnt timbers, ash and scorched earth. The only shelter for the six survivors was a battered old trailer and two cars, but they weren't thinking about shelter. All six of them were digging graves.

Mary and John offered their help, of course, and told their own story while they worked: Mary helped Ellen extract bodies from the ashes, some of them in pieces.

By nightfall, the bodies were buried, a wooden marker placed on each grave. They had used the trailer and what was left of the Roadhouse's walls to construct a rough shelter big enough for those who were staying to sleep. They were gathered around a fire pit, roasting sausages and corn – Mary's stocks – on sticks while they talked.

"Bobby and Dean will be here tomorrow," Bill told Mary. "They found your message."

Ellen had already told her, but Mary nodded gratefully. "Thank you."

"How do you know?" John asked. "The phones are out."

"Only cell phones," Ellen corrected. "At least, our phone was still working before the fire. Dean called to let us know you and Mary were on your way."

"If they called you before the attack, shouldn't they be here by now?"

Ellen shook her head. "They'll have gone to Bobby's place first. Try not to worry, John. Bobby's one of the best."

"He won't let anything happen to Dean," Mary said softly, though she knew Bobby might not be in a position to prevent it. She shifted closer to John and he hugged her against his side. It made them both feel better.

"We're heading north-west," John volunteered. "There's a place I know in the Cascades. I think we'll be safe there."

Mary was surprised, both by John volunteering the information and by his lie. She thought they should keep Sam's involvement secret, but they hadn't discussed it.

The bearded hunter – Kent – chimed in. "You ain't the only ones headed for the hills. I hear Jim Murphy's taken over an old monastery in the Rockies. We're headed that way." He indicated Ellen and Bill beside him.

"That ain't decided yet," Bill growled.

"It is unless you plan on staying here alone," Ellen retorted. She turned to Ellen and John. "Murphy's a priest," she explained, "and a hell of a hunter. He's planning to build a sanctuary and asked for our help. You'd both be welcome, too."

"It's good to know there are options," John agreed, "but we've got reasons to go north."

"I say we should stay and fight," another hunter spat. He was an older man, African-American. No one had given Mary his name. She got the impression that was intentional.

"My father was a hunter," she told him, "and he taught me that a hunter's job is to save as many as we can."

"That's what I'm saying."

"But we'll only survive long enough to save them by recognising when we can't," Mary said firmly. "All of this, it's happening too fast. If we make a stand now, all we'll accomplish is to go down fighting."

"Better than hiding in the mountains like a bunch of cowards!" he snarled.

"I agree. But if we wait, if we can survive for a while, maybe we can figure out the pattern in all this. Then we'll know where to strike. We'll have a chance."

There was a grudging respect in his eyes when he nodded. "Point," he grunted. "Still, you wait too long, what'll be left to save?"

"There's always something," Mary answered. "Humanity has survived ice ages, plagues and world wars. We'll survive this, too."

"Well said, cuz," Bill said loudly, and John hugged her. It was enough.

They spent the night in their makeshift shelter, though few of them managed to snatch more than a few hours sleep. They all felt vulnerable, exposed to the elements as well as to a horrible death swooping out of the fields. And yet, the night passed peacefully enough.

Mary lay on the hard ground with John's arms around her and the stars above. She could hear the chittering of insects in the fields and occasionally, Jo coughing, but no other sounds.

She remembered tucking her boys into their beds at night, whispering that angels would watch over them while they slept. Something far darker had been watching over Sammy.

But the words she had spoken tonight were true: humanity would survive somehow. Evil would not win in the end. If Mary had a role in this, it was not as a warrior, nor the mother of the Anti-Christ. It was to watch over the people she loved, to make sure her family survived. And if she was to do that, she could no longer mourn the son she had already lost. Her Sammy died at Cold Oak. He made his choice. Whatever humanity he had left was written on a small piece of paper, co-ordinates to a place she prayed would be the haven he promised. Mary had to believe in him that much. There could be nothing more.

"Sam," she whispered into the darkness, and felt John's arms tighten around her. Silent tears spilled from her eyes.

Mary would never speak his name again.

Once again, Mary and John travelled the back-roads, and occasionally cross-country, a bone-jarring experience in the old truck. They began their journey alone: the Harvelles were headed for Colorado, Dean and Bobby were headed into battle, with a promise to find them in the spring if they lived that long. Mary hated that parting, but Dean would not be moved. They had to save as

many as possible, he told her, and she could not disagree. There were still people who could be saved, and if Mary and John found their haven, there was a place they could refuge when they had to. They were going south, following what pattern Bobby thought he'd found in the omens.

They made maybe two hundred miles each day, stopping frequently when they found people. Sometimes they stopped to help. Sometimes just to exchange a few words with another human being. Occasionally, they stopped to hunt.

And along the way, they found friends.

A couple who ran a roadside diner were the first. After Mary struck up a conversation with her while ordering breakfast, Sue-Anne served them extra pancakes and told Mary of her daughter, Dee. Dee's eyes turned black and she attacked her parents with a knife before vanishing into the night. Mary told Sue-Anne and her husband what they knew, advising them to protect themselves with salt and, after consulting with John, told the couple where they were going. They promised to follow, when they found their daughter. Mary knew they never would.

Cal Dexter and his wife joined them a few days later. Cal was a big, African American man who seemed much older than his twenty-four years. He had seen too much horror. Jeena was five months along in her first pregnancy, just beginning to show, and Cal was desperate to find some safe place to raise his family. They'd been living in an RV since fleeing the destruction of Lincoln. When they heard Mary's story, Cal grabbed the hope she offered and they began travelling together. They stopped searching out motels and slept in the RV.

By the time they crossed into Washington State, Mary and John had been on the road for nearly three weeks and their band of travellers had grown to nine.

The wall was two metres high, Mary estimated, built of grey stone. The pillars which supported the wrought iron gate were even higher. The gate stood open. Beyond it, Mary could see an asphalt driveway and on both sides of it, cultivated fields with different crops growing in neat rows. She thought she identified potatoes, carrots and cabbages, but there were other plants she didn't immediately recognise. The driveway led in a smooth curve to a further high wall and gate.

Mary looked at her husband as he slowed the truck. "What do you think?"

John shrugged. "No 'keep out' signs. I don't see any security and the gate is open. Let's see what's inside." He waited for the others to catch up, then drove onward, through the first gate.

Was this a farm? Mary wondered. It didn't seem like the farms in Kansas, and why would farmers need such a high wall? It seemed odd, but she couldn't think what else this place might be. The carefully cultivated fields looked somewhat neglected: there were weeds growing and signs of pests, but until recently those plants had been well tended and loved.

All of the plants filled the air with their scents and Mary breathed it deeply. It was the scent of life. She was beginning to feel hopeful about this place.

John slowed the truck again as they neared the second gate and signalled the others. He turned the truck and came to a stop parallel to the gate. He climbed down from the truck, taking his shotgun with him. Mary followed and they both waited for the others to gather around.

"It seems safe," John announced, "but we don't know what we'll find in there. Mary and I will go in first. Wait for us. If anything happens, signal."

Mary was a little surprised. As protective as John had become since the vampire attack, she'd expected him to ask her to wait with the others and not walk into some unknown danger. She was glad he wanted her at his side. She would have waited, if he insisted, but not happily. Mary had paid dearly for their time together and she didn't want to be parted from John again.

She drew her gun and clicked the safety off as they walked through the second gate. From the

outside, all they saw was a high brick wall. Inside, Mary saw several buildings on the inside of that wall, designed such that their roofs formed a walkway around the inner wall. There was a further building in the center which blocked her view of the far side. Several of the buildings had barred windows. All of them had sturdy wooden doors. There was an eerie silence that seemed like more than just the absence of sound. The high wall muffled the sounds of nature from outside but the sounds of human habitation were absent. There was no sound of machinery or music, no voices or movement. Yet this was a place designed for people. There should have been many people here.

She looked at John and he met her eyes then nodded toward the first door on their right. She nodded back and they walked that way. Mary took point on the right side of the door, her weapon ready, while John cautiously reached for the handle. He turned it quickly and flung the door open, stepping back and to the side in the same movement as if expecting an immediate attack. The door slammed against something inside, the sound thunderous in the quiet courtyard. Then silence fell once again.

John signalled to Mary – wait – and entered, his shotgun ready to fire. Mary held her breath, listening for his footsteps as he moved around inside. She heard the scrape of a chair or table being moved, then a crash as something fell. Mary jumped, but stayed where she was. John muttered a curse. It was reassuring; Mary didn't think he would have called out if he believed there was anyone to hear. She holstered her gun and went inside.

The first thing Mary saw was the fallen bookshelf. It had come away from the wall, spilling its contents. Since John was nowhere near it, she guessed his slamming the door open had dislodged nails already loose. She met John's eyes and he gave an embarrassed shrug. Mary shook her head with a quick smile.

It was a classroom. At the far end a large chalk board dominated the wall. In front of the board was a teacher's desk and the main part of the room was filled with desks in neat rows. The desks were different sizes: small ones at the front, larger at the back. The rear of the room was all bookshelves, including the one that fell. She followed John down the centre aisle, walking more slowly than he. There had been *children* here. Children of all ages, judging from the desks. Where were they now?

John reached the front and she saw him tense.

"John? What is it?" she asked.

He indicated the floor behind the teacher's desk. There was a long streak of blood across the stone: old blood, dark and flaking. To Mary's eyes, there was too much blood for a nosebleed or childish injury to account for it, but not enough to have come from a fatal wound...unless it was a young child. She swallowed past a lump in her throat at that thought. She took a step back and glanced around the room. The streak of blood and the desk John knocked over were the only things in the room that was out of place.

"There was violence here," Mary said carefully, "but someone straightened the room after. I think that..." she gestured to the blood, "is where someone dragged a body. Maybe a child."

John was frowning. "If someone cleared up the room, why didn't they clean this? I don't like it, Mary. It feels like...I don't know. Like everyone just vanished." He snapped his fingers. "Like that. Someone *meant* to come back and clean the floor."

"I agree." Mary ran her fingertips over the desk, cutting lines in the dust. "It happened a while ago, John. A few weeks at least."

"Around the time you last saw...?" John didn't say Sam's name aloud.

Mary hadn't yet made the connection, but she nodded. "It could have been, yes." The people who once lived here died or vanished shortly before Sam gave her the co-ordinates to this place.

Every building they checked was the same. They found signs of minor violence: a broken window,

blood, furniture knocked over or in the wrong places. But they found nothing that looked like a real struggle or a murder.

This place was made for a community. There were bedrooms with beds made up. There was a large, communal kitchen with storage cupboards full of canned and dried goods. There was minimal technology. The oven in the kitchen burned wood. There was a hand-pump for water. They found no sign of a telephone, no computers or televisions. Not even a radio. Mary understood then, not what happened here, but the kind of people who lived in this place.

It had been a closed community, most likely religious, shunning modern technology. The community seemed largely self-sufficient. They didn't keep the modern world out entirely: those canned goods, for example, and John located a generator with several canisters of propane. But these people kept the world at arms-length. The locals probably considered them a cult. This was a perfect place for Mary, John and the other refugees. This was a place they could work together and survive.

The chapel was the last building they checked. It was a plain room, the pews simple wooden benches, the walls whitewashed. There was an altar with a plain, white cloth and a cross. The wall above it had once held a large cross: its absence left a distinct outline against the pure white. In place of the cross, someone had painted a single, cryptic word in garish, orange paint: CROATOAN.

Mary had no idea what it meant, but the sight sent a chill through her. She turned to John, a question in her eyes.

"Tell the others," he said.

Mary walked out of the gates. Everyone was gathered together, waiting, and she felt guilty that they had taken so long. For a moment, she looked at the gathered group as if through more innocent eyes. Three men, each of them heavily and visibly armed, stood protectively around the women. They looked like they were posing for a *Rambo* poster. There were four women, one of them very pregnant, but their appearance was almost as intimidating as the men. They wore denim and leather – no skirts or makeup – and all turned to Mary as she approached. There was a lot of tension in the air.

Back in Lawrence, Mary might have been afraid to give them the time of day: they looked like steampunk outlaws living out of an RV and a couple of trucks. But she looked just like them, she realised, with her hair tied back, her shotgun in her hand. How much they had all changed in a few short weeks!

Cal, the biggest of the men, stepped forward to greet her. With the rifle slung over one shoulder and a bowie knife sheathed at his belt, he looked very intimidating, but Mary knew he was a gentle man, devoted to Jeena. His expression was both fearful and hopeful.

Mary smiled a greeting. "It's a good place and it looks like it's been abandoned about a month. We've searched as well as we can. I believe it's safe."

Cal smiled with relief. He turned back to Jeena, who ran the few steps to his side. "We can stay here?" she asked Mary.

She wasn't at all certain they could, legally, but Mary gave Jeena the answer she needed to hear. "We can stay."

They had found their new home.

Winter came early that year, but by the time the snow confined them to the compound their community of nine people had become sixteen. A seventeenth was added when Jeena gave birth

to a healthy baby girl; she named her daughter Hope. Considering they had none of the advantages of a modern hospital, both mother and baby came through well.

They had worked together to harvest the fields and had more than enough food stored for the winter. The compound had animal pens and a chicken coop; both were empty when they first arrived but by Thanksgiving they had a few chickens and pigs. John, Cal and some of the others learned to hunt in the forest and added venison to their stores. They had wood for cooking and heating, propane for the emergency generator and candles for light. In spring, Mary planned to build some beehives. Most of all, they felt safe.

For Mary, one source of anxiety remained: Dean was still not with them and the winter snow would prevent him reaching them until the spring melt. With no way to communicate with him, Mary didn't even know for sure that Dean was still alive. She wished she could command her vision to show her, just once, what had become of her son, but throughout the long winter Mary's dreams were only dreams.

She tried not to think of Sam.

The community became a family that winter. Like all families, they had their frictions and disagreements but they learned each other's ways and how to work together. All tasks were shared, from cooking to repairing leaky roofs, to cleaning out the toilets. They set a patrol, too: at least two people on watch at all times. The patrol was necessary; both Mary and John were haunted by their close call and it wasn't just the supernatural that threatened them. They had no legal right to this land.

One morning in early spring, when the snow had begun to melt and patches of green were visible among the white, Mary was walking through the fields. She could hear birds singing, and it brought a smile to her lips. They would need to think about planting soon. As well as food, she wanted to set some land aside for a herb garden: some herbs for cooking, others for medicinal purposes and some for protection. She had already talked with John about better defences against the supernatural. They needed iron, as much as possible. They needed news, too.

A sound made Mary look toward the outer gate. Had she really heard an engine? A moment later the warning bell sang out and Mary abandoned her survey of the fields. When the bell sounded, everyone had a job to do. Mary was supposed to man the outer gate with John and Cal, but for that she needed her gun. Mary turned and hurried back toward the inner gate, but John was already coming toward her, carrying her gun and belt.

"What are you doing out here unarmed?" he demanded, shoving the belt at her. John carried his shotgun and his pockets bulged with extra ammo.

Mary accepted the rebuke. "I was just walking. I'm sorry." She fastened the gun belt around her waist. "What's coming?"

"People. Looks like a lot."

Cal joined them as they reached the gate. Mary looked up at the road. She saw three vehicles coming down toward the compound. The first was a large SUV: the kind you bought if you had a lot of kids to ferry to and from school. Behind it were two trucks. There was no sign of the familiar Impala and Mary closed her eyes briefly, the disappointment crushing her.

"What do you think?" Cal asked tensely. He had the key to the heavy padlock that kept the gate sealed.

"Others knew we were coming here," John answered. "They could be friends, or more refugees."

"Can we afford to feed more people?" Cal's worry was justified: their stores were getting low and he had a wife and baby to worry about.

"Can we afford *not* to?" Mary asked him. The community could afford to grow. In fact, they *had* to grow if they were to survive long-term.

Cal simply looked at her and nodded.

"It's Bobby!" John called. "Cal, open the gate. He's a friend."

As the convoy came closer Mary, too, recognised Bobby Singer at the wheel of the SUV. There were others with him, but she couldn't see Dean. Anxiety filled her, but she smiled a greeting for Bobby, genuinely glad to see him. Cal finished unwinding the heavy chain from the gate and pulled it open just as the SUV came to a stop. Mary was first through the gate.

Bobby jumped down, smiling. "Mary! You're a sight for sore eyes."

"Where's Dean?" she asked urgently. Bobby's smile faded and she felt cold.

Bobby saw her expression. "Oh, Mary, no. He's fine, I swear he's fine. We had some trouble with one of the trucks. He insisted we come ahead. We've got wounded."

"Thank God!"

John stepped forward. "What are your injuries?" he asked, businesslike.

"Walking wounded mostly. One boy has an infected wound. We couldn't treat it on the road."

"We're not exactly a hospital, Bobby. We have a nurse, but that's all."

"Better'n we've got. I've got eight people with me, plus two with Dean. Twelve of us in all. But we brought supplies with us. Food, blankets. We can pay our way." He looked beyond John to the compound. "I wasn't sure what we'd find here."

"It's a good place. I think you'll be surprised. Cal will take your people in, but I think Mary needs to see our boy. How far away is he?"

Bobby summarised his news while they drove to meet the rest of his group. Most of the people he and Dean brought with them were survivors of an attack on an Oregon town. Bobby described it as a massacre. It wasn't the only one. Every nightmare, every supernatural creature they'd ever heard of was out of the woodwork. And they were multiplying. You could still hunt them: the old weapons still worked, but for every one you killed there were ten more just waiting to step up. Government was a joke, police able to keep order only in the major cities, and what passed for 'order' there wasn't anything you'd recognise. In Bobby's opinion, it was time to concentrate on protection.

Even on the road there was trouble. The convoy had been attacked twice on the journey from Oregon and they took losses in both fights. It made Mary even more nervous that Dean had been left behind.

She saw the truck first, its hood raised, hiding whomever was working on it. Beside the truck, a man she didn't know stood guard, holding an automatic rifle. He raised a hand, waving to Bobby, and shouted something to his companions.

Dean emerged from behind the truck's hood. He raised a hand in greeting and Mary stared in surprise. Dean wore his usual blue jeans and heavy workman's boots, but his top was a sleeveless t-shirt, the kind some people used to call a "wife-beater". It left the burn scars Dean always took such pains to hide clearly visible. Something had changed him. For the better, Mary thought, if he'd lost his sensitivity to those scars.

She leapt down from the SUV and ran across the distance between them as Dean cast aside the wrench he was carrying.

Dean hugged her fiercely. "Thank God you're okay. I missed you, Mom."

She returned his hug with equal fervour. "I missed you too. I've been so worried!" She drew back to look into his face. "We've found a safe place here. Please say you will stay."

Dean glanced at Bobby, his smile faltering a little. "We'll stay," he promised. "For a while, at least."

He was planning to go back into the fight. Mary fought back her impulse to argue; there would be time for that conversation later. Right now she was just glad to have her son back, in one piece.

“What’s wrong with the truck?” John asked.

Dean turned to him with a grin. “What’s wrong is she’s scrap metal with an engine. I’ve had to cobble together parts three times in the past week. But we needed everything she’s carrying.”

“Want me to take a look?”

“Sure,” Dean shrugged. “Maybe you’ll see something I missed.”

Mary watched them bend over the truck’s engine block, her husband and her son, and she smiled to herself. Dean would stay. There was likely to be more than enough fight for him keeping the compound safe.

But as she watched them, another thought stole into her mind: Bobby had not offered news of Sam. And she had not asked. It didn’t matter. Sam was gone.

She had her whole family right here.

~ End of *Kingdom Come* ~

Mary’s story concludes in [*Deliver Us From Evil*](#)