



SUPERNATURAL™

FRESH MEAT

ALICE HENDERSON

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SUPERNATURAL created by Eric Kripke

TITAN BOOKS

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To Jason, for his never-ending encouragement
To Norma, for our adventures in the western wilds
To Gordon, for bestowing on me the love of monsters

HISTORIAN'S NOTE

This novel takes place during season seven, between “Shut Up, Dr. Phil” and “Slash Fiction.”

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty.](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[Twenty-Four](#)

[Twenty-Five](#)

[Twenty-Six](#)

[Twenty-Seven](#)

[Twenty-Eight](#)

[Twenty-Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty-One](#)

[Thirty-Two](#)

[Thirty-Three](#)

[Thirty-Four](#)

[Thirty-Five](#)

[Thirty-Six](#)

[Thirty-Seven](#)

[Thirty-Eight](#)

[Thirty-Nine](#)

[Forty](#)

[Forty-One](#)

[Forty-Two](#)

[Forty-Three](#)

[Forty-Four](#)

[Forty-Five](#)

[Forty-Six](#)

[Forty-Seven](#)

[Forty-Eight](#)

[Forty-Nine](#)

[Fifty](#)

[Fifty-One](#)

[Fifty-Two](#)

[Fifty-Three](#)

[Fifty-Four](#)

[Fifty-Five](#)

[Fifty-Six](#)

[Fifty-Seven](#)

[Fifty-Eight](#)

[Fifty-Nine](#)

[Sixty-One](#)

[Sixty-Two](#)

[Sixty-Three](#)

[Sixty-Four](#)

[Sixty-Five](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Prologue



The Sierra Nevada Mountains, 1846

All he could think about was food. Every fiber of his being thrummed with the thought of it. Every agonizing moment was consumed with contemplating how he could find it, when he would feel it between his teeth, how it would fill up his anguished stomach. At night he dreamed of food: beefsteak; hot stew with potatoes and carrots; warm buttery biscuits; fresh roasted corn and fried chicken. He would start awake sometimes just as he sat down to a feast in his dreams, and he would scream in the darkness, hot tears streaking his face at the loss of even an imagined morsel of food. In the night, he would shove fistful after fistful of snow into his mouth, trying to bury the terrible hunger. In the last few weeks he had eaten bark and lichen and an old pair of leather boots that had given out. He'd devoured part of a boiled wool blanket, eaten tree sap, and sucked on sticks, wishing they were chicken bones he could break apart and suck the marrow out of. With a euphoric longing he thought of fragrant liver and onions, of pork chops smothered in apple sauce, of freshly made bread lathered with honey butter. Then he would weep, the hunger no longer solely in his stomach but infused throughout his entire being, in his bones, in his aching skin, inside his fevered brain.

He had to have food. He had to have meat. His small group had snowshoed away from the Donner Party camp twenty-four days ago. Their goal was to reach Bear Valley, beyond the treacherous mountains, and bring back rescuers and supplies. They had brought along meat from the camp, a few scraps from butchered pack animals, but that food was all gone now. They had hoped to find rabbits and deer along the way, but hadn't found much. It was as if the entire forest had rebelled against the terrible winter and the animals had fled.

Months ago, before the snows fell, their guide Charles Stanton had trekked out to the great valley of California and returned with supplies, mules, and two Miwok guides. He'd distributed the supplies among the emigrants, and then urged everyone to hike out immediately. But they had been too tired. Then the snows came and they were all trapped.

Now Stanton was of no use to anyone. He'd originally led the snowshoe group, which they had named the Forlorn Hope. But a few weeks ago he'd sat down in the snow and lit up a pipe. He puffed away on it, then encouraged the others to go on ahead. He said he'd catch up that night, but no one really thought he would, even Stanton. He'd gone snow-blind, his body starved beyond endurance. No one said anything when he didn't join them at camp that night. Everyone knew he was dead.

Now it was just the Miwok guides leading them through the endless pine forests and exhaustingly deep snow drifts. Foster couldn't stand another day of hearing the Forlorn Hope's snowshoes crunching in the ice-crusting snow. He couldn't bear the thought of another pitiful night clustered around a fire, no one talking, and everyone staring ahead with hollow, grey eyes.

He didn't believe the Miwoks actually knew the way anymore, either. Where was the game? They were supposed to be experts in this forest, but they hadn't found any meat in days. Foster had already been snowbound near a lake with his family, starving, for more than two months prior to this.

Now the Forlorn Hope sat around a meager fire, the sun already set beyond the mountains. Cold seeped into Foster's bones. He watched the Miwoks sitting together on the opposite side of the fire, talking softly in a language he didn't understand. They'd been with the emigrants since October in Nevada, but they weren't really part of the group. And now they were lost. Foster knew it. His stomach groaned and rumbled, protesting against the torture his body had endured since they'd gotten snowbound. Was he just supposed to keep following them around aimlessly? They could be going in circles for all he knew.

Foster watched the Miwoks, talking and pointing into the forest, deciding the next stage of the route. They didn't know. They were lost. Or maybe they did know, and just wanted to lead the emigrants to their deaths. Maybe it was all a plot.

Foster placed a hand on his aching stomach. A few weeks ago they had talked about sacrificing members of the group to save the others. They suggested dueling, or a lottery system for food. They would kill and eat whoever "won" the lottery. Then the animal handler Antonio had died, and next Franklin Graves, who had made the snowshoes for everyone in the Forlorn Hope. Then Patrick Dolan went crazy, running off into the cold and stripping all his clothes off. He'd come back later and died, too. Foster had carved off chunks of the man's side, tearing into the warm meat with a savage desperation. Twelve-year-old Lemuel Murphy succumbed next; they dried some of the meat and continued on.

Now it had been days since their food supply ran out. They sat around the fire, no one saying anything. Some started to eat the oxhide bindings of their snowshoes. Foster wondered if they'd hold the lottery, or if some accident would befall one of the members: a fall off a cliff, or a plunge into an icy river. Or maybe certain people could die for the group without them even holding a lottery. People who didn't really count as people anyway.

As they had a hundred times before over the last few weeks, Foster's eyes narrowed on the Miwoks. He stood up, slinging his rifle over his shoulder, and stared at them. Immediately they noticed his movement. They'd been keeping an eye on him lately, watching him warily. Foster suspected that one of the party had warned the two guides that they might be butchered. If so, then they probably intended them harm. He should get to them first. They weren't really human anyway, were they? Not like the whites of his party. They were no more than savages. Not civilized men like him. Their sacrifice so that he could eat would be of little consequence.

One of the Miwoks, Luis, nudged his friend and pointed at Foster. The other one (Foster didn't know his name, Salvador?)—it's not like they were real people with

meaningful names, anyway, they were really only one step away from animals—turned in alarm. Cautiously the Miwoks rose to their feet. They didn't carry guns, just knives. They were starving, too, and had walked until their moccasins wore through, exposing their bloody, bare feet.

It made them easier to track in the snow, bloody footprints wherever they walked, even when they wrapped their feet in wool.

Foster unslung the rifle from his shoulder and pointed it at them. The Miwoks ran. The rest of the Forlorn Hope looked on with disinterest, too exhausted to take any notice.

Foster trailed the Miwok guides through the trees, following the blotches of red in their wake. They were far more starved and weaker than he was. They'd refused to eat human flesh, instead foraging in the bitterly cold forest for plants. Their acorns were no match for the meat Foster had eaten. He knew he'd catch up to them eventually.

Days later, in a small clearing, he caught up to one, fired the rifle, and killed him. Then it was just the other one. Foster could already taste the delicious warm meat in his mouth. He imagined it slithering down his throat, filling his belly. He caught sight of the other Miwok, who ran on in terror at the far end of the clearing. Foster shot him in the back. The fallen guide sprawled in the snow, blood seeping out and staining the virgin snow. Foster screamed a barbaric, gargled cry into the quiet forest, startling a bird.

Tonight, he would eat.

ONE



Tonopah, Nevada, present day

The ghost collided with Sam Winchester with surprising force, sending him sprawling onto the desert floor. He rolled as its spectral boot came down toward his head. Raising his shotgun, Sam aimed it at the phantom's chest and fired. With a boom, shells erupted, spraying the ghost with rock salt. The apparition vanished in an angry swirl of smoke. While salt didn't get rid of ghosts permanently, it usually bought Sam a little time. But the spirit of George Drechler wasn't as affected as most. Sam glanced around the forsaken cemetery, reaching into his jacket pocket for the last of his ammunition. "I hope you're right about where the bones are this time, Dean," he shouted, struggling to his feet. "Drechler's a mean one. Salt barely fazes him."

A few yards away, his brother, Dean Winchester, stood chest deep in a grave, digging furiously with an old shovel. Sweat dripped from his brow and his shirt was drenched. "Hey, how was I supposed to know about some secret Murderer's Row?"

This marked their third digging expedition on this hunt. They'd dug up a false grave at Drechler's original house in nearby Goldfield, Nevada, then another in the main cemetery of Tonopah, and finally discovered Murderer's Row in the town's old archives. It stood apart from the graves of law-abiding Tonopah citizens, and was now forgotten by history.

Before Sam had a chance to reload, the ghost reappeared. "He's back!"

Sam braced himself. Drechler circled him, eyes furious. Dressed in a dirty brown duster, leather vest, gun belt, and hat, he looked the part of an Old West gunslinger. The ghost glanced over his shoulder at Dean and then abandoned the

attack on Sam and barreled toward his brother instead. Sam ran after him, catching him just as he hovered above the rim of the grave. Sam pulled out an iron dagger and sank it into the ghost's back. Drechler spun, eyes fiery, then shrieked and vaporized, but Sam knew he would be back in a few seconds.

"You almost down to the coffin?" he called out.

Dean straightened, leaning his elbow on the shovel. "You're welcome to come down here if you think you can dig faster, sunshine."

Sam darted away from the graveside as the ghost reappeared. From the depths of his sweeping duster, Drechler produced a rusty Bowie knife and began circling Sam again. The ghost sprang, blade thrusting upward. Sam dodged, but the tip caught in his jacket, ripping the material. Sam lashed out with the iron again, driving it deep into the ghost's chest. Drechler screamed and atomized.

Dean hurried, shoveling away mounds of dirt. *Damn. How deep had they buried the guy?*

At last Sam heard Dean's shovel hit something hollow. Dean scraped the rest of the dirt away, then brought the edge of the shovel down hard on the exposed old wood. It splintered, and he got down on his knees, ripping away planks. Inside lay the bones of George Drechler, who'd murdered fifteen people when he was alive, and ten more after he died.

"Got it!"

Dean reached into his jacket and brought out a cylindrical container of salt. He poured it over the remains, glancing up to see if Sam was okay. Their eyes met as Sam searched the darkness for the spirit. He felt Drechler behind him suddenly and whirled just as the Bowie knife lashed out again. Sam thrust one hand up, striking the ghost's arm and deflecting the blade.

Dean poured lighter fluid on the bones. As Sam struck out with the iron blade again, Dean leapt up out of the grave, pivoting at the edge. He struck a match and dropped it into the splintered coffin.

With a *whump*, the bones caught, fire lighting up the night. Drechler cried out in anguish as his ghost body lit up with flames at the same time. Salting and burning human remains was one way to vanquish a ghost forever. Embers glowed within the ghost's form, creating jagged lines in his face and clothing. Fire snaked and devoured, ashes spiraling up into the night. Then Drechler vanished, whirling away into a puff of smoke.

Sam bent over, placing his hands on his knees to catch his breath. "Nice."

Dean grinned back at him in the firelight, mud and dirt smeared on his sweaty face. "I need a beer." He glanced toward the dim glow of city lights a few blocks away. "And I saw a Super Piggy Oink Oink Shack that we have got to check out. They've got this sandwich that's BBQ boneless ribs wrapped in bacon."

Sam shook his head. His brother's monster-hunting ability was only rivaled by his impressive talent for finding the greasiest meat-serving dives in every town they visited.

They walked toward the glow of the city, crossing a dry section of rocks and scrub bushes. In the gloom, Sam could make out all the little iron crosses of the town's main cemetery.

Murderer's Row stood on the outskirts of Tonopah, Nevada, an old town from Nevada's mining days. The Row wasn't part of the regular cemetery, which was populated mainly by miners killed in a mine fire in 1911.

George Drechler was the brother of one of the miners, and decided to seek vengeance by killing citizens associated with the mine—owners, investors, even attorneys and accountants. Even when a posse caught him and executed him, his killing didn't stop. By the time Dean and Sam discovered his trail, ten more people had died.

In town, Dean ordered more food than Sam thought anyone could possibly eat. With the brimming take-out bag, Sam and Dean returned to the Three Ring Motel on North

Main Street. The sign featured a jovial clown waving his hand, and clowns adorned every door.

Sam glanced around uncomfortably. "I can't believe you made me stay at this place. The sign looks just like the Cooper Circus clown."

"C'mon, Sam. It's festive."

"Festive?" Sam pointed to the neighboring lot. "It's right next to the creepy old miners' cemetery. Great combination."

Dean shrugged. "What could happen?"

Sam pointed at him. "Don't say that. Do not say that."

They entered their room, Dean flinging himself down on his bed and diving into the sack of food.

Sam sat down at the room's table and opened his laptop. He was restless. Had to keep busy. The fiery flashes of Hell were worse when his mind fell idle.

While Dean sat propped up on one elbow, devouring his sandwich, Sam searched the internet. He scoured missing person reports and news accounts of the strange. Then he came across something.

"Hey Dean, listen to this." His brother lowered his halfeaten Super Piggy Oink Oink Delight and turned to him. "Five hikers were killed over the last three years in the Tahoe National Forest. Rangers thought rogue bear, but it's unusual for black bears to be this aggressive."

Dean talked around a mouthful of pig. "What, you're thinking wendigo?"

Sam lifted his eyebrows. "Could be."

"Still remember the last one. That was brutal."

"You want to check it out?"

"Let's go." He took another huge bite of the sandwich.

"Bobby?" Sam asked.

Dean nodded. "Bobby. Best tracker we know."

Like Sam and Dean, Bobby Singer was a hunter, part of a small group of people who knew about the existence of monsters and spirits. They'd tracked down violent creatures from vampires to demons to ghosts. Bobby had taught them a lot of what they knew about hunting. Over the years, when their dad was out on a case, Bobby took care of them and helped raise them. He was a second father to them, a curmudgeon with a heart of gold.

Sam dialed his cell, wondering if Bobby was at his friend's cabin in Whitefish, Montana, or off somewhere on a case.

He picked up on the first ring.

"Bobby, it's Sam."

"This better be good. I just caught dinner."

"I think we might be on to a wendigo."

"Ech. Not my favorite member of the human-eating bunch. Where'd you pick up the trail?"

"Near Lake Tahoe."

"Prime feeding territory. Lots of tourists coming and going."

"That's what we thought."

"People missing?"

"Yeah."

"They're saying rogue bear?"

"Yep."

"All right. I'm just wrapping things up in Eugene, Oregon. Ghost on campus here."

"Sounds interesting."

"Just burned some nineteenth-century groundskeeper bones. I'll head down. Where do you want to meet up?"

"There's a little town near the Tahoe National Forest called Emigrant Gap. Most of the people have gone missing near there."

“OK. Meet you there. I’ll bring my .30-30.”

“Figured you would,” Sam said. Bobby had been hunting creatures for years. He could track like no one they knew. “See you there tomorrow evening.”

Sam hung up and turned to Dean. “Bobby’s in.”

Dean crammed the last of his sandwich in his mouth and nodded. Then he lay back on the bed, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Tomorrow it’ll just be us and nature.”

“Can’t wait,” Sam said soberly.

The last time they’d hunted a wendigo, they’d barely made it out of there, and their companions had not been so lucky. Their very competent guide had been killed, along with some innocent campers. He thought of the vastness of the forest, of the sheer speed and agility of the creature. Last time people had died. He only hoped this time would be different.

TWO



The next day Sam and Dean drove across Nevada along Highway 95 in the gleaming black Chevy Impala, Dean behind the wheel, Sam sprawled in the passenger seat. Rugged mountains lined the horizon, sagebrush dotting the high desert floor. A writer had once described this part of Nevada as “the loneliest place I ever found myself,” but Dean loved the West. Loved the high, open spaces and the history. He’d seen every classic western movie ever made. While “Back In Black” by AC/DC played on the radio, he imagined Pony Express riders leaning over their horses, racing toward the Pacific. They passed through the small towns of Hawthorne and Schurz, seeing the hulking remains of abandoned mines on the hillsides. Wild mustangs ran in the open spaces. They reached Carson City, Nevada, where Kit Carson and Mark Twain had once roamed the streets, then turned west toward Lake Tahoe. On Highway 50, they started climbing into the Sierra Nevada mountains. The sun sank low behind the peaks, painting the clouds a dazzling red and gold. Sam drifted in and out of sleep.

The car crested a hill and the lake suddenly came into view, a deep sapphire-blue pool amid the snowy peaks. Dean let his mind drift, and it inevitably took him to Castiel. The angel had resurrected Dean, and had then become his friend, fought side by side with him and Sam. Next to his brother and Bobby, Cas was the closest thing Dean had to family. He couldn’t believe he was gone. Sometimes the life of a hunter made him feel like he was destined to lose everyone too early. Ellen and Jo, his mom, his dad.

The job could make a person crazy. He knew Castiel had been dealing with huge issues—the silence of God, a war in heaven, the apocalypse—but he could have talked to Dean. They would have figured it out together. Cas didn’t have to make a deal with Crowley, the King of Hell. He didn’t have to

swallow all those souls from Purgatory and become the Heavenly equivalent of an unstable nuclear reactor. Now his friend was gone, torn apart by the ravenous Leviathan too powerful to contain, even for an angel. Right now, somewhere out there, the Leviathan were growing stronger and stronger, duplicating person after person, posing as doctors, entrepreneurs, scientists, politicians. Dean and Sam stared down the barrel of a new Armageddon, hot from the oven, that once again threatened to destroy life as they knew it. And Dean didn't have the belief he once had, that unfailing knowledge that they could tackle whatever came at them. He'd lost that somewhere along the road.

Damn it. Why did Cas have to do that? They could have used him in the upcoming fight, used his power and knowledge. But Dean missed more than that. He'd told Cas once that he was like a brother to him. Fat lot of good that had been in the end.

They descended into the lake basin, driving past steep cliffs. Out on the lake's surface, white caps crested and fell. They drove through the town of Incline Village and entered California, passing through King's Beach. Dean kept an eye out for good eateries. They turned north and drove through Truckee, once the most dangerous city in California, full of gunfighters and lynch mobs. As night fell and "Free Ride" by Edgar Winter played on the radio, they rolled into the small town of Emigrant Gap.

With only one main street, it wasn't too hard to find Bobby. Dean spotted his van parked outside the Ritzert Roadhouse.

Sam stirred awake and they got out and stretched. A cold breeze sighed through the pine trees, the unmistakable scent of snow on the wind. Dean breathed in the high-altitude air, smelling earth and wet pine trees. Sam gathered up the case research he'd collected and they entered the grill.

Bobby Singer sat at the bar, a shot of Maker's Mark in one hand. He leaned over a newspaper, making notes in a small notebook. His red flannel shirt and worn jeans were

rumpled, and the blue, netted baseball cap on his head was just as soiled and beat up as ever.

“Bobby!” Dean greeted him.

Bobby turned on the barstool, taking Dean’s hand and patting him on the shoulder. He did the same with Sam.

“I was wondering when you idjits were going to show up.”

“It’s good to see you, too, Bobby,” Sam said.

Bobby motioned toward the empty barstools next to him. “Take a load off.”

They sat down, Dean ordering beers all round.

Bobby pointed to the newspaper he was reading. “There’s been another disappearance. Young kid, about twenty. Went back-country and didn’t come back. Rangers found blood and some torn clothing.”

Sam leaned in to look at the article. “Does it say where exactly?”

“Out near Sixmile Valley.” Bobby pulled out a topographic map and spread it on the bar. “I figure we can light out tomorrow. It’s about a four-mile hike in.”

Sam pulled the research folder out of his jacket and slid it over to Bobby. He studied the accounts, turning to the map on occasion, then nodded. “These attacks happened in the same basic area. As much as I hate to say it, I think you’re right. We’re looking for a wendigo.”

A wendigo was an incredibly fast, vicious creature that had once been human and that craved human flesh. Sam and Dean had fought one a few years ago. The thing had been hard as hell to find and kill. It had an uncanny ability to imitate human voices, crying out for help to lure in victims. Then it ate, not leaving much behind. The only weapon that could kill it was fire.

“I picked up some supplies on the way down,” Bobby told them. “A flamethrower and the makin’s for some Molotov cocktails.”

“And here I thought you were going to say s’mores,” Dean said. “I love a camp-out.”

“This ain’t a game, boys. These things are mean and hungry.”

Dean smiled. Bobby wasn’t openly emotive, but every now and then his affection came through in the form of gruff advice.

Bobby packed up the map and research and tucked it away in the folder. “I’m getting some sleep. I’ll see you two in the morning.”

“Okay, Bobby,” Sam said.

Dean turned to his brother. “We need to find some digs. And something to eat.”

That night Dean slept fitfully, images of the last wendigo hunt keeping him awake. He could still hear the screams. Dean was starting to feel worn out and hopeless about the hunting gig. They’d go out there and hunt the thing and then what? Another monster would be waiting somewhere else. No matter how many they killed, another always took its place. Sam would tell him that they saved lives, that that was important. Dean used to think that, too. He supposed he still did, on a good day. But they’d saved the world so many damn times already, and it was always ready to off itself again. Sometimes it was as if it wanted to end. Maybe they were just uselessly postponing the inevitable, all this suffering was for nothing. Dean’s head just wasn’t in the hunt like it used to be. He was feeling used up. He knew Bobby would warn him that was a dangerous way to be. *You don’t have your head in the game, you’re dead.*

Then there was Castiel. Dean felt so betrayed. If Cas hadn’t let those Leviathan bastards out of Purgatory, humanity wouldn’t be facing annihilation again. Sure, maybe Raphael would have busted them out anyway. Maybe it was better that it was Cas who did it. First, though, the power had gone straight to his head. He’d actually demanded they bow down before him, their new god. Only toward the end was he the Castiel that Dean remembered.

Dean flashed on the last time he saw him, wading into the deep waters of the reservoir before erupting with the blackness of thousands of Leviathan, all swimming eagerly out into the world. His friend had vanished in an explosion of darkness, leaving them alone to deal with the upcoming catastrophe. Sometimes Dean got so angry about it he wanted to put his fist through a wall.

He rolled over, trying to get comfortable. On the other bed, Sam murmured in the dark; he was having a nightmare. Dean worried about his brother. Knew that he was struggling a lot more than he let on. But he wasn't letting Dean in like he used to. Wasn't leaning on him like when they were kids. Dean felt shut out. He'd never admit it to Sam, but sometimes he felt like his brother just didn't need him anymore. What was the point? Dean had protected him for as long as he could remember. His father had charged him with that duty, and he'd done his best. And then Hell itself had claimed Sam...

Last year Sam had made the ultimate sacrifice to save the Earth. He'd agreed to be Lucifer's vessel, then flung himself and Lucifer into Hell. Castiel rescued him, but it took them a while to realize that not all of Sam had made it out. He had come back minus his soul, which remained locked in combat with Lucifer in the cage. When they finally managed to get his soul back in his body, a wall existed in Sam's mind, blocking out memories of Hell.

Castiel destroyed that, too. He removed the wall, and Sam hadn't been the same since. He was tortured with visions of Lucifer. Dean had a hell of a time convincing Sam they were hallucinations and not the actual fallen angel, sitting there tormenting him wherever he went. But pain helped. An old wound in the palm of Sam's hand helped his brother differentiate what was real and what wasn't. Pain seemed to focus Sam's mind.

Dean rolled over, trying to make his mind go blank so he could just get some goddamned sleep. He was going to need it tomorrow. What waited for them in that forest was fast and deadly, and Dean had to get his head together if he wasn't going to end up as wendigo jerky.

He thrashed around, then sat up on the edge of the bed. He stood up and walked into the room's small, dingy kitchen. He pulled out a bottle of whisky and a tumbler. Filling the glass halfway, Dean downed the contents. Then he filled it again and drank more slowly. He was tired of the world threatening to explode. Tired of seeing his brother suffer. He needed a goddamn day off. Hell, he needed a goddamn life off.

Sam stirred in his sleep again, groaning. His brow knitted together. Damn Castiel. If he hadn't removed that mental wall, things would be a lot easier for his brother. They needed every break they could get. But once again Cas had betrayed them, and now Dean had to watch his brother suffer daily through those hellish visions.

He walked back to the bed and sat down, watching the shadows of trees move on the thin curtains. Finishing the rest of his drink, he lay back on the bed, trying to force his mind to go quiet.

The morning came too early, with Bobby knocking on the door. Dean's head throbbed dully from the whisky last night and a lack of sleep.

They drove to the trailhead and geared up, loading their packs with ammunition, Molotov cocktail ingredients, food, and water. They slung rifles over their shoulders, and Bobby took the lead, searching for the first trace of the creature. Dean followed him, carrying the flamethrower, and Sam took up the rear, watching their backs. The forest was quiet, with a few birds singing in the trees and the wind sighing peacefully through the branches. But Dean knew it wouldn't be long before they were fighting for their lives.

THREE



Storm clouds moved in. The air in the forest hung wet and cold, and the cloud layer descended as the morning wore on, drifting eerily through the trees. A few times Sam could see the peaks beyond when the clouds parted, but the mists would swirl again, covering the view.

The soft pine needles beneath their feet felt spongy and wet, and the scent of snow lingered in the air, though it was still too warm for any flakes to fall. Sam's breath frosted as he watched for movement in the trees.

Ahead of him Bobby stopped and bent down, studying a broken branch on a manzanita bush. "Something big came through here," he said. "But could have been a buck."

"Or a rogue bear?" Dean asked.

Bobby threw him a wry smile and stood up again, continuing on. They walked in silence, and quiet clung to the forest. A few times Sam heard a distant woodpecker and the complaining trill of a squirrel.

They hiked for two hours, moving deeper into the Tahoe National Forest. As they passed into a small clearing, Sam thought he saw movement in the trees on the far side, a blur of motion too fast for him to lock on to. Wendigos liked to move in trees. His heart picked up its pace, and he braced himself for a sudden attack from above.

"You guys see that?" he asked, stopping.

Dean turned, following Sam's gaze into the massive ponderosa pines in front of them. "No."

"I thought I saw something."

"Keep your eyes peeled," Bobby said. "I think we might be getting close."

Dean looked grim. "Don't have to tell me twice."

They moved slowly forward, Bobby studying the forest floor for any sign of prints or hair. He stooped again, studying a large human-shaped footprint in a patch of mud. "This is it." He gazed up at the trees at the far edge of the clearing, leaning on his rifle. "Smell that?"

Sam whiffed the air. Decay.

Dean wrinkled his nose. "Well, that can't be good."

"Come on." Bobby waved them forward, led by his nose.

They passed through the clearing, Sam watching the branches above as they entered the trees. The fresh scent of wet pine hung heavily there, but above it all was the sickly sweet smell of decomposition. They moved quietly through the trees, avoiding fallen twigs and stepping over sodden logs.

Bobby held up a fist, the signal to stop. He gestured toward a distant point, and Sam saw a ramshackle wooden structure leaning against a massive granite boulder.

Bobby knelt down and slung off his pack. He made up two Molotov cocktails and handed one to Sam. Then he stood up, motioning for Dean to skirt left with the flamethrower and for Sam to skirt right. They split up, moving to surround the building. Sam gripped the Molotov, white-knuckling the bottle of gasoline. He held his lighter at the ready, grateful for the heavy feeling of the rifle against his shoulder. If he missed with the Molotov, the rifle would at least slow down the wendigo, buying time for Dean or Bobby to land home with fire.

As Sam drew nearer to the makeshift shed, the stench of decomposition grew stronger. It was an old structure, wood worn and splitting with years of sun exposure. A wagon wheel stood propped up against one side, and a rusted lantern hung from a tree branch above.

He saw Dean and Bobby circling around. Bobby motioned toward a rickety door on one side, the only obvious entry point. It hung on rusted hinges, no longer fitting into the doorframe. A simple wooden bar hung through two metal

brackets served as the lock. That meant whoever lived in the shack wasn't at home; there was no way to lock it like that from the inside. But it would be a good way to lock victims in, Sam thought bleakly.

Bobby approached the wooden slat and signaled for Sam and Dean to hang back. Cautiously he kicked it free with his boot, holding on to the Molotov with one hand and his lighter with the other. The board fell to the ground, and with a groan and thump the door swung open.

Instantly they were assaulted by the stench of decaying flesh. Sam fought back the urge to gag.

Bobby stared inside, then lifted his arm to his nose. "Nobody home." He crept forward, coughing at the reek. Sam and Dean followed him inside.

A small room lay beyond. A simple wooden table, cut from rough logs, stood in the center. A rickety bench sat next to it. Dozens of items lay scattered across the earthen floor: an old candle, a used box of matches, a sleeping bag leaking stuffing, a soiled pillow, a collection of old books with crumbling spines, a deck of worn playing cards. Metal glinted in the dirt at the far side of the cabin.

Sam placed his bottle of gasoline on the table and pocketed the lighter. He walked to the gleaming metal and bent down. He pulled a dented gold pocket watch from the dirt, clicking it open to find the crystal cracked and grime on the face. An engraving on the back of the watch read "W.M.F. from S.M.F." The watch was old, nineteenth century, and probably not from a recent victim.

Sam straightened up. Most of the items scattered on the floor were old. The playing cards had yellowed with age, the books spotted with mildew and tanned from the sun. In another corner lay some old daguerreotypes of a woman and a small boy, and an image of a general store and post office with the name "Foster's Bar" painted on a sign above the door.

Bobby still had his mouth covered with his sleeve. "What is this place?"

Dean nudged the rank sleeping bag with his foot. "Something lives here."

Bobby glanced around. "Where is that god-awful stench coming from? I don't see any bodies."

Sam looked down at the dirt. "Maybe it's just seeped into the floor. Decomp liquid soaking the soil."

"You think this is the wendigo's digs?" Bobby asked. "Not your typical deep, dark cave."

Dean winced at the stench. "For one thing, where are the bodies?"

A high keening wail sounded on the wind outside.

They fell silent, listening. Sam heard it again, a human cry for help. He hurried to the door of the shack, waiting.

Then it came again, and he could make out the words. "Help me!" A woman's voice, in the distance.

"Is that—" he started to ask, turning toward Bobby.

"It could be the wendigo," Bobby answered, joining him at the doorway.

Dean bent down in the dirt, gathering up a tattered notebook and a yellowing envelope. "Let's bring some of this stuff. Could give us a lead." He stuffed it into his pack, then slung it on his back. He joined them by the door.

Outside, the woman cried for help again, screaming from somewhere in the distant trees. She was either fighting for her life or it was the wendigo, imitating a human voice and trying to lure them closer.

Sam stepped aside as Dean moved past him, raising the flamethrower. "Let's do this," his brother said.

They moved toward the screams, Sam gripping the bottle of gasoline and placing his thumb on the lighter's striking wheel.

FOUR



Together they crept toward the sound of the woman's cries. Dean gripped the flamethrower, finger on the trigger. As they neared a dense cluster of trees, the cry suddenly stopped, cut off. Either the creature had just finished her off or there was no woman at all. They listened, pausing. Bobby studied the ground, pointing to more brush with broken branches. Up in the trees, a fresh break had caused a branch to fall. They listened. The reassuring hiss from the blue flame at the tip of the flamethrower was the only sound.

Bobby walked to the fallen branch, then studied the trees above for movement or sign.

"Anything?" Sam asked.

Bobby frowned. "This whole area is riddled with old mines. Thing could be holed up somewhere, right beneath our feet."

Sam looked down. "That's a reassuring thought."

A crack of a branch brought their attention up. Dean saw a blur of movement, leaping from tree to tree, but it was too fast to make out. He aimed the flamethrower up, but the thing was gone before he could fire. He wasn't exactly excited about the thought of setting the forest alight, either. He had to be careful. As careful as he could be and not end up dead, anyway.

Twenty feet away, high in the branches of a ponderosa, the thing moved again, circling. Bobby poised to throw the cocktail and instinctively the three formed a protective ring, backs to each other.

"When it comes down it's going to come in fast and furious," Bobby told them. "Brace yourselves."

Then the attack came. Dean felt claws slice into his chest as a blur of movement streaked by him. He fired the flamethrower, but it missed its target. He spun around, moving away from Sam and Bobby. Another hit struck him on the back of his head and he went down. Blood streamed into his eye as he staggered to his feet. He heard Bobby cry out and saw Sam fly through the air and slam into a tree. Something growled, wet and hot, next to his ear, and he slammed his fist backward, meeting something fleshy and cold.

Dean brought up the flamethrower. He was going to gank this sucker. Sam wasn't moving, leaning against the tree with his head sagging. Dean couldn't even see Bobby. For a moment he feared that the thing had grabbed Bobby and taken to the trees. He heard Bobby shout and looked up, seeing his friend dangling from the wendigo's arm. Bobby thrashed around, hands closing around the stock of the rifle slung on his back.

How damn strong could it be?

"Bobby!" Dean yelled.

Bobby wriggled the rifle around to the front of his jacket. His finger laced through the trigger and a deafening shot rang out. The bullet tore through the wendigo's face. Bobby fell, crashing through branches and landing with a thud in a cluster of bushes.

Shrieking, the wendigo leapt down on top of him, claws raised. Another cacophonous boom rang through the forest and the wendigo staggered backward, shotgun pellets embedded in its chest. Sam had recovered and stood to the left, shotgun poised for another round.

Dean saw his chance and ran forward, firing the flamethrower. Bobby groaned and rolled free of the bush. The edge of the fire touched the wendigo's arm and it howled, moving so fast that Dean could no longer see it. The blur moved into the dense trees, the cry on the wind fading as it ran away.

"It's getting away!" Sam yelled.

“I see that!” Dean called back. He looked to Bobby, who wasn’t going to be jumping up any time soon to track the wendigo before the trail went cold. “And unless you got something that moves a hell of a lot faster than we do, we won’t catch up.”

Bobby crawled away from the burning bushes. Some of the pine needles were starting to catch and the fire spread. Dean flung down the flamethrower and rushed to his friend, dragging him clear of the flames.

“Damn wendigo messed up my ribs,” Bobby grumbled.

Sam started stamping out the flames and Dean joined him, kicking dirt onto the fire. The pine needles caught unbelievably fast, and Dean took off his coat and started swatting at them.

They were so engrossed in stopping the fire that they didn’t hear the person approach from behind them. Dean heard the cock of a handgun and a voice yelled, “Just what the hell are you boys doing?”

Dean spun around to find himself looking down the barrel of a .38.

FIVE



The ranger stood in a firing stance, pointing the gun at Dean. She was a petite woman with short, efficient blonde hair and an attitude that let Dean know she was not to be messed with. On her back towered a tremendous backcountry pack that looked like it weighed two times more than she did.

“We’re just trying to put the fire out,” Sam told her, holding his palms out in a placating gesture.

She pointed the gun at him. “I heard shots.”

Bobby stood up, wincing in pain. “That was me,” he said. “Caught sight of a buck.”

“And the fire?” she asked.

Dean put on his best well-meaning smile. He knew the flamethrower lay only a few feet away and dared a glance at it. Thankfully, it was obscured by brush. “I accidentally dropped my cigarette.”

“You smoke?” she asked dubiously.

“Oh, yeah. Packs and packs. I’m trying to quit, though,” he added.

“If you jerks are trying to burn game out of the forest, I’m going to cite you for so many tickets you’ll have to mortgage your grandmother’s teeth to pay the fines.”

Dean lifted his hands. “Oh, no. We wouldn’t do that. Bambi is safe with us.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Your friend there just said he took aim at a buck.”

Dean shifted his weight. “Is Bambi a buck?” He looked to his brother for help, and Sam shrugged hopelessly. “I thought Bambi was a... Bambi.”

The ranger lowered her gun, evidently taking them for clueless louts.

“Okay, let’s put this out,” she said. She dropped her huge pack and pulled out a small shovel. She went to work burying the flames in dirt and soon the blaze was extinguished. Her eyes fell on their pile of belongings. Dean had left his bag open, and peeking out were his silver .45, a shotgun, a bottle of holy water, a short sword, a large knife, and more bottles of gasoline for Molotov cocktails.

Bobby’s pack, which was only slightly open, revealed another rifle and the muzzle of a Mossberg pump-action shotgun.

Sam’s pack was zipped. *Thank goodness for small miracles*, Dean thought.

“You boys are planning quite a party,” she said. “What do you need all these guns for?”

Bobby responded, trying to mask the pain from his ribs. He spoke through clenched teeth and gripped his side nonchalantly. “We heard there was a rogue bear out here. Just wanted to be careful.”

She eyed the stash of weapons. “You have licenses for all these firearms?”

“Of course,” Bobby said cheerfully.

“Pepper spray is more effective against bears,” she told them. “You shoot a bear and ninety percent of the time you’re just going to make it mad.”

“We’ll keep that in mind, officer,” Dean said with as much chipper enthusiasm as he could muster.

“It’s ‘ranger,’” she told him. “Ranger Grace Cumberlin. You boys have a hunting license?”

Bobby reached into his jacket and pulled out a mess of paper and cards. They were all fake, of course, but they were good fakes. Hunters needed a lot of forged papers. Fake I.D.s to get them into morgues and police files, licenses for a vast array of weaponry.

She took the licenses and nodded, satisfied for now. But Dean could tell that she didn't trust them one bit.

She handed the papers back to Bobby and indicated his side. "You okay?"

"Perfect. Just took a spill."

"A spill. Uh-huh."

Dean winced. Yeah, she was so not buying this. But she probably couldn't guess the truth, either. Probably just thought they were suspicious losers.

She picked up her massive pack and slung it on her shoulders like it weighed as much as a box of tissues. "You boys be careful. I don't want to see you again."

"Yes, ma'am," Dean nodded, putting on his best smile again.

She narrowed her eyes at him. *Yeah, she is having none of it.*

With a final disdainful glance over her shoulder, she walked away, disappearing into the trees.

"That was close," Bobby said when she was out of earshot. "Thought she was going to haul us in."

Dean watched her retreating form, then went to pick up the flamethrower from the brush. "Yeah, I think she could have lashed us onto that pack and hiked out with us, too."

Sam looked at Bobby. "You doing okay?"

"I'll live."

"Can you still track?" Dean asked.

"Well, I'm not giving up now," he growled.

They slung their packs on and Bobby searched the ground where the wendigo had run off. "Let's go," he said.

They hiked until dark, and the trail had gone cold. Bobby's ribs were much worse than he was letting on, and the temperature dropped considerably as the sun set behind the mountains. They were without jackets and sleeping bags, so

finally Dean came to the hard conclusion that they should go back and regroup. They were no good to anyone dead.

He stopped. "We have to go back."

Bobby paused, turning around.

Sam said, "I was thinking the same thing. We need more firepower."

"This thing's too fast for Molotovs. We'd have to get lucky. Another flamethrower wouldn't hurt," Bobby said. "If we could figure out where its main lair is, we could surprise it there and kill it. Might be our only chance."

Dean nodded. "I'm in."

They turned and headed out of the forest, the cold seeping into Dean's bones. He only hoped they could find that lair before more people disappeared.

SIX



While Sam and Dean checked out the newspaper morgue of the *Truckee Herald*, Bobby visited the Truckee library. Bobby's bruised ribs were already on the mend, and Sam was feeling more hopeful about the hunt. He pored over newspaper indices while his brother retrieved the microfiche and looked up the articles.

"Here's one," Sam said, writing the catalog number down on a piece of paper. "A pair of hikers disappeared in this same area about fifteen years ago." Dean took the paper and moved to the metal file cabinets that held the microfiche. The overworked clerk at the desk told them to look at whatever they wanted, just be sure to refile it all in the right place.

Sam scanned further back in time. There had been another set of disappearances a few years before, and still another a few years before that.

The newspaper files stopped in 1879, when the newspaper was founded. But that year a team of miners had vanished from a silver mine near Lake Spaulding. "Check this out. Ten miners vanished from the Panfil Silver Mine, which is only five miles from Emigrant Gap."

Dean looked up from his screen. "I got one here, too. A group of surveyors vanished while planning the route of Highway 80 through Emigrant Gap."

"This thing's been busy."

"I'll say."

"Disappearances going back at least through 1879. And those are just the reported ones. A lot of emigrants came westward then. A lot of anonymous faces and plenty of people to disappear."

Dean jotted down notes from the surveyors. “I wonder what Bobby found.”

The Truckee library was a nice one, with large, open windows looking out onto pine trees. There weren’t many people milling around the shelves when the Winchesters entered. They walked past an older man perusing the magazines and a young girl in the science-fiction section.

Bobby sat at a table in a back corner, books piled high around him. He’d been trawling through the local history section. Tomes on the Emigrant Trail, mining, and California pioneers took up every available inch of the table. Sam felt a tinge of sadness when he saw Bobby nose deep in an old book with yellowed pages and a faded spine. Bobby’s house in South Dakota had held a repository of books on all manner of arcane and supernatural knowledge; ancient books and new books, journals, diagrams, parchment folios, illuminated manuscripts. Bobby had lost it all when his house burned. Now he stayed at his friend Rufus’s cabin in Whitefish, Montana. Sam knew it was torture for him to have lost all those books. Bobby was one hell of a researcher.

Bobby looked up as they entered the room. “Glad you could make it. Take a seat.”

Sam sat opposite Bobby and leaned in to talk quietly.

“What’d you find at the newspaper morgue?” Bobby asked.

Sam spoke in a low voice. “A series of disappearances dating back to 1879.”

“What happened then?”

“Newspaper was founded,” Dean told him.

Bobby closed the book he was looking at and pulled his notes closer. “Well, you know all those emigrants coming through in the mid-eighteen hundreds?”

They nodded.

“Seems a lot of people have been getting lost around Donner Lake.”

Dean leaned forward. “As in the Donner Party?”

“None other.” Bobby nodded. “In 1845, a group of emigrants decided to take a cutoff advertised by one Lansford Hastings. It was supposed to allow them to traverse the Great Salt Desert in two days and a night. But it took much longer, taking them extra weeks and costing lives. The upshot was they got delayed and hit the Sierra Nevadas in late October, just as winter was setting in. They tried to make it out, but deep snowdrifts held them back. They retreated to what is now Donner Lake. Another group in the party had a wagon axle break at Alder Creek and holed up there. They weren’t a cohesive bunch. No team spirit like the Uruguayan rugby players. They fought and squabbled and some of them were killed even before the group got snowed in. Once that happened, it was every man for himself. More than one person was suspected of murdering his fellow man to fill his stomach.”

Bobby pulled out the items they’d retrieved at the shack, including the pocket watch and photos, and placed them on the table. He clicked open the watch to reveal the initials W. F. “This could be William Foster’s.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Who’s that?”

“William Foster was with the emigrants trapped near Donner Lake. He was a member of the Forlorn Hope, a group of fifteen snowshoers who left the snowbound emigrants to try to breach the mountains and reach help at Sutter’s Fort near Sacramento. They had two Miwok guides, and Foster, half-crazed with starvation, hunted them down in cold blood and ate them. He reasoned that their being Miwoks made them less human and that they should sacrifice themselves to the white emigrants.”

“Nice guy,” Dean said drily.

“Yeah, a real prince,” Bobby agreed. “After the Forlorn Hope reached help, Foster returned with one of the rescue parties for his kid. Only by then the kid had died and been eaten. By that time, Foster himself had eaten at least six different individuals.”

“You think he’s our wendigo?” Sam asked. Wendigos didn’t start out as crazed, inhumanly strong killers. They’d been regular people, pushed to the limit of endurance and driven to cannibalism to survive. Those who relished in it could lose themselves, the sickness spreading through them until they craved human meat and nothing else would satisfy them.

“At the very least, I think it was his things at that shack. This daguerreotype of the little town and the other of the child and wife are definitely linked to him. Couldn’t find any known photos of the kid, but here’s one of his wife.”

Bobby slid a book over to them. A black and white photograph showed a much-aged version of the woman in the daguerreotype.

“Also found this.” Bobby slid over another book, showing a clearer photograph of the general store and post office with the name Foster’s Bar. “It was a little settlement near the Yuba River that was inundated when they made Bullards Bar Reservoir.”

“What happened to Foster?” Dean asked.

“Records say he sickened and died in 1879.”

“But he could have just disappeared and the family could have thought he was dead.”

“Especially if he’d started to transform. He would have looked seriously ill at first.”

Sam leaned forward. “Any guess as to where his lair might be?”

Bobby turned back to the books, pulled one off the stack. “Far as I can tell, there was a place called the ‘Camp of Death.’ It’s where the Forlorn Hope was hit by a nasty blizzard and resorted to cannibalism. Could be he’s revisiting the site of his old crimes.”

“So we go out there and we kill him,” Dean said.

“Unfortunately, it’s not that simple. None of these sources say exactly where the Camp of Death was, only that it was

near what is now Emigrant Gap. I looked at a USGS topo., and that area is riddled with mines. Could be anywhere in that area. We need some more info.”

“So where to?” Sam asked.

“Virginia City,” Bobby said, closing his notebook.

“What’s in Virginia City?”

Bobby stood up. “The Aces and Eights Saloon.” The chair legs screeched on the library floor in that unique way reserved for library chairs. Bobby winced at the sound. “It’s a hunters’ hangout. I figure we’re not the first to hunt this thing. Someone’s gotta know something.”

Dean and Sam stood up, too. “Sounds good to me,” Dean said. “Let’s go.”

SEVEN



A cold wind blew over Virginia City. The main street of the town stood before them, apparently unchanged since 1879. The city had been built on the side of a steep mountain, with forested slopes above and the high desert stretching away beneath. Wooden sidewalks ran the length of the street. Old saloons, hotels, and casinos rose on both sides, some of their wooden structures leaning. The sidewalk creaked beneath Dean's feet as he walked toward the Aces and Eights Saloon. A motorcycle roared by, pulling over in front of the Delta Saloon, whose windows advertised the "World Famous Suicide Table." Up one of the steep streets stood Piper's Opera House and Millionaires' Row, home to huge mansions built with the riches from the famous Comstock lode of silver.

A few people milled around the streets, and he could hear the bluegrass music of a live band filtering out from one of the bars.

It was a strange, exotic place, like stepping back in time to the Old West. They passed the newspaper office where Mark Twain had worked, and a place that offered ghost tours on the weekends. Just looking around at the old buildings, the leaning balconies, hearing the lonely whispering of wind through the streets made Dean think you wouldn't have to look very hard to find ghosts in this place.

The Aces and Eights Saloon appeared on their right, a large, white wooden building. A weather-worn sign swung and creaked in the wind, depicting hands holding a set of playing cards.

"This is it," Bobby said. A few tough characters hung out in front smoking, and Dean nodded to them as he passed through the saloon doors.

Inside music played on a jukebox, a country western tune Dean didn't recognize. It was an old place, nineteenth century, with a large wooden bar with brass railings along the bottom to rest your boots on. A haze of smoke filled the room, drifting around the ceiling by Victorian shaded lamps. A scuffed-up piano stood in one corner, the keys yellowed and the ivory missing altogether in places. Old paintings hung on the walls, desert landscapes and one of a saloon girl fanning her face. Three leather-faced cowboys played cards at a beat-up wooden table in one corner. The only thing missing was brass spittoons next to the bar stools.

At the bar, a line of beer drinkers looked over their shoulders with disinterest at the three men who entered.

"What'll it be, boys?" asked the bartender, a tall woman with so many tattoos on her arms that Dean couldn't see any bare skin.

"Beers all around," Bobby said, "and a whisky." He looked at the shelf above the bar, its bottles glowing in the fading sun. "Make that two."

They took three empty stools at the far end of the bar. Through the floor-to-ceiling window, Dean watched the sun paint the desert mountains gold. It was a beautiful spot.

The bartender slung a towel over her left shoulder and poured the drinks, eyeing Dean and the others surreptitiously. Dean caught the guy next to him sneaking a glance, too. He wondered how many people in there were hunters, and how many tourists. The bartender slid a lager to him and he took a sip, spinning on his stool to check the place out.

Apart from the poker players in one corner, two other tables were filled. Two leather-clad, tattooed men sat with a woman wearing a black leather vest and fringed chaps over her blue jeans. Their tanned and reddened faces were wrinkled and leathery from years of riding motorcycles in the hot sun. Their long hair was braided tight against their heads, and one of the men wore a black bandana with skulls. Dean wondered if they were out for a weekend motorcycle ride or if they were hunters.

The other table held two men who talked in hushed tones. A blond man in green fatigues and a black T-shirt leaned closer to his wiry companion, whispering something. The wiry man's face formed an expression of disgust. He cringed, showing brilliant white teeth against the dark cocoa of his skin, and held up a placating hand to get the other man to stop talking. The blond slapped his own leg hard, and busted out with an outlandish laugh that filled the whole bar. The poker players looked up, annoyed, then went back to their game.

"That can't be true!" the dark man protested.

"Swear to God, Jason." Fatigues held up his hand as if he were a Boy Scout. "Swear to God!"

Jason leaned forward. "I swear you make up the craziest b.s., Gerald. I've been out to their trailer. There's no way they're keeping something like that there."

Gerald nodded. "And every day they bring it fresh milk."

"Now I know you're bullshitting me."

Gerald laughed again, but Jason nodded in Dean's direction. He had realized Dean was eavesdropping, and in a not so subtle way. Dean grinned, nodded, and held up his glass at them.

Gerald scowled. "Who are you, Mr. Rogers, my friendly neighbor?"

Dean's smile vanished and he put the glass down. "Just being friendly. You have a loud laugh. Hard not to notice."

This earned him an indignant stare from Gerald.

Dean spun back toward the bar.

Bobby eyed him. "Making friends already?"

"Apparently."

"Just try not to get in a fight before we figure out which of these people are hunters," Sam urged him.

Elbows planted on the bar, Bobby took a shot of whisky and glanced over his shoulder. "You boys recognize anyone?"

Sam looked around casually, too. “Nope.”

Gerald had returned to talking in a low voice, with Jason looking sicker by the minute. “You are disgusting,” Dean heard the wiry man say. “Now I know you’re full of crap. Ash would no more have done something stupid like that than cut off his hair. Besides, Ellen would have killed him for it.”

Dean and Sam perked up, exchanging glances. Their friend Ellen had owned Harvelle’s Roadhouse in Nebraska, a bar frequented by hunters. Ash had been a brilliant former MIT student who could hack into any computer system and use math and probability to figure out any kind of problem. But the most awe-inspiring thing about Ash had been his astounding mullet, which hung well past his shoulders. Jason was right: whatever Ash had supposedly done, Ellen would have killed him for it if it were dangerous. She’d lost her husband to hunting and wasn’t prepared to lose anyone else. Unfortunately, she had lost more—she and her daughter Jo had perished not long ago in order to save Dean and Sam’s lives.

A skinny, pale guy appeared from a back room. He pulled a bar rag out of the back pocket of his ripped denim overalls and started wiping down tables. As he got close to Gerald’s table, Jason got up. “Drink on your own.” He walked away, revealing a painful-looking limp.

Gerald called after him, “You ain’t any fun, Jason.”

Jason approached the bar and took a seat. After a minute, Bobby said in a quiet tone, “Heard you mention Ellen. You mean the bar owner?”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “You know Harvelle’s Roadhouse?”

“Indeed I do,” Bobby told him.

Jason looked sad, lowering his eyes. “Then you know Jo and Ellen are...” His voice trailed off. The bartender placed a beer in front of him.

After a moment of silence, Sam said, “We were there.”

Dean felt a punch to his gut at the mention of that day. He always did. He’d gone over it a thousand times, wondering

what could have been done differently, how they all could have walked out of that town alive. But they hadn't.

Jason's eyes narrowed. "You sons of bitches. You're the ones who left them to die?"

Boom. Punch two to the gut.

Dean shook his head, horrified. "We didn't call in the Hellhounds." He remembered the horror of seeing Jo mortally wounded, of the impossible decision to leave her there so she could take out as many Hellhounds as possible, thus buying them time and their lives. Her mother staying by her side. Jo was all she had left.

When Jason continued to look angry and dubious, Bobby added, "You think all three of us wouldn't have traded places with them if we could have?"

Dean felt an unwelcome constriction in his throat and swigged down another gulp of beer. Bobby was right. He usually was.

Jason frowned, relenting. "I guess so. They were good people, the Harvelles." He looked up, studying all of them. "You hunters?"

"Born and raised," Sam told him. He held out his hand. "Sam Winchester."

Jason shook it, lighting up. "Well, hell! I've heard of you! The Winchesters! You must be Dean." He shook Dean's hand with exuberance. "I'll be damned." He turned to Bobby. "And you?"

Dean watched the skinny bar hand as he wiped tables closer to them. He was clearly eavesdropping.

"Bobby Singer."

Suddenly, the skinny guy dropped his cloth. "No friggin' way! I thought I recognized you all! Three regular legends in my bar." He grabbed Bobby's hand and shook it so hard Bobby slopped some of his beer on the table. Then he shook Sam and Dean's hands.

The bartender strolled over. “It ain’t your bar, Jimmy, you lowlife. You can barely scrub the floors right.”

Jimmy grinned good-naturedly. “This here’s Darla,” he said.

She nodded at them in greeting.

Jimmy leaned in conspiratorially. “She killed that vamp nest over in Carson City last month—you know, the ones who were preying on drunk customers leaving the casino over there?”

Dean lifted his beer and nodded it toward her. “Nice.”

“Nasty things.”

Jimmy drew closer, getting uncomfortably in Bobby’s space. “You here huntin’ somethin’?”

“Now Jimmy,” Darla said, “go back to cleaning the tables.”

He looked chagrined and said, barely audibly, “Okay.”

As he turned away, Darla said quietly, “Best to ignore Jimmy. He’s a little excitable.” She glanced around the bar. “Can’t remember that not everyone in here might want to hear what we talk about.”

“He means well, though,” Jason said in his defense.

“So, are you a hunter, too?” Dean asked Jason.

“Jason’s been in the biz for a long time,” Darla said. “Long as I can remember.”

The hunter looked to be in his late thirties or early forties, but his face was so weather-beaten it was hard to tell. Dean wondered if he’d been raised in the life, too.

“My mom,” Jason said.

“Huh?”

“You were wondering if by ‘long time’ she meant my family had been in the business.”

Dean nodded. “Hard life for a kid.”

“That it was.” He took a sip of his beer. “That it was.” He looked at Dean and Sam, appraising them. “I knew your dad, actually.”

Sam turned his attention away from Darla. “You did?”

“Well, in passing, when he’d come into the roadhouse. I was green as hell back then. A teenager. The stories he’d tell used to scare the hell out of me.” He laughed. “He was an intense son of a bitch.”

Bobby lifted his second shot of whisky. “That he was.” He downed it in one gulp.

Dean felt a small pang of jealousy. So this guy had helped his dad out while, what, Dean was on another case? Had his dad sent him on some research errand while this guy was actually hunting with him in person? Not for the first time, Dean felt a pang of regret for how he’d been raised, the hardened lifestyle he and Sam had been plunged into after the death of their mother. Most kids would be jealous that their dad spent time practicing in battling cages with other kids, and here Dean was jealous that this guy got to kill monsters with his dad and probably risk his own neck.

“What brings you to town?” Jason asked, taking a sip of his beer.

“A case,” Sam answered.

Bobby leaned in. “You know anything about the folks disappearing out by Emigrant Gap?”

Jason shook his head in consternation. “Hell, yes, I do. Tried to burn the sucker three weeks back. Thing cracked three of my ribs, tore some cartilage in my shoulder. I’ve barely begun to recover. But I’m going back.” He gestured at them with the bottle. “That why you’re here?”

Dean nodded. “Yep.”

“That thing’ll have you for dinner. I’ve never hunted one of them before, though I remember my parents telling me about one they killed in Oregon before I was born.”

Dean felt some perverse pride rise up in him. “We killed one out by Blackwater Ridge in Colorado a few years ago.”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “Oh, yeah? How bad you get hurt?”

Jason wasn’t wrong to assume. That thing had done a number on them.

Bobby was all business. “You know where its lair is?”

The hunter stared out the window for a minute, then looked back at them. “I can get you close. I couldn’t find the actual nest, but I knew I was near. It’s an old mine near Sawtooth Ridge. Everything pointed to there.” He looked down, frowning. “It got me before I got a chance to take it out.”

Bobby pulled the topographic map out of his pocket. “Can you mark it on here?”

“I’ll do you one better. I’ll take you. Thing got the better of me once. It ain’t gonna happen again. It needs to go down.” He winced as he shifted his weight on the barstool.

Dean wondered if Jason was damaged goods. Maybe no more so than Bobby, with his bruised ribs. But with Bobby’s tracking skills and this guy’s knowledge of the area, they stood a good chance, even if they were all a little banged up.

“What do you say?” Jason asked him.

Outside, a sudden wind kicked up, bringing a cloud of dust past the saloon windows. Dean saw an honest-to-god tumbleweed go by. Sam looked to Bobby and him. “I think we could use him.”

Bobby took a swig of his beer. “Agreed.”

They slapped a twenty down on the bar and got up.

Jimmy rushed over. “You leavin’ already?” Dean noticed that his front teeth were brown and a few were missing entirely.

“Good meeting you, Jimmy,” Dean told him.

Jimmy gazed at him hopefully, clutching his bar rag with both hands. “Maybe I could ride shotgun?”

Behind him, the bartender waved her hand across her throat in the gesture movie directors use to say “Cut” and shook her head.

“Maybe next time,” Dean said, giving him a light, friendly punch on the arm.

“Aw, hell.” Jimmy turned away, defeated.

That night they ate at the Enraged Cow and Sippery, Dean finishing off a steak lathered in BBQ sauce and topped with crispy onion curls. Bobby ate a salad and Sam a turkey pita.

Then, with Jason following them in his beat-up Chevy pickup, they drove back in the darkness toward Emigrant Gap.

They restocked in Reno in a twenty-four-hour outfitter that had everything from warm jammies to guns, crossbows, combat boots, and night-vision goggles. They even got a second flamethrower for Sam. Dean had to love Nevada.

Jason limped up to the cashier, who tried not to stare. Jason was right. The wendigo had messed him up good.

In a low voice, Sam said, “Sure we want to take Jason on this hunt? Look at him.”

Bobby frowned. “Was wondering that myself.”

“Me, too,” Dean added. “But he’ll be helpful. If he can keep up.”

“He has got useful intel,” Bobby conceded.

While Jason finished checking out, Bobby grabbed the *Reno Gazette* off the stacks. “Uh-oh,” he said.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“A family of five just went missing out by the Yuba River.”

Jason joined them. “That’s right where Sawtooth Ridge is.”

Bobby read more. “A search by helicopter using FLIR didn’t pick up anything.”

“They’re probably underground where the FLIR won’t be able to see them,” Sam said.

“What the hell’s a flerr?” Dean asked.

Bobby stroked his beard, reading the rest of the article. “Forward-looking infrared,” he said distractedly. “Says here they’ve only been missing for a day.”

Sam paid and picked up the gear. “They could still be alive.”

“Yep,” Bobby agreed.

Jason took the paper from Bobby and read over it. “We have to go now,” he said. “There still might be time.”

They hurried out to the parking lot, loaded up their cars, and hit Highway 80, driving as fast as they could toward the wilderness and the abandoned mine. This time they could not fail.

EIGHT



Bobby was starting to get used to the hiking route through the Tahoe National Forest. They made their way through the pine trees, weaving between huge boulder fields of grey granite. The afternoon sun came out for a while, filling the air with the fragrant scent of sun-warmed pine. They passed the bright orange and yellow of a tremendous lichen-covered boulder and scrambled down a steep slope of scree. They were completely off trail now, Bobby leading them on with a compass and the map. He had a GPS unit in his pocket, too, but he never counted on something that ran on batteries in a life and death situation like this.

In the west, storm clouds clustered around the peaks, with a fresh dusting of snow visible whenever they parted. The sun dipped below the mountains and instantly cold settled into Bobby's bones.

They climbed up a steep slope to a ridge. He could feel his legs burning with the effort, and every breath he took was painful. He was just grateful the thing hadn't cracked his ribs like it had Jason's. Bruised ribs he could live with, and more importantly, bruised ribs he could fight with.

Jason struggled along in the back, his brow beaded with sweat. Bobby could tell he was in pain, but he hid it as best he could and never complained.

At the end of the ridge, they descended into a meadow. On the far side, a tremendous cliff towered above them. A black hole yawned in the rock, ancient wooden beams fortifying the opening. The mine. No sooner had he spotted it than the reek of decaying flesh assaulted his senses.

"Christ!" he cursed, bringing his arm up to his nose. "That's a god-awful stench."

The others groaned, trying in vain to block the smell.

“First one in’s a rotten egg,” Bobby said, wrinkling his nose.

Jason stopped, slinging his pack off his back. “This is it,” he said. He pulled out a bottle of gasoline and jammed a rag down its neck.

Bobby followed suit and Sam and Dean checked their flamethrowers.

“You’ll want to turn those off all the way,” Bobby told them.

Sam raised his eyebrows.

“Methane. If this mine has any pent-up gas, you’ll send us all to high heaven.”

Dean nodded and the two of them extinguished the pilot lights.

“You see any sign of the family?” Sam asked.

Bobby searched the ground, looking for footprints or drag marks. He didn’t see any. The thing probably took them screaming from tree to tree.

In the distance a chickaree cursed at them, trilling near an old stump. They were the most cantankerous damn squirrels Bobby had ever met. Once, in Whitefish, they’d tried to make off with his cereal while he unloaded groceries, and when he took it away, they cursed at him.

He drew closer to the mine entrance, gripping the Molotov, ready to light it. Still no prints. Then, right at the mouth, he found a disturbed patch in the dirt where something heavy had been placed down and then dragged. Two clear imprints of tremendous bare feet with long claws marked the spot where the thing had landed, leaping down from the trees.

“This is it,” Bobby told them. They entered the mine, darkness swallowing them.

Inside the air felt warm. Cut off from the wind, Bobby started to thaw out. His ribs ached as he pulled out his flashlight.

The light penetrated the blackness, illuminating old wooden support beams and hooks where lanterns had once hung. The stench of decay was almost unbearable, and Bobby swallowed back his lunch.

From somewhere in the bowels of the mine, a low, anguished moan drifted through the passages.

“They’re still alive,” Jason said, rushing forward.

Bobby grabbed his arm. “Maybe.”

Bobby took the lead, aiming the flashlight down to the drag marks. They followed them down the first passageway and veered right at the first intersection. Another smell hung in the air, he realized with alarm, the sewer-gas stink of methane. “Nobody flick your lighters or fire guns. There’s a methane leak in here.”

“Any thoughts on how we’re supposed to kill this thing in here?” Jason asked.

Sam stopped. “We’re going to have to lure it out.”

Dean looked concerned. “What if it doesn’t want to come out? If that family’s in here, it’s got enough food to last for days.”

“We’ll have to tempt it out.”

Dean narrowed his eyes. “How? These suckers are smarter than us.”

Jason stepped into the glow of Bobby’s flashlight. “I’ll be the bait. Maybe it’ll want to finish me off.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Bobby said. “I’m sure it wants to finish off all of us.”

He continued down the narrow passageway, the stench of methane growing stronger. “Remember... no flames.”

At the next intersection, he took a right, following the tracks. Bobby could feel the weight of the mountain above him, and an almost claustrophobic feeling pressed down on him.

Up ahead they heard a strangled mewling, the voice of a child. Jason rushed forward, but Bobby put out an arm to hold him back. "We go slow."

At the next intersection, drag marks moved off in both directions. Maybe the thing was separating its victims, fresher meat with fresher meat, or maybe according to size and tenderness. Bobby pushed those thoughts away and chose a direction.

The decay hung thickly in the air, so bad Bobby felt it coating his tongue and the inside of his nose. Sam lifted his sleeve in a vain attempt to filter it out.

They heard the tiny cry again, coming from the passage they'd selected. They were close. The floor dipped down, timbers above them raining dirt. Bobby's flashlight picked up a million motes of dust sifting through the air.

His eyes streaming from the stink of methane and decay, Bobby stepped into a larger room. Three bodies hung from the rafters, a man, a woman, and someone who'd been dead for a while. Only the backbone and skull remained, with the odd piece of tissue glistening in the beam of light.

In a distant dark corner, the mewling rose into a terrified scream. Bobby shot the flashlight beam at the sound. A tall, gaunt form stood up, eyes ablaze in the darkness. A small girl hung from its spindly fingers, her shoulder bleeding badly from a bite wound. The wendigo growled, needle teeth shimmering with saliva.

It dropped the child, racing toward them. Bobby dove to one side and ran to the back of the room. "Run!" he shouted at the others.

While the wendigo tore after Sam and Dean, Bobby grabbed the child in one hand, pulled out his hunting knife with the other and cut the parents free.

"It got my brother!" the man shouted. Bobby shushed him and pushed against their backs, ushering them out of the room.

"It ate him!" the man continued to shout.

“I know. I’m sorry,” Bobby said. “But you have to shut up or that thing’s going to come back.”

Carrying the girl in one arm, he hurried them up the passageways he’d come down. Ahead he could see Sam’s fading flashlight. They were well out in front, and hopefully the wendigo was taking the bait.

They sped around corners, the man struggling to keep up because of a huge gash in his thigh. When Bobby saw the amount of blood soaked into the guy’s jeans, he knew it was a miracle he was still alive.

They ran, Bobby feeling the agony of his bruised ribs, until they saw the dim light of the mine opening. “Keep going!” he encouraged them.

“Did you see his skull? That’s all that was left!” the man shouted.

And a spine, Bobby thought. Let’s not forget the spine. Hell, I’ve turned into a cynical old fart.

The dim glow grew brighter, and the turn put them on the final stretch. “We’re almost out!” the woman cried with relief.

They sprinted toward the exit as a barrage of gunfire opened up outside. Bobby saw flames as they burst through the mine opening.

“Get down!” he yelled, worried the family would get hit in the crossfire. The man and woman threw themselves into the dirt and Bobby laid the girl next to them. She stared quietly at the scene around her.

Sam and Dean stood on the far side of the clearing, firing into the trees. Jason crouched nearby, taking cover behind a huge granite boulder. He held his lighter, ready to strike it.

“Now!” Sam yelled to Dean. They both fired up their flamethrowers.

The wendigo howled, leaping down from the trees. It ran at them full-tilt, hitting Dean so hard he flew fifteen feet and landed in a heap. Sam blasted the flamethrower again, but the creature cleared the fire with ease.

Bobby dropped his flashlight and pulled out his Zippo. The wendigo started circling Sam, baring its teeth. Bobby crept up behind it, lit the Molotov, and flung it. Lightning fast, it turned, as if it could hear the projectile whistling through the air, and sidestepped it. Barreling toward Bobby, it lifted arms tipped with serrated claws.

“Bobby!” Dean shouted, struggling to his feet. He fired the flamethrower, but the wendigo was too fast, clearing the distance to Bobby in less than a second.

It slashed Bobby’s stomach, tearing through his down vest, flannel shirt, and T-shirt to his bare skin. Bobby felt the searing heat of its claws and cried out in surprise and pain.

Jason ran forward from the boulder, the Molotov lit and leaving his hand. It arced through the air and once again the wendigo spun around, saw the incoming fire, and dodged to one side. Bobby craned his neck up in alarm as the fiery missile hissed through the air toward him. He dove, landing behind a boulder as the Molotov exploded all over the meadow.

The couple screamed, picking up the child and running further away to safety.

Bobby rummaged through his pack for another Molotov, sweat beading on his forehead and his hands shaking with adrenalin. The thing was right behind him. He knew it was. He heard Jason shouting and another Molotov exploded on the far side of Bobby’s boulder. He leapt up, a new Molotov in hand. This time Jason had landed his closer, lighting up the ground under the wendigo. It howled in agony and Sam advanced, firing his flamethrower. Fire licked up the wendigo’s arm. Screaming in pain, it launched into the air, landing in the trees above.

They could hear branches snapping and see trees swaying as it vanished into the distance. Then it was gone.

“Goddamn it!” Bobby shouted.

“You okay?” Sam asked, rushing to him.

“Fine.” He felt anything but. *Goddamn wendigo*. He glanced down at the claw marks in his stomach. Thankfully his clothes had taken the brunt of the blow, and the scratches were only superficial.

He looked around the meadow. “Where the hell did that family go?”

“They hightailed it,” Jason said, pointing in the direction they’d gone.

“The idjits,” Bobby cursed. “We’ll have to go after them.”

“There’s a backcountry ranger’s station not too far from here,” Jason said. “We could just escort them there, let the forest service get them out.”

“Sounds good,” Bobby agreed. “We need to stay and finish this thing.”

He stamped out the remaining flames in the meadow.

They caught up with the injured family a few minutes later, the man still shouting about what the creature had done to his brother. At least they’d saved three of them. Bobby felt bad about the brother, but they always seemed to have losses in their line of work. And if they hadn’t been there, the whole family would be dead, especially the little sprout.

She stared up at Bobby, blood seeping through the shoulder of her shirt. “You got it,” she said quietly to him.

“Yep,” he told her, rubbing her head, even though they hadn’t yet. She didn’t need to be kept up nights wondering. And tonight they were going to finish that thing off or he was going to take up macramé at the local community center. He was getting too old for this carnival sideshow.

At the backcountry station, the four hunters departed before the ranger came out, leaving the family to explain. The last thing they needed was another ranger on their asses. Bobby watched from a distance as the man took in the family. He retrieved his med kit, did some emergency triage, and then they hiked off in the direction of town. Still the man shouted

about his brother's skull. Poor guy. Losing family was the worst.

Bobby had certainly lost his fair share of loved ones. His stomach tightened at a sudden, unwelcome flashback of the night he'd had to kill his possessed wife. God, he'd loved her. No one should have to lose someone like that. That night would haunt him till the day he died, and probably well beyond that.

He forced the image to go away, ordered the lump in his throat to subside. In the west, the sunset glow was almost entirely gone. They had to make camp, or they were dead meat out in the open. He turned to the others. "Let's get a fire going, set up a watch."

Sam and Dean nodded. Jason stared in the direction the family had hiked off with the ranger. "I feel bad just leaving them."

"They'll be okay," Bobby said.

"But what if the wendigo gets them again? And that ranger, too?"

"It won't. Because we're going to get it first."

NINE



Bobby finished laying the logs for the fire and used his flint and steel to get the flames going. The kindling caught immediately, and he blew on the fire to make it billow outward. Pine caught and crackled, warming his face and hands.

He sat back on his bed roll, grateful for a moment of peace. His ribs were killing him, but he probably felt better than Jason. The young hunter leaned against a tree a few feet away, his head down. A branch broke and Bobby whirled around with his shotgun to see Sam and Dean coming through the brush, their arms full of more fallen wood.

Sam dumped his pile next to Bobby and sat down crosslegged. "It's quiet out there."

"Thing's probably pissed off as hell we took its lunch away," Bobby answered.

Dean spilled his pile of wood down and joined them. He nodded toward Jason. "He asleep?"

"Nah. Just recovering. That was a hell of a fight."

"Who could sleep in the middle of this?" Jason asked, not even lifting his head.

Sam laughed. "Good point."

Bobby rearranged one of the burning logs with his foot. "At least we have a ready supply of fire now."

Dean held out his hands to warm them. The night was cold, in the lower thirties, Bobby guessed.

"Just try not to fall into the fire when that thing comes back, you idjits."

Sam smiled.

Jason glanced around, suddenly alert. “So we just wait for this thing to show up?”

Dean turned to him. “It’ll want to draw us out. Separate us. It’ll probably call to us again, sounding like someone who’s wounded. Just don’t fall for it.”

They waited tensely. Bobby idly poked at the fire with a stick. Sam kept staring at a tree opposite the fire. He flinched, then brought his hand up, driving his thumb into the scar in his palm.

“You okay?” Bobby asked.

Sam flinched. “Huh?” He tore his gaze away from the trees.

“There ain’t nothin’ there but a tree, Sam.”

Sam laughed, a sad, forced laugh. “I know.”

This wasn’t good. He was probably seeing Lucifer again. Bobby worried about the kid. He hated that Sam was suffering those visions of Hell. And it was dangerous going on a hunt when Sam wasn’t all there. Now that they’d stolen the wendigo’s food, tonight’s battle was going to be worse than fighting an enraged grizzly bear while wearing a jacket made of prime rib and bacon.

In the distance, a scream suddenly tore through the quiet. Sam jumped, and Dean spun in that direction.

“Here we go,” Bobby said, standing up.

Jason stood up too, with some difficulty, leaning against the tree.

Sam and Dean slung on their flamethrowers and stood back-to-back with Bobby. Jason pulled out a Molotov.

“Help me!” a woman’s voice pleaded. Then she screamed again.

“Are you sure?...” Jason started.

“Yes. It’s the wendigo.”

“Oh god!” she cried.

“But what if?...”

“It’s not human,” Bobby told Jason firmly. “Don’t leave the fire.”

“Stephen?” she called. “Are you out there? Help me!”

Jason stared in the direction of the voice. “Stephen? That’s pretty specific.”

“It’s just trying to fool us.”

Dean turned to Jason. “Bobby’s right. The one we fought in Colorado did the same thing. Just hold your ground.”

Jason hobbled over to them, gripping his Molotov. Together they formed a ring, each man facing outward.

The woman’s voice cried out again, trailing off into an agonized scream.

“It’s taking everything in me not to go after her,” Jason said through gritted teeth.

“It’s not a her. It’s the damn wendigo,” Bobby told him.

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“No, but one thing we can be sure of—you go out there now, that thing’s going to rip you to shreds.”

They stood in tense silence. Bobby hoped to god he was right, that some woman wasn’t out there, dying an agonizing death while they stood by.

“Carol?” a man’s voice called. “Carol? Jesus, where are you?”

“Oh, god,” Jason said. “It *is* a couple.”

He started to move away and Bobby grabbed his shoulder. “No, it’s not. It wants you to think that, and it’s working.”

The man cried out in surprise, then screamed.

“Don’t buy into it,” Dean warned.

Jason almost broke away from them, but faltered, staying in place.

The man's scream became a strangled cry, fading off into the forest as if he were being dragged away at tremendous speed.

Then they heard the woman begging for help, this time closer, her voice reduced to a whisper, but growing nearer. "Is someone out there?"

Bobby saw a shadow under the trees, a figure moving falteringly toward them.

"Hello? There's something out here! It got my husband!"

The dark shape staggered forward, thin arms grabbing trees for support.

"Incoming," Bobby whispered.

With Jason staying at Bobby's back, Dean and Sam pivoted outward, staring into the dark.

"Please help me," whispered the figure. Bobby held his ground, despite the urge to rush over and offer aid.

It crept toward them, glancing behind in fear.

Bobby took a step forward.

The wendigo rushed him, its open mouth full of needle teeth. He dodged to one side, lighting his Molotov, then flung it at the wendigo. The missile crashed over the thing's spindly shoulders, fire raining over its torso. It howled in agony, darting away into the dark. They saw it fall to the ground and roll, the flames darkening until they were extinguished.

"Damn it!" Bobby cursed.

They watched that part of the dark forest. No one moved.

Then it dropped down on Sam from above. Sam jerked his shoulders violently, throwing it off. It fell in the dirt and Sam fired off the flamethrower, a tongue of flame billowing out just as the wendigo leapt up to avoid the blast.

It grabbed a tree branch and swung itself deftly upward, landing feet first on the limb. Its eyes narrowed and it glared down at them.

Dean blasted his flamethrower, but the wendigo leapt clear.

“Thing’s slipperier than a conger eel,” Bobby cursed. He lit another Molotov and launched it at the wendigo as it landed near the camp fire.

It roared with rage as its arm ignited. Slapping desperately, it smothered the flames and snarled. Dean crept toward it, ready to fire again.

Suddenly it sprang forward, growling, jaws open and ready to bite. It shot through the air toward Dean, but instead of backing away, Dean ran to meet it. It slashed an arm at him. Pulling out his Bowie knife, he thrust it upward, into the creature’s chest. Roaring, it landed in front of him. Dean shoved the flamethrower inside the gaping knife wound and pressed the trigger.

Fire lit up the wendigo’s insides. It howled in agony, spinning away from Dean and tripping into the camp fire. Seams of fire erupted inside its torso. Flames caught its legs. Brilliant white and gold filled the creature. It turned its head up, arms thrown out, flailing, giving out a deafening, shrill shriek of anguish. Ash began at its feet and billowed upward. Then suddenly the wendigo was made of dust, a grey whispering column in a skinny humanoid shape. A gust of mountain wind swept through the trees and hit it, scattering the ash in a hundred directions.

They’d got it.

The wendigo was toast.

Bobby let out a celebratory whoop and turned to the others.

He saw Dean falter, gripping his arm. Blood sprayed outward between his fingers as Dean tried to clamp down on the flow. Gritting his teeth, Dean toppled over into the dirt.

TEN



Sam gripped his brother's shoulders, practically dragging him. "C'mon, Dean, just a little farther."

The wendigo's claws had ripped through Dean's brachial artery, and he'd already lost too much blood.

"You said that half an hour ago, Sammy. I'm starting to not believe you." Dean flashed his brother a half-hearted smile, then winced with pain.

They'd made a tourniquet out of Sam's belt, but Dean had already lost a lot of blood. Despite the cold, his skin was slick with sweat. He was breathing way too fast, staggering forward in a confused state.

"Well, then we're a half hour closer," Sam told him.

Dean's face was completely drained of color. Even his lips had gone white.

"Pick up the pace, Dean," Sam urged.

His brother stared up at him. "Maybe if you weren't such a friggin' giant, it'd be easier to lean on you."

They hurried as fast as they could, with Dean's hand on Sam's shoulder for support. Bobby walked on his other side, making sure periodically that the tourniquet held. Jason took up the rear, limping and sucking in air between clenched teeth. Sam didn't think this ordeal had done Jason any favors. Poor dude should spend the next few weeks sitting in a bed reading a stack of good books.

The hike through the night seemed to last forever. Each time they went over a rise, Sam was sure it would be the last one, that they'd see city lights below, and each time only the dark forest greeted them.

Dean got worse, leaning more heavily on Sam, who kept his brother upright. Sam pushed down the fear that kept rising up inside him. They were going to make it. Dean would get fixed up.

Bobby met Sam's eyes. "I don't like the looks of this."

Dean glanced blearily at him. "You don't like the looks of what? I look like a friggin' world champion cage fighter right now."

"Well, he's still ornery as hell," Bobby said.

"Yep," Sam answered.

"You do know I'm standing right here, right?" Dean asked. "You don't have to cluck over me like a couple of mother hens."

"Too bad," Bobby said. "You got to pick up the pace, son."

"Fine," Dean said angrily, and did.

Sam thought they should probably fashion a stretcher, but he didn't like the idea of pausing to scrounge up materials.

They struggled over another incline, and to Sam's huge relief, lights twinkled in the distance. "We're out!"

"Thank god," Dean murmured.

Another half-mile and they reached the trailhead and their cars. Sam drove Dean straight to the emergency room in Truckee.

While the doctor stitched Dean up and gave him a transfusion, Bobby and Sam took turns sitting nervously or pacing. They both suggested a doctor have another look at Jason, but the hunter stubbornly refused. "They've already seen me once," he reasoned. "Bones just have to finish healing."

Moments later the doctor appeared. She was a short Chinese-American woman, and spoke to them compassionately. "Mr. Blackwood will be fine. But I want him to spend the night." Sam knew there was about as much

chance of that as Dean attending a Backstreet Boys concert and buying the T-shirt. “But he doesn’t seem to be very agreeable to that.”

“Yeah, he wouldn’t be,” Sam said apologetically.

Bobby stepped forward. “I’ll talk to him.”

She nodded. “Great. He’s in room 102.”

While Bobby disappeared down the corridor, the doctor narrowed her eyes at Sam. “You should really talk to him about his hobby. Filming himself doing crazy feats in the hopes of breaking in as a stuntman could prove extremely dangerous. I think he’s kind of proud of his wounds.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

She shook Sam’s hand, then turned, heading back through a set of swinging double doors.

Jason stood up. “That’s a relief.”

Sam finally allowed himself to breathe. “I’ll say.”

“Hard thing about this business,” Jason said. “I’ll bet that’s not the first close call you two have had.”

Sam heard Bobby’s raised voice on the other side of the swinging doors. “Dean, get back here.”

“I don’t need rest and hospital food,” he heard Dean bellow. “I need a hamburger—no, a *great* hamburger and a cold beer.”

“Why do you have to be so goddamn stubborn?”

The swinging doors burst open and Dean appeared, his face much more full of color than when Sam had last seen him. His cheeks were almost rosy. “Let’s roll,” he rumbled.

Reluctantly, Sam left the hospital with him. In Truckee they celebrated at the Liberty Bar. Bobby and Dean knocked back a few shots of whisky, and Sam drank beer with Jason.

“That was one tough mother,” Jason said. “Glad you all were there.”

They clinked glasses. It was the end of another hunt, and Sam knew soon he'd have to say goodbye to Bobby. Every time they wrapped up a case, Sam was filled with a mix of pride, elation, relief, and worry about what waited for them next.

Dean still looked a little peaked, and Sam knew he should have spent the night at the hospital.

Finally Bobby stood up. The moment had arrived. "Best be going. Got to pack up my things and head north. Want to be over the Oregon border by tomorrow morning."

Bobby shook hands with Sam and Dean, then with Jason. It was always hard to say goodbye. For as long as Sam could remember, Bobby had pretty much been their second father, and in some ways a more attendant father than John had been. They all said goodbye to Jason, who waved at the door of the bar and went out to his truck.

Before he left, Bobby told them about a possible rakshasa in Utah that warranted checking out.

After they finished their drinks and ate, Sam and Dean headed out, too. While Dean slept in the passenger seat, Sam drove eastward across Nevada. The sun rose ahead of him, bathing the green and brown landscape in gold. Sharp mountain ridges rose in the distance. On all sides of him, there were no signs of civilization except the road. He passed another car only occasionally.

They slept over on the Utah/Nevada border in a classy little joint decorated with fishing regalia. Where the heck people fished in this thirsty country, Sam had no idea.

The next day they continued into Utah, Dean still sleeping most of the time in the passenger seat after his brush with blood loss.

Sam's cell phone jangled in his jacket pocket. He fished it out. "Yes?"

"It's Bobby."

"What's up?"

“You boys see the morning news?”

“No, we pretty much just left our motel.”

“There’s been another disappearance in the Tahoe National Forest.”

“What?”

“Deer hunter kissed his wife goodbye at five a.m. yesterday to meet his friends at a hunting camp in the forest. He never arrived. His buddies found a pool of blood and their friend’s rifle. Said they heard something fast, up in the trees.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“Nope.”

“That’s after we wasted the wendigo. Think there’s a second one?”

“Must be,” Bobby said. “Maybe another Donner Party survivor.”

“How could we have missed that?”

“I don’t know. We were a little distracted, what with Dean on the edge of passing into oblivion.”

“Good point.”

Dean stirred, yawned, and straightened up. “What’s up?”

“There was another killing in the Tahoe National Forest this morning.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Nope.”

To Bobby Sam said, “We’ve got to get back there.”

“Already on my way.”

“We’re turning around now.”

Sam slowed and pulled a U-turn on the highway.

ELEVEN



The Winchesters made fast time, arriving in Truckee in the late afternoon. Bobby was waiting at the Java Joint Cafe, an old 1930s diner. He'd arrived in town earlier and posed as an F.B.I. agent to get access to the police reports.

Sam and Dean slid into the booth opposite him. Bobby was eating the biggest chicken pot pie Sam had ever seen. He slid a topographic map over to them.

"I've marked the spot where the hunters found their friend's rifle and the pool of blood," he said in a quiet voice.

The waitress came over, all cheer. "Anything to drink?"

They placed their orders and Bobby continued when she left. "I say we hike out near this spot, stake it out. Something doesn't feel right to me. My gut's got more to say than the town gossip at a church bingo night."

Dean slid the map over to Sam. He studied it for a few minutes. "This area isn't far from the Donner Lake camp where the emigrants over-wintered. You really think it's another wendigo?"

"It would be odd," Bobby said, "them being so close. From everything I've read, wendigos are solitary."

"Should we call Jason?" Sam asked.

Bobby shook his head. "You saw that guy limping. He was this close to collapsing the whole time we were out."

Dean nodded. "Dude needs time to recover."

Sam eyed him. "You're not doing so hot, either."

"A little pale's a lot different from broken ribs and a messed up leg." Dean regarded his brother with waning patience.

“A little pale? Dean, you almost died.”

“I’m fine.” He brushed off Sam’s concern, shifting his weight in the seat and staring out the far window.

“When you boys are done holding each other’s hand, we need to find out some more information. You got your suits?”

Sam nodded. They had the customary black suits and ties tucked away in the car’s trunk.

“Head over to Fish and Game and see if any other big puddles of blood have turned up in the last year or so. Maybe we can figure out where this thing hangs out.”

“Maybe the wendigos were related in life, and that’s why they occupy the same territory,” Sam suggested, thinking about the Donner Party.

“What do you mean?” Dean asked.

“Well, maybe they were part of the same family, people who stuck together through the whole Donner Party ordeal.”

“And they’re still sticking together?” Bobby said with distaste.

“The family who slays together stays together,” Dean said, grinning and picking a French fry off his plate.

At the morgue, dressed in their best suits, Sam and Dean flashed F.B.I. credentials and were referred to the ranger service for reports of hunting mishaps. The chief ranger’s office was full of maps and books, and he cleared off two chairs for them. Chief Ranger Willis McGovern was a tall, red-faced man with an impressive beard that rivaled Grizzly Adams’ and a bit of a gut starting above his belt. He smoothed back his balding brown hair and motioned for them to sit down.

“We don’t get a lot of F.B.I. visits,” McGovern told them.

“Our superiors believe this warrants a visit,” Dean told him in his best authoritative voice.

Sam pulled out a little black notebook he kept for just such occasions. “We understand a man went missing this

morning, and a large pool of blood was found, but no body.”

McGovern nodded. “U-yep. Yep. That’s right. But you probably want to talk to the sheriff, not the Forest Service.”

Dean leaned forward in his seat. “We’ve been there already. What we want to know from you, Chief Ranger McGovern, is if there have been similar animal attacks in the past.”

McGovern fiddled with an imaginary speck of dust on his desk blotter. “Well, actually, yes. Some people think there might be a rogue bear out there.”

Sam jotted down an imaginary note. “I see. And how many attacks have there been?”

“Well, quite a few, going back a ways. I only took over last year. But I don’t take much stock in the bear theory. You ask me, some nut job’s out there.”

“Why not a bear?” Dean asked.

“Well, black bears are pretty shy. It’s rare for one to become predaceous on humans. They’re mostly vegetarians. Only about two percent of their diet is meat. When they do kill something big, they like to cache their meat and protect it aggressively. But a bear’s never been spotted around these... well... blood pools we’ve found. There have never even been bear tracks.”

“So you think human, then?”

“That’s my theory. Course no one takes me seriously. People hear ‘mauled hiker’ and they instantly think bear or mountain lion.” He leaned forward. “Let me tell you, humans do a hell of a lot more mauling of each other than those predators do.”

“Can you show us where these blood traces have been found?” Sam asked.

The ranger dug around in his desk drawer and pulled out a file folder. “I’ll do you one better. Let me make a copy of the reports.”

He left the room and returned a minute later with a second folder. "Here you go." He handed it to Dean.

Dean stood up. "Well, thank you for your time."

Sam tucked his notebook into his inside jacket pocket and stood up. "Yes. Thank you."

They both shook his hand and left the office.

"We have to hike out there again." Sam took the folder, opening it to thumb through the files. "We just need to figure out the range of this thing's hunting grounds."

Pooling the information from the police reports Bobby obtained and the Department of Fish and Game animal attack reports, they were able to pinpoint several areas of high activity.

Bright and early next morning, Bobby geared up once again and headed into the Tahoe National Forest with Sam and Dean. It was getting colder every day, and his breath frosted in the air. They made fast time, hiking without stopping once. In less than an hour, they reached the site where the deer hunters had found their buddy's rifle. A game trail winding through the area had been sealed off with tape where the pool of blood had been. Most of it had seeped into the ground. Located along the edge of a clearing, the spot offered a lot of places where a predator could sneak up on a man.

Bobby knelt, looking for footprints, broken sticks, anything that would give them a clue.

As he bent over, a thick red strand of viscous liquid dripped onto the shoulder of his shirt. He looked up into the trees. Some of the needles there had a rusty hue, others dripped with slowly drying bits of something.

"It took him up into the trees," Bobby said. He studied the trunk of the pine tree. It was untouched. "And it didn't climb, either."

They stood staring up and suddenly a man's scream rent the silence.

“This way!” Dean shouted, taking off through the trees. Sam and Bobby followed. A strangled cry sounded from somewhere in front of them. They bounded around boulders and manzanita bushes, tearing through the trees toward the sound.

Bobby felt a wild rush, not sure if they were running toward a living victim or straight into another wendigo’s trap.

They heard a thump and branches breaking, and at the next set of boulders, Bobby saw blood spatter on the grey of granite. “Here!”

They stopped. The directionality of the spray pattern showed that whatever had the man was traveling fast to the south. Bobby scanned the horizon in that direction, seeing a blur of movement in the trees some two hundred feet in the distance. “This way!”

He ran, Sam and Dean just behind him, and another pitiful cry reached them through the trees. Sam brought out his flamethrower, and Dean pulled his .45.

Bobby followed the blood spray, thick drops of it coating the brush and soil. A syrupy drool of it dribbled down the trunk of a ponderosa in front of them. Bobby scanned the branches above, but didn’t see any movement. They spread out a little, not going too far from each other, but enough that they could scan different parts of the forest.

“Anything?” Sam called to Bobby.

“Nothing.”

“Me, either,” Dean called.

They met back together and stood for a long time, straining to hear anything in the distance. Somewhere a woodpecker thrummed against a tree trunk. A raven flew by, its wing noise making Bobby start. It landed near the blood, gurgling in the weird way ravens do.

Bobby moved outward in concentric circles, hoping to pick up the blood trail again, but it seemed to stop suddenly. If the thing had been leaping from tree to tree, the blood would have been visible. It was as if the victim had simply vanished.

“Maybe I missed something,” he said. “Let’s go back to where the blood trail started.”

They started back.

A sudden rustling in the brush made them all pull out their guns and point them toward the sound.

Ranger Grace Cumberlin appeared, the same gigantic pack on her back. Instantly they lowered their guns. She stopped. “You boys make more of a ruckus than an explosion in a fireworks factory. I could hear you a quarter mile away.” She glanced around, studying the forest. “What are you doing out here?”

“We told you,” Sam said. “Hunting deer.”

She eyed Dean’s gleaming, stainless handgun. “You’re hunting deer with a .45?”

He gave her his best nonchalant smile and put the gun away.

She glanced nervously at each of them, her hand on the butt of her service pistol. “Something about you boys isn’t right.” She spotted the flamethrowers strapped on Sam and Dean’s backs. “I think it’s time you leveled with me. You’re not deer hunters. You’re no more deer hunters than my aunt Lulu who collects *Bambi* figurines.”

Bobby stepped forward. Grace clutched the butt of her revolver, and he held his hands up to indicate he meant no harm. “I’m going to reach into my jacket to get my I.D.”

“Do it slow.”

Carefully he fished out his F.B.I. credentials and held them out for her. “I’m Special Agent Cash, and these are Agents Plant and Young.” He nodded his head toward Dean and Sam respectively. “We’re out here investigating the recent rash of deaths. We don’t think it’s a rogue bear.”

She studied his I.D. and then took her hand away from her gun. “Oh, you don’t, do you?”

“No ma’am,” Dean said. “What can you tell us about these disappearances?”

“First tell me why you need a flamethrower to take down this guy.”

“It’s for intimidation,” Dean said awkwardly. “And back to my question? What can you tell us?”

She shrugged. “Not much. I don’t really follow the case.”

“How can that be? You patrol these woods.”

“Lots of people go missing every year, Agent Plant, and it’s not due to bears or serial killers. They’re just stupid. Not enough water. No backcountry experience. No proper clothing in case of a storm. You boys got proper clothing? Rain gear? Emergency blankets?”

“We’re prepared,” Dean told her.

“Besides, we’re just out here to look around today, not make camp,” Bobby told her.

“That’s just what I mean. The weather in the Sierra Nevadas can change on a dime. The day can start out sunny and warm and end up in the teens with snow. Then you’d go missing, or turn up dead in some ravine.”

“That’s a... cheerful thought,” Dean said.

Sam had been quiet, studying her. Finally he said, “So you haven’t heard anything about the attacks? Not even the couple who were escorted out of here recently? The ones with the kid?”

“They didn’t tell me anything about it when I last radioed in. That’s really not my department. I mainly check permits, give people directions, do first aid if it’s needed.”

Branches broke behind them and they all spun, Bobby ready to blow the source of the sound away. But it wasn’t a wendigo. A man, completely naked and covered with blood, marched out of the bushes, staring straight ahead.

TWELVE



The naked man marched right past, taking no notice of them, eyes glassy and staring. Bobby automatically stepped out of the way as he continued in a straight line toward the south.

“What in the world?” Bobby breathed.

As he passed the ranger, she lit out after him. “Sir?” she asked.

He didn’t respond, just kept walking. Sam saw that his body was covered with strange marks, like stab wounds that had closed up. He hurried to catch up with Grace, Bobby and Dean following.

Nearer now, he saw that the wounds were sealed with some kind of glistening adhesive, almost like super glue. Deep gashes covered the man’s chest, stomach, and kidneys.

“Sir?” Grace tried again.

Still he marched onward.

She shucked off her jacket and draped it over his shoulders. If he felt the gesture, he didn’t give any indication. He walked right through a bush, the branches scratching his legs. Bile and blood dribbled down his back from one of the wounds.

“I’ve got to get him back,” Grace told them.

“He might be our vic.,” Bobby said, “the one who disappeared this morning.”

“I’ll see that he reaches help.”

The man tripped on a log, regained his balance, and kept walking.

“I’ll go with you,” Bobby offered.

“That really isn’t necessary.”

The man walked face-first into a tree trunk, stepped to the side, and continued on.

“I really think I should. I need to question him.”

“I don’t think this guy’s going to be fit for questioning any time soon.”

“Still,” Bobby insisted, “I’d like to help.”

“Fine,” Grace said coldly. “But hurry up.”

Sam and Dean walked alongside them. Sam stared around the forest, feeling eyes on him. “Agent Plant and I should stay out here, keep looking for signs of the killer.”

“Good idea,” Bobby said. “I’ll call you when I learn something.”

Sam nodded at him and watched as he disappeared over the next rise with the ranger and the marching man. He pulled out the map. “We need to make camp, Dean. We’re dead center where the attacks have been happening.”

Dean looked around. “Some place defensible.”

They walked around, settling on a flat spot where they would be able to see anything approach. No trees stood overhead, so they could avoid surprise drop-in visits this time.

Sam built a fire while Dean walked around the perimeter, setting up an early warning system with some tripwire so they could hear anything approach on foot.

The sun sank low and cold came with the darkness. Sam could smell sage on the wind. They sat down on their sleeping bags, watching the smoke rise and curl up into the black sky. The embers glowed bright yellow and orange and Sam watched them pulse and fade.

Something rustled in the bushes and they leapt up, braced for a fight. A doe came through the underbrush, stepped over a log, and stared at them.

“It’s just Bambi,” Dean said.

“That’s Bambi’s mother.”

The deer disappeared back into the underbrush. They sat down again, tense, waiting, trying to conserve their strength. The stars came out, more dazzling than Sam had ever seen before. The Milky Way stretched from horizon to horizon, a glowing cloud of light.

Dean made a line of Molotov cocktails next to the fire, waiting to be lit. Sam fiddled with his flamethrower, checking it for the twentieth time in the last hour.

In the distance they heard a swooping noise, like a huge bird sweeping over the forest. It faded away.

“Did you hear that?” Sam asked.

Dean nodded, getting to his feet.

The noise of beating wings returned, louder than ever. Sam jumped up, eyes scanning the starlit sky. The beating grew thunderous and Sam spun around, trying to find the source. “What the hell?” Then it faded, tapering away softly, the wing beats barely discernable.

Sam was just looking back to Dean with a shrug when something blocked out the sky above him. Where stars had been, a dark shape descended, reptilian wings outspread. Glowing coppery eyes gleamed in the darkness. At the last second, two clawed feet whipped out and caught Sam by the shoulders. Talons hooked into the flesh below his collarbones. He cried out, thrashing, grabbing at the leathery feet. White-hot pain erupted in his chest muscles as the claws tore through him. The thing wrenched violently to one side, and Sam struggled to keep his balance. As he thrashed, he felt his feet leave the ground. He kicked, feeling pebbles cast away from his boots, then suddenly his feet swung free. He grabbed his knife out of his jeans pocket. Stabbing upward, he felt the blade sink into the tough flesh of an ankle. Warm liquid rained down over Sam’s hand and dribbled thickly onto his head. He dared a look down, seeing twenty feet of yawning space between him and the ground.

“Sam!” Dean yelled, rushing forward. He slung his flamethrower around to his back and pulled out his rifle.

Sam tried to look up, to make out what had him, but he couldn't see anything more than a black silhouette against the stars.

He heard the crack of a rifle, then another shot, and suddenly the thing banked and weaved. The pain in Sam's shoulders erupted and he bit back a cry. It felt like any second his collarbones would snap and the claws would tear through his muscle, sending him crashing to the earth.

As the creature banked rapidly to the left, another rifle shot rang out. It pitched forward. Sam watched as the ground sped toward him, alarmingly fast, too fast, and a huge, jagged rock loomed up in the foreground. He was going to hit it. Face first. He clenched his teeth against the pain as he careened toward the granite. Air streamed over him, causing his eyes to tear up. Sam put his legs out, hoping to buffer the crash, and suddenly the thing turned. For a moment it hovered, rising and lowering in the air with each powerful flap of its wings. Every time they sank and rose again, Sam could feel his flesh tearing.

Then the talons slid out and he plummeted downward. The last thing he saw before he hit was Dean whirling around to fire the rifle again, while the dark shape closed in on him.

THIRTEEN



Dean fired the rifle, unable to make out the creature's dimensions in the dark. He thought he managed to hit it at least once, but it sure as hell wasn't slowing the thing down.

Sam landed hard next to a fallen log, and Dean started backing away, hoping to lure the creature in his direction. "C'mon, you son of a bitch!" he shouted.

He felt a blast of air from its wings before he heard it. Clawed feet knocked him flat on a bed of pine needles and branches. He clutched his rifle to his chest, rolled, and got up on one knee. He didn't see his attacker. If the thing would just get low enough, maybe he'd be able to spot it against the trees. Fighting something jet black against the night sky was not getting the job done.

Another whoosh of air blasted him from behind and a sharp pain bloomed in his arm as the creature grabbed him and threw him like a sack of wet noodles.

Dean's left arm windmilled as he flew through the air, but he managed to keep hold of the rifle. His back hit a tree trunk and he slid down the rough bark. He landed hard on his side, brought up the gun, and fired it point-blank into the dark shape above him.

Nothing. Not even a whimper.

A blinding wave of fire erupted to Dean's left. Sam stood with his flamethrower, the entire arc of fire enveloping the creature.

"Right on!" Dean shouted, jumping to his feet and punching a fist into the air. "Nice going, Sam!"

The dark shape shook, wings flapping as it rose into the sky. It darted to the left so fast Dean didn't actually see it move. Then it darted back to the right. The flames went out.

Dean pulled out his .45 and fired the entire clip into the creature while Sam hit it with another blast of fire.

It rose higher, wings beating in the darkness. Running back to his pack, Dean found his shotgun loaded with rock salt, then ran back. With a deafening blast, he fired two rounds into the creature as it tried to fan out the flames. Plummeting backward, it fell to the ground, its feet kicking. Dean saw a glimpse of leathery flesh, narrowed, coppery eyes and a hulking torso of muscle. Then it took to the air again, wings outspread.

Dean grabbed more shells out of his jacket pocket and opened the breech of the gun. When he snapped it together again, the creature had vanished in the darkness. He and Sam waited, braced, staring into the sky. The wing beats grew louder and Dean aimed the muzzle of his shotgun at the sky, searching the surrounding trees, waiting for the telltale silhouette to block out the stars. The whoosh of air sounded louder and louder. Dean knew it was on top of them, somewhere, waiting to swoop in for another attack.

Then the sound stopped.

He got out his flashlight and shone it at the tops of the trees. But the thing hadn't landed, at least not that he could see.

They waited, moving closer, till they stood back to back.

"Nothing hurt it," Sam said. "Not bullets, not iron, not fire."

"Or rock salt." Dean pointed in the direction it had disappeared. "What the hell was that? A friggin' pterodactyl? It sure as hell wasn't a wendigo."

Blood seeped down Sam's chest and back. He could feel it soaking through his shirt. "That thing could fly, Dean."

"I noticed! It was ready to carry your ass off to feed its little dinosaur babies."

"What the hell was it?" Sam sounded a little shaken. "I've never heard of something that could do that. Have you?"

It had talons and leathery wings. And it didn't make a sound. Even when I stabbed it, and you shot it."

"And you set it on fire."

Dean rested the butt of his rifle on the ground. "Whatever it is, we're going to find out how to kill it and finish this job." He pulled out his cell to call Bobby, but couldn't get any reception.

"I think I might need some stitches this time," Sam said.

"Let's go. I can't reach Bobby. We need to figure out what this thing is." Dean checked his .45, then slung the rifle onto his back. Sam winced as he gathered his gear up. Then they hiked into the darkness, searching the sky.

FOURTEEN



Bobby and Grace finally reached her truck, parked at the Finder Mountain Trailhead. The man still hadn't said anything.

They had to fight to get him into the cab of the truck. He only wanted to walk forward. Finally, Bobby bound his legs together and hefted him onto the bench seat. The man stared forward, eyes blank, his legs continuing to move as if he were walking. He kicked the gearshift and kept shuffling his legs. Grace hurried around to the driver side and Bobby squeezed in next to the man. They had draped Grace's jacket over him, but because he refused to stay still, that was all they could do. He reeked of old blood and something else, a chemical smell Bobby couldn't place.

"Can you hear me?" Bobby asked him for the tenth time as Grace fired up the truck. She pulled out onto the gravel road. "What's wrong with him? I mean, other than shock?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it—those cuts all over him."

"They're not cuts, they're puncture wounds."

The truck jostled over a pothole, but the man seemed oblivious. He kicked the gearshift again, knocking it into neutral, and Grace cursed. "This is taking too long. We need to get him medical attention a.s.a.p."

The gravel road ended at a county highway and she turned toward Truckee, accelerating quickly. Bobby studied her face as she drove. Her chin stuck out defiantly and her cheek held a smear of mud. Her hands on the steering wheel were sticky with the man's blood.

She drove faster. Soon the lights of Truckee gleamed on the horizon. A few minutes later they pulled into the

ambulance entrance of the E.R. Bobby stepped out and called to two nearby paramedics. "A man's been hurt."

They rushed over, gently pulling the man from the cab of the truck. "What happened?" one asked.

Grace stepped around to join them. "We don't know. Found him like this up on Finder Mountain Trail."

"Why are his legs tied together?" one of the paramedics asked, eyeing them suspiciously.

"He wouldn't stop walking," she told him. "We had to do that to get him in the truck."

One paramedic rushed off and returned with a gurney. They lifted him onto the stretcher and he kicked, trying to walk. His eyes stared upward, glassy and blank.

Grace and Bobby followed them in, watching while an E.R. doctor took over. He wheeled the man into an examination area and pulled a blue sheet across for privacy. Bobby and Grace stood waiting tensely on the other side.

They didn't wait long. The doctor threw open the blue curtain and called, "Code Blue! Crash cart, stat!"

Bobby peered in to where the man lay on the bed, still moving his legs, then moved aside as the code team rushed in. They performed C.P.R. and used the defibrillator, but the man continued to flatline.

"Doctor," one nurse said, "why is he still moving?"

"It must be some reaction," he told her, his eyes wild.

Grace stopped a paramedic as he left the tiny area. "What's happening?"

"There's no pulse," the man said, looking spooked, "but there's motor activity."

Through the curtain, they could see the man's eyes staring upward, his legs moving up and down as if walking.

The code team started talking excitedly, rushing around and checking the equipment. "Everything's working, doctor," a nurse told him.

The doctor's voice bellowed over the chaos. "Get this patient down to M.R.I. immediately."

"But..." the nurse started, confused.

"Do it!"

She and two paramedics hurriedly wheeled the gurney out from the examination area and raced toward the elevators.

Bobby and Grace followed after them, taking the stairs. They rushed down to the hallway below in time to see the hospital staff with the gurney disappear through the M.R.I. admitting door. They stood outside in the corridor.

"What the hell is going on?"

"I don't like this." Grace's brow furrowed. "What did they mean he didn't have a pulse? Do you... think he was like that in the car with us?"

Bobby shrugged. "Could be. Neither of us checked, we just assumed."

As they waited, more doctors rushed in, but none came out. Bobby started to wonder if any were left in the hospital at large.

Finally, the original E.R. doctor emerged, looking exhausted. Bobby stopped him, flashing his F.B.I. credentials. "Can you tell me what happened with the man we brought in?"

The doctor stopped, blinking dazedly. "What?"

Bobby gestured toward the M.R.I. room. "What were the results?"

The doctor's mouth opened and closed again. "We tried to sedate him so we could do the M.R.I. It didn't take. He kept trying to get up and walk away... and then finally, he just collapsed." The doctor stared blankly down the empty hallway. "We managed to run the M.R.I. and..."

When it became clear the doctor had fallen silent, Bobby prompted, "Yes?"

Slowly the doctor's eyes shifted up and met Bobby's. "He was full of organs. Other people's organs."

“What?”

“We counted at least four spleens, two appendices, enough intestines to fill up his whole stomach cavity and part of his chest.” He met Grace’s eyes. “And most of his own organs were missing. He had no lungs or heart, no stomach, or liver.” The doctor’s voice shook. “It was like someone had stuffed him full of parts and sealed him back up with some kind of super-sticky adhesive.”

“What were those wounds?” Bobby asked.

“Puncture holes. The only marks on the body. His organs must have been sucked out through them, and the others pushed in through the same holes.” The doctor flushed and covered his mouth. “Excuse me,” he said.

As he walked away, Grace said, “What kind of messed-up killer would do that? Does that sound like the work of the murderer you’re after?”

Bobby stared at her. “To be honest, I’ve never heard of anything like that. I need to find my colleagues.”

“I need to go check in at the station.” She squeezed his shoulder in a surprisingly affectionate gesture and returned to the stairwell.

Bobby stood a moment, collecting himself. He had no idea what they were dealing with, and that was unsettling. Most of his books had been destroyed in the fire that had consumed his house, though he’d stashed a few here and there. A trip to the Toiyabe College library tonight was in order. But first he was going to get as much information about the walking organ donor as he could.

As he headed after the queasy doctor, he hoped Sam and Dean were okay, out there in the forest with that thing.

FIFTEEN



At the Truckee General Hospital, Sam sat on the edge of an examination table, wincing as the E.R. doctor injected him with a local anesthetic. She was the same person who had stitched up Dean two nights before. Dean stood next to the bed.

“You boys keep getting into trouble,” she said. “You want to tell me about it?”

Sam fumbled in his jacket pocket and pulled out his F.B.I. credentials. “We’re undercover. Here working on a homicide case.”

Her eyes widened, and she paused before she started stitching, needle hovering over the wound. “And that’s who did this to you?”

“We’re not sure,” Sam told her. “We didn’t get a good look at him.”

“Have you seen similar wounds to these?” Dean asked.

She began with the curved needle, making tiny, neat stitches. Her brow furrowed. “I don’t think so. The other doctors might have. How did you say this happened?”

“Uh... some kind of hooked weapon,” Dean said quickly. They always went to great lengths to seem as plausible as possible, which usually wasn’t very easy.

“Well, this is bad. Are you up on your tetanus shots?”

“I think so,” Sam said.

“Well, I’m giving you another one just in case,” she told him.

She finished the row of stitches on Sam’s chest. An earlier X-ray had miraculously shown no damage to his

collarbones. “I’m going to fill out a painkiller prescription for you and come back with your discharge papers.”

When she left the room, Dean whispered, “I’m amazed that thing was able to pick up a Jolly Green Giant like you.”

Outside the little examination area, Sam suddenly heard a familiar voice. “That’s Bobby,” he told Dean.

Dean popped his head out, seeing Bobby talking to an E.R. doctor. When they finished, Dean called him over.

Bobby stepped inside the blue curtain. “What are you two doing here?”

“We had a run in with a... thing,” Dean elucidated.

“A thing.”

“A flying thing. It had wings.”

“And claws.” Sam added.

Bobby frowned. “I think that man was its handiwork.”

“Naked sleepwalker guy?” Dean asked.

Bobby nodded. “He was full of organs. Other people’s organs. And the creepier part is that I think he was already dead when we found him.”

Dean grimaced. “You mean walking around dead?”

“Yep.”

Sam stood up from the exam table. “What could do that?”

Bobby set his mouth in a grim line. “That’s what we need to find out.”

SIXTEEN



At the Truckee Public Library, Sam pored over old newspaper articles on microfiche. Dean sat at the table behind him, going through the newspaper indexes.

“I have an eerie sense of déjà vu,” Dean said, not loving the research part. He’d been writing down the call numbers for different articles that looked promising, while Sam located them in the microfiche cabinets.

“If we can find other accounts, we might figure out what we’re dealing with.”

“My eyes are going blurry, and I’m getting motion sick watching you skim that microfiche.”

Sam stopped scrolling when he found the article Dean had written down the reference for. “Strange Corpse Found Containing Organs of Twelve Different People.” He skimmed the article. “Check this out. On Thanksgiving in 1992, missing hiker Michael Strathmore returned to his family as they sat down for the holiday meal. They welcomed him in, but he wouldn’t stand still, instead roaming all over the house. Finally he grew weak and collapsed. When they did an autopsy, they found the organs of twelve different people inside him.”

“Where did he disappear?”

“Near Donner Lake. And the body was covered with sealed puncture wounds.”

“That’s our guy.”

Sam read the rest of the article, hoping it might reference other similar instances. It didn’t.

“Anything helpful?” Dean asked.

“Nothing except we know this thing’s been here since at least ’92.”

Dean continued to look over the indices. When he exhausted the *Sierra Tribune*, he moved to the *Sacramento Chronicle*. “Here’s another one.” Dean wrote down the reference number and handed it to Sam.

After he retrieved the microfiche spool, Sam wound it through the machine. “Missing Aviator Found Dead With Puncture Wounds.” Sam read the article. “It’s about a prop plane pilot who crashed in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas in 1964, out near Brantley Ridge. A huge search party turned up nothing. Then about a week later, he just strolled into the small town of Blue Canyon and walked the length of Main Street. He collapsed at the far end. The coroner determined that someone had filled him up with the organs of other people and that he’d died from septicemia.” Sam finished the article. “Yuck. Except the guy had no lungs or heart, so I don’t know how the coroner reached that conclusion. I think you’d die of that before septicemia.”

“Maybe he didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t sound crazy.”

“Keep looking. We’re on to something.”

Dean returned to the over-large blue index books of the *Chronicle*. After a few minutes, he said, “Got another one.”

Sam spooled it up. In 1932, a ranch hand in the Central Valley of California had disappeared just outside Sacramento. His body was found by gas company workers some twenty miles away. The medical examiner found the organs of fourteen different people sealed inside the corpse.

Dean leaned forward as Sam relayed the tale. “So, Sacramento, the foothills, Tahoe. This thing was moving east.”

Sam stood up from the microfiche machine. Moving to the shelf full of newspaper indices, he pulled down three huge red books. “Let’s check the *San Francisco Daily Tribune*.”

They split them up, combing through the entries. In 1912, Sam found another reference to a corpse with foreign organs.

He retrieved the spool and fed it through. "Corpse of Missing School Teacher Found Under Grisly Circumstances."

"What's it say?"

"An elementary school teacher disappeared after a teacher/ parent meeting in 1912. The following week, she walked into her classroom and collapsed in front of her students. The coroner found the remains of seven people inside her."

Dean gave a low whistle. "Wow. 1912."

"Let's go back farther."

They scanned the indices. "Here," Dean said, getting up and retrieving another spool. He wound it through the machine. "1874. A banker was found containing the spleens and appendixes of fourteen people."

"That's before Foster could have transformed into a wendigo."

Dean returned to the table and continued flipping through, but couldn't go earlier than 1865, when the *Daily Tribune* was founded.

"What are we dealing with?" Sam asked.

"Something that lives a long time."

"Or has babies," Sam added.

"Don't even say that. I am not in the mood to fight an army of those things."

"One thing's for sure," Sam said, "it covers its tracks well. It's been doing this since at least 1874, with only a handful of reports."

"It's probably why the cases were never connected."

Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell. "I'll see what Bobby's found."

Back at the diner, the bell rang above the door and Bobby appeared. He slid into the booth opposite them, then idly

glanced at the menu while Sam finished chewing a bite of turkey club.

“Found some interesting stuff. Accounts go back more than a century,” Sam told him.

Bobby shifted uncomfortably in the booth.

“What’s up?” Dean asked.

“I think I know what we’re dealing with.”

Dean sipped his beer. “And that is?”

“An aswang.”

Dean gave out a short laugh. “Excuse me?”

“An aswang. Filipino creepy-crawly with a penchant for human organs.”

“Sounds like that could be our guy.”

“It gets worse. A lot worse,” Bobby told them.

Dean’s brow furrowed. “Okay, tell us.”

“This thing’s more of a nightmare than playing spin the bottle at a family reunion. It’s got a long proboscis that it inserts into victims and sucks out their organs with. But it likes to make them last, taking organs you don’t need to survive at first, then using sticky saliva to seal up the wounds.”

“Yikes,” Sam said.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want this thing to visit me at night.”

“It’s got wings?” Dean asked.

Bobby nodded. “Yep. And even worse, it can take human form.”

“So you could be living next door to Mr. Organ Sucker and not even know it,” Dean added.

“Would make for a memorable block party,” Bobby said. “What did you find?”

“Victims filled with other people’s organs have been turning up for more than a century,” Sam told him.

“That still sound right?” Dean asked Bobby.

“Yeah. When its nest gets full, it likes to select a victim it’s already sucked empty, and put all the inedible parts in it. Then it reanimates the corpse and sends it out to be reunited with its family.”

“Happy days,” Dean said.

“Yeah, that makes for a cheery reunion,” Bobby said.

“So how do we kill this thing?” Dean asked.

“That’s the tricky part. Couldn’t find anything about how to kill one.”

“Well, we can tell you it’s not iron or salt or bullets or fire,” Sam told him.

“That narrows it down,” Bobby said. “I couldn’t find any accounts of someone who’d actually fought the thing.”

“Great,” Sam said.

“Just stuff about villagers living in terror of them at night. Sometimes they suck babies out of pregnant women.”

Dean frowned. “So a real family-friendly, warm and fuzzy monster.”

“But I did find accounts of what people did to ward them away,” Bobby said.

“So what do we have to do?”

“Make a concoction of vinegar, salt, garlic, ginger, and pandan spices. Not sure how it’ll work. Try sprinkling it like holy water.”

“So what’s the plan?” Dean asked.

They all exchanged looks, then Bobby said, “I need to do more research. Find out what’ll kill this thing.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. “Bobby, people are dying out there.”

“That’s why I think you and Dean should go back, at least try to keep people from stumbling into this thing’s territory. You’ll probably have more luck once you have the mixture. At

least it'll leave you alone." He met their eyes. "And be careful."

"You don't have to tell us that," Sam said. "That thing almost ripped through my chest."

"I'll call you as soon as I learn how to finish it off."

Dean remembered trying to reach Bobby when Sam got hurt. "Cell reception's a bitch out there."

"It'll have to do." Bobby messed with the brim of his ball cap. "There's one other heart-warming detail I haven't mentioned."

Sam raised his eyebrows.

"This thing's hermaphroditic; it reproduces with itself. So be on the lookout for eggs."

Dean couldn't believe this. "Are you serious, Bobby?"

"Yeah. Grey and leathery."

Sam leaned forward. "Where would it lay them?"

Bobby shrugged. "Not sure. None of the accounts said. But this thing isn't so much into deep and dark like the wendigo."

Dean thought of all the accounts going so far back. "Why haven't any hunters fought it before?"

"Near as I can figure it, it doesn't have to kill very often."

"The accounts were spread apart," Sam added. "But now it's killing more often."

"So let's make this spice mixture and get out there again," Dean said.

The aswang was stepping up its game for some reason. Sam was right. All the other reports had been chronologically and geographically far apart, but now too many people had gone missing in too short a time. Either it was killing more people now, or it was getting sloppy. Either way, they had to stop it before more people died.

SEVENTEEN



Sam and Dean had been walking through lunchtime and into the afternoon, coming up empty. They searched the area where they had found the organ victim, then started moving in greater circles. The weather looked iffy, a new layer of clouds moving in low and grey on the horizon. A chill came with it.

As they crested a rise, suddenly Dean felt eyes on him. A branch snapped and he whirled around. Grace stepped out, her huge backpack towering behind her. “Hey,” she said as they lowered their guns. “That was some messed up crap the other day. Guy was full of other people’s body parts.” She met Dean’s gaze, her eyes haunted. This was a subdued Grace Dean hadn’t seen before. As if reading his thoughts, she added, “You don’t shrug something like that off.” She sized them up. “I’m surprised they don’t have more agents out here.”

Sam shrugged, then winced at the pain in his shoulders. “We’re pretty busy at the bureau.”

Dean noticed that she had double the ammo in her belt now, and a shotgun was strapped onto her pack. He looked at Sam.

“It’s strange that everywhere I go, here you are,” she said.

Sam looked at his watch. “We should check in with Bobby.”

“Sounds good.” Dean pulled out his cell and checked the bars. The icon on his screen displayed a satellite dish spinning uselessly. No signal.

“I’ll be right back,” he told them. He walked toward the nearby ridge, then began the steep ascent up the smooth granite. He could feel the sun radiating off the rock. Yellow and orange lichen grew in colorful patches as he climbed

higher. From the top of the ridge, he could see trees and other patches of open granite outcroppings. In the distance, the Tahoe Summit ski resort ran its ski lifts, and in the far, far distance, he could make out the treeless slopes of the Boreal and Sugar Bowl ski resorts. The whole area up here was dotted with them, with miles and miles of undeveloped forest between. It was a perfect place for a man-eater like a wendigo to make its nest. Lots of tourists coming and going, as Bobby had said.

Dean pulled out his cell again, lifting it up as it powered on. One bar. He called Bobby.

When he answered, Dean asked, “You find anything yet?”

“I think I may be on to something. I contacted a hunter on the west coast at Point Reyes who found an account of a villager using a stingray barb on the end of a whip. But both the whip and the barb have to be treated with a variety of spices and an incantation was performed on top of that. It’s not something I could whip up here. The ingredients make quite an exotic shopping list.”

“So what should we do?” Below him, Dean watched as Sam and Grace milled about the clearing, talking awkwardly. The wind sighed through the trees, and a gust buffeted his back.

“This hunter has some of what we need. I can go out there and get her to make it, but it would save time if you helped gather the ingredients. We could be there and back in a day.”

“Sounds good.”

“Find anything exciting out there?”

“Not yet. Grace found us again.”

“Well, you two should come back. I don’t like the idea of leaving one of you alone out there. Faster we get this weapon made, faster we can take care of this thing.”

“Okay. I’ll tell Sam.” Dean hesitated. “Should we call Jason? He was good backup before.”

“Slow backup.”

“But he helped.”

“Okay,” Bobby relented. “I guess that way one of you could stay out there, warn people off, and the other could come to Point Reyes.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’ll come pick one of you up at the trailhead now,” Bobby told him, and hung up.

Dean noticed he had a voicemail message on his phone and checked it. It was Jason, telling them to look him up if they were ever back that way. “Nice hunting with you,” he’d said, and hung up.

Dean debated, worried that at best Jason might slow them down, and at worst, get himself killed. But finally he decided the extra help would be welcome, especially if they all had to split up. He called him, catching Jason at the Aces and Eights.

“Yo, Dean,” Jason said.

“Hey Jason. How’s it going?”

“Can’t complain. Ribs better. You guys must be halfway across Utah by now. To what do I owe the honor?”

“We’re actually back in the Tahoe National Forest.”

“What?”

“There have been more killings.”

“Another wendigo? I thought they were solitary.”

“So did we. But it’s not a wendigo. It’s something worse.”

Jason sounded incredulous. “Something worse?”

“Yeah. An aswang.”

“An ass what?”

“Something we don’t want to mess with lightly. Bobby knows a hunter in Point Reyes who can make a weapon for us.”

“Where are you now?”

“Near the Finder Mountain Trailhead.”

“I’m coming to meet you.”

“Okay.” He looked at his watch. “When can you get here?”

“Give me two hours, maybe a little more. Got to gear up and then I’ll leave.”

“Thanks, man.” They agreed to meet at the trailhead and Dean hung up.

He rejoined Sam and Grace in the clearing. “Agent Cash has a lead,” he told Sam.

“Great. Does he want us back there?”

“Yeah. A.s.a.p.”

Grace smiled ruefully. “So I’m back to being on my own?”

“Sorry, ranger. Looks like it,” Sam told her.

“I’m used to it. Wouldn’t survive long in this gig if I didn’t like being alone.”

“Call us if you run into any trouble,” Dean said. He handed her one of their fake F.B.I. business cards, though the number on it was accurate.

“And you’ll come running?” she asked dubiously.

Dean smiled. “Something like that.”

“Well, good luck,” she told them, and set off again in the direction she’d been heading.

“I don’t like the thought of her out here alone,” Sam said as they watched her go.

“Me, either,” Dean agreed. “But she’s tough. Besides, we can’t force her back to town.”

“Maybe we should level with her.”

“Are you kidding me, Sam? Level with her? She’d laugh us out of the forest. And then probably lock us up.”

“So what did Bobby say?”

“He thinks he has a line on a weapon that might kill it. He wants one of us to go with him to the bay area. I called Jason for backup. He’s meeting us at the trailhead.”

They started walking back, keeping an eye out for hikers. The trees grew thick in this area, broken only by large expanses of grey granite. They ducked and bent, moving through a particularly dense section of pines, and Dean heard something moving ahead of them. “Sam!” he whispered.

They squatted behind a boulder. Footsteps drew nearer, something big and bipedal moving through the underbrush.

They waited tensely and it grew closer. Dean stood up suddenly, bringing his .45 to bear.

From around a bend in the trail, a hiker with a huge backcountry pack appeared, face lit up and grinning beneath a shock of blond hair.

Dean stepped out, flashing his F.B.I. badge. “This area’s been closed off.”

The hiker’s face fell. “What? I’ve been planning this trip for ages. Finally got the time off.”

Sam emerged, showing his F.B.I. I.D. as well. “Sorry, sir. There’s a manhunt in progress.”

The hiker’s eyes went wide, and he glanced around nervously. “Manhunt? Like, serial killer manhunt?”

Sam took the man’s elbow and turned him around on the path. “The sooner you return to your vehicle and leave the area, the better.”

Looking thoroughly spooked, the hiker did as he was told, moving at a quick pace back the way he’d come. Sam and Dean followed at a distance, making sure he got back to the trailhead safely. Soon they reached the parking area, and watched while the man loaded his pack into his car and drove off.

While they waited, they turned away two couples and a guy with a dog.

Soon they heard the rumble of Jason's truck. He pulled in next to the Impala and got out, lifting a hand in greeting. Hefting a pack out of the passenger side, he slung it on his back.

He strode over to them. "So, what kind of fight are we looking at?"

"Big," Dean said.

"Mean," Sam added. "Seriously bad news."

"So how do we fight it?"

"Bobby's figuring that out now," Dean told him.

Jason looked around the forest. "We can't just wait around. People are hiking into these woods all the time. I made two people turn back on the road just now. Told them some crazy story about a pack of rabid dogs. I think they were more scared of me than my story."

"One of us has to go to the coast with Bobby to get what we need for a weapon."

"It'll work?"

"We're not sure yet. But it's the best lead we've got."

Jason sized up Dean. "You up for staying out here with me, fending that thing off?"

Dean felt a slight pang of something within him. It felt good to be needed. "Sounds good. Sam, you go with Bobby. We'll stay here and patrol, try to discourage people from spending the night out here until you two get back."

Sam shifted his weight. "You sure, Dean?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"All right. Sounds like a plan."

Some tiny part of himself that Dean was ashamed to admit was there felt a little hurt at Sam's nonchalant answer. So Dean would stay out here, fighting this thing, while Sam headed off to the bay with Bobby. He could remember a time when Sam wouldn't have left his side. Now it seemed like

Dean was merely an afterthought, and sometimes not even that.

“Okay,” Dean said. “That’s the plan.”

A few minutes later, Bobby’s van pulled up in the trailhead lot, its tires crunching on the gravel. He stepped out. “Jason,” he said in greeting.

“Good to see you again, Bobby,” the other hunter answered.

Bobby eyed Dean. “You boys going to be okay out here on your own?”

Dean nodded. “Someone’s got to keep people from entering this thing’s territory.”

Sam put his gear into the backseat of Bobby’s van and rejoined them. “Be safe, Dean.”

Bobby looked at his watch. “And check in every six hours. If we don’t hear from you, we’re coming back here pronto.”

Sam and Bobby climbed into the van and Dean watched them drive off. Now only their car and Jason’s beat up pickup waited at the trailhead parking lot. At least that meant there weren’t other hikers out there right now, at least none from this access point. Now all Dean had to do was keep people safe until Bobby and Sam returned.

He and Jason walked back into the forest, alert to every sound and any hint of movement, while Dean gave Jason the rundown on what they were hunting this time. They passed through a dense copse of trees and emerged from the other side, moving toward a trail on the map. Dean figured most hikers would move along that path. They walked for a couple of hours, not running into anyone or seeing any hint of the aswang.

A sudden rain of pebbles from a nearby ridge snapped his attention in that direction. A gaunt figure stood on top of the rocks there, some three hundred feet away. It stared down at them, unmoving. “What the hell?” Jason asked.

Dean pulled out his binoculars, but before he could train them on the person, he had vanished.

“Did you see him?” Dean asked.

Jason nodded. “Skinny son of a bitch.”

Dean pulled out his handgun and ran toward the bottom of the ridge. A steep but do-able slope of granite rose up to the top. Dean ran up the rock, aiming his gun in front of him as he drew near the crest. After a few feet, he’d reach the tree where the man had stood. Dean ducked low, hurrying toward it. He couldn’t see over the other side of the rock from there. He reached the top and pointed his gun down, scanning the other side of the ridge. A lot of open country stretched out before him. All he could see were more mountains, valleys, brush, and the ski resorts in the distance. Whoever had been standing there had lit out fast. Maybe too fast to be human.

He moved along the top of the ridge, checking the area. No one. When he looked down, Jason stood at the base of the slope with his rifle out. He was using the scope to scan the hill.

“Anything?” Dean called down.

“Nope.”

Dean descended, keeping his .45 out. They joined up at the bottom.

“What was it?” Jason asked.

“I have no idea. Dude was gone.”

They hiked for another half an hour, moving through trees. In the distance they thought they heard human voices, a long way off. They started moving in that direction, wanting to turn away any new hikers.

A sudden flash of movement brought Dean’s attention to the remains of a massive rockslide that had swept down the mountain in antiquity. Huge granite boulders piled up to a small level area with few trees. Standing next to one of the pines was the same thin figure they’d seen earlier. It looked human, lean and tall. Dean stared harder. Shifting his rifle from his shoulder, he pointed its scope to the spot. Standing

next to the tree was a rail-thin man, one hand on the trunk. He was too far away to make out any features. He darted away, dropping out of sight as soon as Dean focused on him.

“Jason! There’s someone up there. I think it’s the same person we saw before.”

Jason trained his scope on the ridge, too. “I don’t see anyone.”

“He’s fast.” Dean lowered his rifle. He scanned the ridge one more time for the strange figure, but didn’t see anyone. Dude was used to hiding, whoever or whatever he was.

They continued on, but now they couldn’t hear the voices. Sound had a strange way of carrying in the forest. Things that were far away sounded close—voices, waterfalls—as they bounced off the granite walls. Dean wondered if they were walking near another trail.

As he paused to check the map, he suddenly felt eyes burning into him. Pivoting, he saw the figure again, only this time he stood only a hundred feet away. He’d crept up on them, moving with no sound. A dark hood was pulled around his head, obscuring the face. Dean snapped up his rifle, ready to fire.

EIGHTEEN



As Bobby's van rumbled over the rough road back to the main drag, its familiar scent surrounded Sam. The smell of Bobby's cars, a mixture of oil and the comforting scent of sun-warmed flannel, instantly transported Sam back to his childhood. How many times had he driven around with Bobby while his dad was out on a case? A lot of the time Dean and his dad worked together, leaving Sam alone. It had created a distance between Sam and his father and brother. But Bobby had always been there. He had a way of making Sam feel at home.

They hit Highway 80 and drove west. Passing through Emigrant Gap, Sam watched the now-familiar edifices of smooth grey granite on both sides of the highway. In cracks in the granite, pine trees grew. Sam flipped the sun visor down as the afternoon wore on. The canyon of the Yuba River soon yawned before them, carving deep trenches in the granite. Fire scars marked the forest here and there, creating a swath of bare trees, many scorched black.

They descended, entering the foothills. Pine trees covered rounded slopes and the sun streamed through the branches. Soon the foothills leveled out, and they entered the Central Valley. In the distance, Sam could see the outline of Sacramento's downtown cluster of buildings. The wide, flat plain of the American River stretched before them.

They drove past the skyscrapers and over the river. The sun dipped lower and Sam shifted in his seat, worried about Dean. He didn't like leaving him out there. He knew that joining Bobby would make assembling the weapon go a hell of a lot faster, but he was still uneasy. Dean hadn't been the same since Sam got his soul back. Sam had watched his brother wandering around only partly engaged. Disillusionment and weariness kept creeping closer to Dean.

“Bobby,” Sam said, squinting in the sun to face him. “I’m worried about Dean.”

Bobby regarded him out of the corner of his eye. “And he’s worried about you. Some things never change. You two spend more time worrying about each other than you do breathing in and out.”

“I’m serious. This feels different.”

Bobby sighed. “All right, how does it feel different?”

“It feels like Dean wants to give up.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that, too,” Bobby conceded reluctantly. “Not a safe way to be in this game. The last thing a hunter needs is to be distracted.”

“Or disillusioned.”

“Yeah.”

“Can you talk to him?”

“I will.”

As they drove across the Yolo Wildlife Area, Sam stared out at the birds gathering in the wetlands just off the highway. He thought about his brother, about the strange distance that had arisen between them. He remembered a time, not so long ago, when they had an almost telepathic understanding of each other. Back then they shared an unquestioning trust when it came to hunting together. But he didn’t feel that now.

Sam knew he’d been distracted, too, fighting off images of Lucifer and flashbacks of agony from his time spent in the cage. Sometimes it felt like his head was tearing in two, with one part back in that terrible place, and the other part here, fighting monsters just like he’d always done. With each day he felt those two parts separate more, and constantly had to remind himself that he was out of the cage. That was no longer his existence, no matter how much his hallucinations of Lucifer wanted to convince him otherwise. The scar in his hand where Dean had stabbed him served as a reminder of how real this world was. It still ached and Sam was glad for it.

He drove his thumb into the scar any time his mind doubted the reality of this world.

He missed Dean. He missed himself, his old self. Sometimes he thought of his time at Stanford before he resumed the life of a hunter. Life had seemed full of hope then. He had been starting a future with Jess and attending college like he'd always wanted. Then everything had changed that night Dean showed up and told him their dad had gone missing. Sam had rejoined the hunt and his life had never been the same again. Maybe it never had the chance of being normal. He was a Winchester, after all.

"Awfully deep in thought over there," Bobby said, breaking into his reverie. "You still worrying about Dean?"

"Just thinking about the road not taken."

Bobby looked thoughtful, almost wistful. "Yeah, I know how that goes."

Sam knew Bobby had also seen his share of grief, that his chance at a normal life had been taken away, too.

In the distance the coastal mountains came into view, fog gathering around the peaks. They climbed over them and suddenly Sam could see the sparkling waters of San Pablo Bay. They cut over to Highway 37, passing through miles of wetlands. White egrets fished, and dozens of ducks gathered in the late-afternoon sun. The sky reflected in the water, making the wetlands appear like little pools of sky themselves.

"Think Jason is going to hold up out there?" Sam asked.

"He's taken a licking, but doesn't seem to let it stop him."

The rolling hills of Marin County rose into view as 37 joined Highway 101. Bobby took it north and exited in the city of Novato, taking a road out toward the sea. "Almost there," he told Sam.

Cows milled in fields as they wound their way west. Oaks dotted the hillsides and vultures circled overhead. The sun hung low above the hills as they arrived in the small town of Point Reyes Station.

It didn't look much different than it must have decades before. Buildings from the late 1800s lined the main street, and a few pedestrians strolled along the street in the dusk.

"Where do we find this hunter?" Sam asked.

Bobby glanced around at the buildings. "She runs a little restaurant off the main drag called The Pelican's Nest."

They passed through the central part of town and turned off onto a side street. The Pelican's Nest stood halfway down the block. A sign sporting a white pelican sitting on a cluster of eggs hung above the door. The building was old, probably from the turn of the last century. Bobby found a parking spot around the side.

"Is she expecting us?" Sam asked, climbing out of the van.

"Yep."

They were halfway up the stairs when the front door opened and a woman in her fifties stepped out. Her brown hair hung loose and wavy around her pretty face. Intelligent eyes twinkled at the sight of them. She grinned and threw her arms around Bobby. "Bobby Singer," she said, giving him an affectionate hug.

"Marta," Bobby said in greeting.

"And this must be Sam Winchester." She grinned at him.

Sam held out his hand, taking an instant liking to her. "Good to meet you."

"Likewise." She gave Bobby another squeeze and Sam was amused to see him get a little bit shy and flustered.

"Come on in!"

They followed her inside the restaurant, and she locked the door behind them. Something smelled amazing, like freshly baked bread and exotic spices. "Getting ready for the dinner rush," she explained, gesturing toward the kitchen. "We open in half an hour."

"Get a lot of business here?" Sam asked her.

“Tourists mainly, but we have a few devoted locals. It’s a nice day job to have to support the other one,” she told them quietly. Sam knew she meant hunting. “Let’s go into my office.” They followed her through a set of swinging doors, down a hall, and through another door. Inside was a cozy office, with a large batik print of a whale hanging on one wall. A Tiffany art deco lamp cast soft light on the red walls. She shut and locked the door behind them, then gestured for them to sit down in the office chairs next to her desk.

“So you really think you’ve found an aswang?” she asked.

Bobby nodded. “Seems that way.”

“I’ve never known someone to hunt one.”

“Me, either. Were you able to dig anything else up?”

She unlocked a drawer in her desk and pulled out an old leather-bound book. A ribbon marked a particular page and she opened to it. “This legend says that to keep the aswang away, the villagers created a special weapon that could spear it and drag it down to the earth. But it needs to be steeped in special spices and have an enchantment cast upon it.”

“Can you do it?” Bobby asked.

“I think so. I’ll need to get together all of the ingredients, and some are pretty obscure.”

“Like what?” Sam asked.

“Like ajowan and screw pine.”

“Wow. I’ve never even heard of those spices. Screw pine? Really?” Sam agreed.

“It’s also called pandan spice. I can do the enchantment part with Bobby.” She looked at Sam. “Can you gather the spices we’ll need to soak the whip in and the stingray barb for the hook?”

Sam pulled out his small notebook and pen. “No problem. Just give me a list.”

She skimmed over the book and said, “Okay. Salt, ajowan, galangal, screw pine, tamarind, wattle seed, kokum, kaffir lime, and lovage.”

“Lovage?” Sam asked. “There’s really a spice called ‘lovage?’ Screw pine and lovage?”

“Yes. And the whip has to be made out of twine that is two parts hemp and one part seaweed.”

Sam finished writing it all down, then read over the list. “Okay. This is all going to smell pretty bad, isn’t it?”

Marta was all business. “You’ll have to make a trip to Odysseus’s Spice and Curio Shop. It’s out on the coast. You can find just about anything there.”

Sam folded up the notebook and put it back inside his jacket. “Will do. How much time will you need on your end?”

“About a day, I think.”

“We really appreciate this,” Sam told her.

She smiled. “Just don’t tell any of my kitchen staff. They think I spend my nights doing extreme LARPing.”

“We’ll be discreet,” Bobby assured her.

“I figured you would, Bobby Singer.” She grinned again, and this time Bobby held her gaze for a few seconds longer before looking away, slightly embarrassed. Bobby was amazing in a fight and knew more about arcane magic and obscure creatures than anyone Sam knew, but he could get flustered when it came to regular human stuff. Bobby didn’t do regular too well. In fact, none of them did.

Bobby walked Sam out to the van. “She an old friend of yours, Bobby?”

“Something like that,” Bobby said evasively. “You get the spices and meet me back here. I’ll get started on the spell.”

“Think we can get all those items and do the enchantment before tomorrow?”

“We’re sure as hell gonna try.”

NINETEEN



Dean fired, and the figure vanished into the brush, moving away quickly out of sight.

“Who the hell is that?” Jason shouted, bringing out his gun.

Dean searched for any sign of motion. “Did you get a good look?” Dean’s heart hammered.

Jason stared around, pointing his gun. “No!”

Dean could feel eyes boring into his back. He spun. High up on another granite outcropping stood the thin figure, staring down at them. “There!” Dean shouted, pointing his gun. The figure vanished.

Dean turned to Jason. “We need to track this thing, find out where it’s holing up.”

“The speed that thing moves, we’ll have our work cut out for us.”

Dean walked to where he’d first seen the figure close up, standing by the tree. There were two boot prints in the depressed soil.

Sudden voices in the trees attracted Dean’s attention on his left. Catching sight of a flash of color through the branches, he stepped off the trail, followed by Jason.

Jason met his eyes. “Hikers?” he mouthed.

From the cover of a huge ponderosa, Dean peered out. Sure enough, hikers. Two of them with big backcountry packs on their backs. Dean scanned the ridge above. He had to get rid of them before Speedy came back.

Jason stayed hidden while Dean moved through the trees, intercepting the hikers on the path. Flashing his F.B.I. badge, he approached them. “Special Agent Plant.”

The two hikers stopped. Both were in their late twenties, a man and a woman, holding hands and laughing. Instantly their smiles vanished. “What’s the problem?” the man asked.

“We’re cordoning off this area for a manhunt,” Dean told them.

They looked alarmed. “Are we in danger?”

“Not if you return immediately to your car. Where are you parked?”

“At the Finder Mountain Trailhead. We just got started.”

“Good. Please return to your vehicle and leave the area.”

The woman grabbed the man’s arm and turned back.

“Who are you hunting?” the man asked.

“Let’s just say that you shouldn’t stop along the way for any reason.”

That was enough for him. He took his companion’s hand and hurried back the way they’d come.

When the couple were some distance away, Jason appeared. “Smooth.”

“Thanks.”

“Should we tail them back to their car?”

“Yep.”

They followed at a distance. Dean noticed Jason’s limp had improved.

“Feeling better?”

Jason nodded. “Yeah. It’s slowly getting back to normal. Ribs still hurt a bit, though.”

Dean didn’t have the heart to tell him how much worse fighting the aswang had been than fighting the wendigo. They were going to get worked over if Sam and Bobby didn’t get back soon with the weapon.

Dean watched the couple get into their Subaru Outback at the trailhead parking lot and then slipped back into the trees.

He hadn't caught a glimpse of any other movement.

Clouds started moving in, and with them a cold wind that bit through Dean's jacket.

Jason glanced around at the sky. "Looks like a storm might be on its way."

Above them the clouds moved and spiraled, layers building up in dark gray.

"It's going to be dark soon," Dean said. "We should find a good place to make camp."

The wind sighed in the branches above and Dean decided going without a fire might be the best course of action. It was a good defense against a wendigo, but a bright warm fire might attract the aswang. He didn't like the thought of fighting something like this; they knew so little that he felt like he was making it up as he went along. Hell, he was.

"First I should climb to higher ground and check in with Bobby."

"I'll go with you to the bottom of the hill."

Two hundred feet away rose a steep incline of granite. Dean bounded up it, keeping alert for any sign of the thin man. At the top, he turned on his cell and got a signal. He dialed Sam's number.

His brother picked up on the third ring. "Dean."

"Sam."

"How's it going out there?"

"Turned away a couple hikers. Being stalked by something skinny and fast moving. Can't make out much more about it."

"You okay?"

"So far. You?"

"We've met the hunter, and she's already started preparing ingredients for the weapon. I'm heading out for a spice shop on the coast tonight."

“Bobby doing okay?”

“Yeah. I think this hunter’s got a thing for him.”

“I bet that’s making him blush.”

“I’ll say.”

“Well, hurry it up. I’ll call you back in six hours.”

“Okay, Dean. Be safe.”

“Bye.”

Dean pressed ‘end’ and headed back down the steep granite to where Jason waited below.

“Everything good?” Jason asked.

Dean nodded. “Yep. Let’s find a place to hole up before it gets dark.”

Jason looked nervous. “Yeah, okay.”

Snow flurries cascaded down on the wind. Dean looked up at the darkening sky. Layer upon layer of clouds had gathered, and he smelled more snow in the air. A storm was on the way, and Dean hoped they were prepared for it.

TWENTY



As the western sky turned gold from the sunset, Sam drove out toward the coast and the little-known shop that sold spices and historical fishing equipment, Odysseus's Spice and Curio Shop.

He entered the Point Reyes National Seashore and drove past the Bear Valley Visitor Center with its huge barn-looking building. Deer meandered in open fields, and quail scooted around in the underbrush as he drove past. The twisting road took him through forest and then past a handful of historic ranches. Cows grazed in the fields, gazing out at the wide spaces. He passed over a cattle guard into the Tule Elk Reserve. He watched them milling about, huge antlers shining white in the sunshine.

Then at last he saw the ocean. Steep cliffs descended to a wild and crashing surf. A bank of fog hovered out at sea, and the wind created white caps, flashing white on the blue. The gold of the sky reflected upon the water.

The spice shop lay almost at the end of a little beach access road. Sam drove past a small cafe that advertised the best BBQ oysters in the area, and a little touristy shop selling kites and wind socks. At the end of the tiny row of stores, he spotted Odysseus's.

He pulled up and walked inside. The breeze coming off the ocean was chilly, and Sam wondered how Dean was doing out in the forest.

A little bell rang overhead as Sam entered the shop. The place smelled like brine and old rope, and was littered with antique anchors, barrels, and fishing nets. A long counter covered with jars ran the length of the place. More jars lined shelves on the wall behind it.

From a door at the back of the shop, a diminutive man stepped out. He looked at least ninety-five years old, with a wisp of white hair on top of his pale head. He stared at Sam through glasses so thick they distorted the eyes underneath. He slowly made his way to the counter, pausing by the cash register.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Odysseus?”

“Yes.”

“Marta told me that you could prepare some ingredients for me?”

At this, the little man moved away from the counter. He lifted a wooden board and emerged onto Sam’s side. Totalling closer, he said, “Marta said that?”

“Yes.” Sam held out his hand as the man drew closer. “I’m Sam Winchester.”

The man took his offered hand and shook it so powerfully Sam let out an involuntary grunt. “Wow. Quite a handshake you got there.”

The little man stared up at him. “I’m Johennie Odysseus, proprietor of this establishment. You’re taller ’an sasquatch. Where’d they grow you?”

“Kansas.”

“I see. I see.” He released Sam’s hand and tottered back toward the counter. “Marta phoned me to say you’d be coming by. Some of the spices she mentioned are pretty rare. Don’t have much use for ’em. They’re up there on the top shelf.” He pointed behind the counter, at a collection of jars too high up even for Sam to reach. “Got a stepladder around back. I’ll see that you get fixed up with what you need and send you on your way.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The man smiled. “Ooooh! ‘Sir.’ Don’t hear that too often these days. It’s all backtalk and twittering and talking during movies now. Movies used to be a treat. Now people act like

they're in their living room instead of in a movie house. Drives me to distraction."

As he talked, Johennie lifted the wooden board and returned to the other side of the counter. He waved Sam toward him. "Come on through."

Sam did so.

"Now let's see here." The man fumbled around in his apron for something and pulled out a list. Sam read the same herbs that were on his own list. "Let's get started."

In the back room of Marta's restaurant, Bobby pored over an old leather-bound illuminated manuscript that dealt with a lot of Pacific-island creatures. "This is an incredible book."

Marta stood at a small table, crushing some rock salt with a mortar and pestle. She looked over her shoulder at him. "It was compiled by a Spanish missionary who served in the Philippines in 1742. I came across it in the library of a hunter who was killed in the area a few years ago. He had no will and everything went into probate. His entire estate was auctioned off, and I got a few of the books."

Bobby flipped to a disturbing drawing of an aswang. "Wouldn't want to meet this sucker on a lonely banana plantation at night." He carefully turned a few more pages. "This is the book with the incantation for the weapon?"

She nodded. "I marked it for you."

Bobby saw a long blue ribbon hanging out of the pages and turned to it. Another rendering of an aswang stared up at him. A sharp proboscis stood out from a cruel, angular face. Eyes, wide and insectile, peered out from a slanted brow. Leathery wings opened wide, and clawed feet and hands flexed, ready to kill. "This matches the description Sam and Dean gave."

"I thought so, too, when you described it to me on the phone."

Bobby stared at the image for a few moments. "A Spanish missionary. That's interesting."

She raised her eyebrows. “How so?”

“Well, it might explain how this thing got here. The Spanish frequently traveled the Pacific Ocean then. This thing could have stowed away on a missionary ship and come to California.”

“They don’t like crowds. Maybe it was looking for a brand new world? Somewhere it could continue to kill unnoticed?”

Bobby nodded. “So it came to the New World. Only the New World was growing, expanding. It could have started out on the coast, then kept moving inland as more and more settlers took up residence in San Francisco. Maybe it’s been moving east, trying to stay in remote areas. A place gets too populated, it moves on.”

“And now it’s hit upon the wilds of the Sierra Nevadas. That’s good hunting ground there.”

“Skiers, hikers, boaters, gamblers in the casinos. There’s a constant influx of transient people.”

She stopped grinding the salt and met Bobby’s eyes. “This thing’s smart. This is the first time someone’s picked up its trail, and it’s been hunting for a long time.”

Bobby thought of Dean out there with it, armed only with the spice concoction he’d made. “I know. The sooner we get this weapon made, the better I’m going to feel.”

He saw a drawing of the weapon on the next page. A long whip ended in a stingray barb.

“We still don’t know if it’ll work,” she warned him.

He stared again at the insectile eyes, the sharp, cruel features. “It’s got to work. It’s the best shot we have.”

TWENTY-ONE



Dean and Jason found a small clearing in a ring of trees and laid their bags on the ground. Though Dean had a tent, he didn't relish the thought of sitting in one if the aswang attacked. So they slept out, unrolling their gear on a soft bed of needles.

"I'll take the first watch," Dean offered as darkness fell.

Jason slept fitfully while Dean sat against a tree, rifle gripped in one hand and a jar of the concoction Bobby had made in the other. Snow drifted down, dusting the ground and making everything a little brighter. He watched for any trace of activity and strained his ears listening for sounds in the dark.

Everything was so quiet in a snow-covered forest. Dean put his hood up, hearing an almost musical tinkling of snowflakes hitting the material over his head. As he stared out, a chuffing noise snapped his attention behind him. He stood up, tense. Branches snapped and low breathing broke through the silent snowfall. Dean remained quiet, waiting.

The breathing grew louder, and he saw something massive and dark push through the brush and enter their clearing. A head rose from a muscular body and sniffed the air, finding Dean and Jason on the wind. It was a black bear. It stared at Dean, pinpointing him in the dark. Dean stared back.

The bear tossed its head, moved a little closer, then turned away. With a crash of branches, it disappeared into the underbrush.

Dean let out his breath.

He sat down again, training his ears to the quiet. He couldn't hear anything but the sound of snow on his hood and the rush of his own blood in his ears. The wind had died down.

He couldn't hear traffic or the buzz of electricity or anything out here but the wild. He imagined what this place must have been like for the Donner Party.

He knew that, miles away, Interstate 80 ran right through the Camp of Death where the emigrants had resorted to eating each other. Now people sped by at seventy miles an hour, but it used to be nothing but wilderness stretching from Fort Bridger in Wyoming to Sutter's Fort near Sacramento. They couldn't resupply in Reno or Truckee because they didn't exist yet. But right then, right where he sat, it couldn't have been very different than it must have been for them. He could yell and cry out and no one would hear him. Without his car, it would take days to hike out to civilization.

He heard Jason stir and looked over at the sleeping hunter. His brow was creased with a nightmare, and his eyes moved rapidly beneath the lids. Dean would never admit it, but he felt pretty good keeping watch, looking out for someone. His whole life felt like he'd been looking out for people. Sammy when he was little, strangers who'd been attacked by monsters. This was the first time in his life he felt obsolete. Sam didn't seem to need him anymore. He barely talked to Dean about things that mattered, and Dean knew he was suffering with images of Hell. Dean felt a punch in his gut and tried to push away the thoughts that caused it, but he couldn't. Dean felt guilty. Maybe he didn't deserve Sam's regard.

When he was a kid, Sam's life had been saved by a little girl, a kitsune—a fox creature that has to eat a certain part of the human brain to survive. The girl had killed her own mother to protect Sam. Later, as an adult, she had never killed. She worked as a mortician, getting the brain matter she needed from the dead. But when her son got terribly sick, she realized she had to get him fresh meat and killed a human for him. When her son recovered, she swore to Sam that she would never kill again, and he spared her life. But then Dean went behind Sam's back and killed her. She had murdered people, after all, even if the victims she chose were scum—a heroine drug dealer among them. Dean had a mission, didn't he? He had to protect humanity.

He felt bad about her, though. She haunted him. Dean had sent her son away on his own, vowing that if the boy ever murdered anyone, he'd show up and kill him. The boy had stared at him with hatred, and sworn that the only person he'd ever kill was Dean. Then he'd run off.

If Sam ever found out, Dean knew it would change his brother's opinion of him. He would be tarnished in Sam's eyes.

Dean knew that even when you make a decision you think is for the best, it can change how people feel about you. Killing Amy was right. He knew that. She would have killed again. But it had put the trust between him and his brother in jeopardy. Sam would feel betrayed if he found out Dean had gone behind his back.

God knew, that's how Dean felt about Castiel, though Cas sure as hell had made far more epic mistakes than Dean. Castiel had once told him that he thought of Dean as family. Dean had begged the angel to defuse after he'd taken on the power of all those souls from Purgatory, but Cas hadn't listened, and instead became drunk with power, his original good intentions lost in his megalomania.

He'd betrayed them all. Dean had trusted him, remained loyal even when Sam and Bobby suspected that Cas was going dark side. Dean had refused to believe it then, but they'd been right.

Dean forced himself to think about something else. He wondered how Bobby and Sam were faring at the seaside, and if Bobby would talk to Sam about his Hell memories.

The temperature continued to dip lower. The snowflakes, which had been huge and clumped together at first, were now smaller and discrete, a sure sign of increasing cold. Dean shivered a bit, then stood up to walk around the perimeter in an attempt to get warm.

On Dean's second lap, Jason sat bolt upright with a garbled shout.

"What is it?" Dean said, scanning the surrounding trees.

Jason looked around, confused. “Nightmare. Sorry.” He slumped back into his bag.

Dean made another circuit, glancing at Jason as he tossed and turned. Finally, Jason sat up again. “I can watch for a while.”

Grateful, Dean took him up on his offer and climbed inside his own warm sleeping bag while Jason took the watch.

Snow floated down, dusting his eyelashes. With only his face sticking out of his bag, Dean drifted off to the sensation of his nose going slightly numb with cold. Around him the forest creaked and gusts sighed in the trees. He knew it was just the wind, but he couldn’t fight the feeling that the aswang was close by their camp, breathing in the darkness.

TWENTY-TWO



The bell rang above Sam's head as he exited Johennie's shop, a bag full of spices tucked under one arm. He also now had the stingray barb and the hemp and twine for the whip.

In the west, a glow was still visible above the horizon, though the sun had now set. The deep blue of the sky there blended into night in the east.

He was halfway to Bobby's van when a splitting pain erupted in the back of his head. He crashed down hard, thinking at the last minute that he couldn't land on the bag. He twisted, landing on his back.

As the blinding pain surged forward, forcing his eyes shut, Sam struggled to get his bearings. Vaguely aware of a VW Rabbit parked beside him, he slid the bag under it.

Gripping the back of his head with one hand, he tried to rise. Warm stickiness met his cradling fingers. He forced his eyes open in time to see a two-by-two come swinging down for a second strike. Instinctively, he rolled on the asphalt, the wood hitting the street instead of his face.

Fight-or-flight adrenaline forced his brain to focus. Sam shook his head and got his bearings. He was on the street. Someone just clubbed him with a board. He reached out, steadying himself against the Rabbit. There was blood from his head wound on his hand.

The man with the two-by-two swam into focus above him as Sam got to his knees. He was a scrawny bastard with faded jeans and a worn leather jacket. His scuffed boots cried army surplus. When Sam met his eyes, he saw a familiar reflective glint; a flash of silver he'd seen before. Vampire.

As his head cleared, he heard the crunch of boots on gravel and glanced to his left in time to see a pair of brown

cowboy boots draw nearer.

Leather Jacket swung the board again and this time Sam caught it. He pushed it forward with all his strength, throwing the vampire back against a parked truck. The attacker lost his grip and Sam swung the board around in an arc, hitting Cowboy Boots in the head with a sickening crack.

Blood streamed down the vampire's face. Sam had broken his nose for sure. He heard a rough voice behind him yell, "Grab him!" and whirled around to see three more vampires approaching cautiously.

Damn it. He had no immediate way to do them any real damage. If he could get to Bobby's van, he could use the machete to decapitate them. None of the other vampire stereotypes worked—no crosses, no stakes through the heart, even the sun didn't hurt them more than causing a bad sunburn.

Sam lunged out with the two-by-two and the trio backed off. But already he could hear Leather Jacket getting to his feet and closing in behind him. Sam took a gamble and ran for Bobby's van.

As blood trickled down his back, he fished in his pocket for the keys and pulled them out. He knew he'd left the spices under the Rabbit, but would just have to come back for them or he'd be dead. He was badly outnumbered. He heard Leather Jacket laugh in a cocky way as he struggled to unlock the door with slick, blood-soaked hands.

"Having trouble there, Winchester?" the vampire gloated, moving closer. Sam wanted to punch him in his smug, blood-sucking face.

Instead, he put all his effort into getting into the van, then locked the door. The vampires closed in around him, pounding on the glass. Then suddenly a cacophonous shot rang out.

Leather Jacket laughed arrogantly again, and Sam heard him yell, "That pea shooter isn't going to do much to kill us, grandpa."

Sam got the van started and backed up in the direction of the gunshot. He heard a satisfying thump as he hit one of the vampires. The others kept pounding on the glass, running alongside him.

Johennie stood in the doorway to his shop, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. “Maybe not, you ghoulish son of a bitch, but it’ll hurt like hell.”

He unloaded a round point-blank into Leather Jacket’s face. The vampire howled, bringing his hands up. Johennie fired a third round into another vampire’s chest.

Sam pulled up level with the store. “Get in!” he called out.

Johennie rushed up to the passenger door and hopped in. They roared off down the road, Sam swerving to hit two of the vampires who’d been slamming their fists against the glass.

“That was a close one!” Johennie said. “What the hell were those things?”

“Vampires.”

“Vampires? I thought they were just the concoction of Polidori and Stoker.”

“Most of them have been wiped out, but there are still nests of them here and there.”

Odysseus gave a long, low whistle. “I’ll be damned.”

Sam turned down the highway toward Point Reyes Station.

“Where we heading?”

“Back to Marta’s. Those vamps were lying in wait for me back there. They knew my name. This feels like a setup. We’ve got to warn Bobby.”

Odysseus opened the breech of his shotgun and reloaded it. Then he snapped it back together. “I’m game.”

“I see that.”

As Sam entered the town of Point Reyes Station, he could see an orange glow on the horizon, but this time it wasn't the sunset. By the time he turned onto the little street that led to Marta's restaurant, he could see the source.

The Pelican's Nest was on fire.

TWENTY-THREE



Sam jumped out of the van, running to the front door of the Nest. The place must have just caught on fire because even the fire department wasn't there yet. Sam called 911 and reported it.

Johennie joined him and they looked for a way in. The kitchen seemed to be the seat of the fire.

"Bobby!" Sam yelled. "Marta!"

He didn't see any movement inside. He ran around back. The door was open. Marta appeared in the flaming doorway, her arms full of old books.

Sam rushed to her. "Where's Bobby?"

"Inside," she said, coughing. Soot coated her face, stained her brown hair ebony. "He's getting the last of the manuscripts."

Sam ran in, saw the burning hallway and Marta's office just to the right. A blast of heat hit him like a visceral force, and he felt as if every little hair on his face was instantly singed off. The office hadn't caught yet, but the fire was drawing dangerously close. Thick black smoke hung heavily, so dense he could barely see. He ducked low, entering the office. Bobby stood at the desk, scooping up spices and a few ancient leather-bound texts.

"Bobby!"

He saw Sam and ran to him, dumping the books and supplies into his arms. "Wait for me outside!" he ordered, then coughed.

"Not a chance!" Sam yelled back. The fire hissed and sputtered, working its way down the hallway. Sam choked, trying to bend down lower to get beneath the layer of acrid smoke.

Bobby took another stack of books and added them to Sam's load. "This is the chance I never got with my place!" he said, then went into a coughing fit. "These books are irreplaceable."

He returned to a shelf, got two armfuls of books and staggered back to Sam. "Now we get out!"

They passed through the outside door, the wave of cool night air a blessed relief. Sam breathed it in, then started hacking.

Marta passed them and ran inside.

"Marta!" Bobby called to her in protest.

Sam and Bobby rushed to the van, dumped the books inside, and sped back. Sam didn't see Johennie around.

As he and Bobby went back inside for the rest of Marta's research material, Sam heard the wail of a fire engine's siren in the distance. Relief flooded over him.

Inside the office, the air temperature had grown searingly hot. Sam could feel it burning his lungs as he grabbed the last of the books and retreated with Marta out of the door. Bobby was the last to leave, rolled manuscripts tucked under both of his arms.

They carefully piled the ancient books and scrolls inside the van, then sat catching their breath and coughing.

Sam looked around for Johennie. "Something's wrong," he wheezed.

Bobby wiped soot from his eyes. "You mean other than the towering inferno?"

Sam moved away from the van, checking the other side of the building. "Johennie was with me."

Marta looked incredulous. "Odysseus left his shop?"

"It was sort of an emergency. But I don't know where he is now."

The sirens grew in volume and soon red flashing lights filled the night sky. Firefighters piled out of the truck, ordering

them to move to a safe distance. Instantly the hose was out, water pouring onto Marta's restaurant.

She watched the flames consuming the kitchen and two of the walls. "This is sickening," she said.

Neighbors emerged from houses and nearby restaurants and shops, all staring at the blaze.

They moved Bobby's van farther away, and got out.

Sam stared around the faces looking for Johennie, then a glint caught his eye in the darkness, off to the side of the restaurant in a vacant lot. The lot stood on the very edge of town, with no buildings beyond it. Sam lifted a hand to block out the furious brightness of the fire, and peered at it.

There was another flash of light, and Sam saw it wasn't one pinpoint, but several. They blinked and moved, and he realized he was staring at eyes.

A flashlight clicked on in the lot, and illuminated in its beam was Leather Jacket, holding a knife to Johennie's throat.

TWENTY-FOUR



Sam turned to Bobby and Marta. “There! In the field! Vampires. They attacked me outside Johennie’s shop. And now they’ve got Johennie.”

The two hunters followed Sam’s pointing finger, seeing the reflective eyes in the darkness.

“Vampires?” Marta asked. “I didn’t know there were any nests left around here.”

“This is special,” Sam said. “They knew my name. They’d come specifically for me. They might not be locals.”

Bobby coughed into his sleeve. “They probably set this fire to drive us out.” He glared in their direction. “Divide and conquer.”

“Those bastards,” Marta hissed. “They burned me out of my restaurant. Didn’t they? Didn’t they?” She turned to Bobby. “What do you have in your van?”

“Two machetes. A chainsaw.”

Marta set her jaw. “That’s a good start.”

Bobby opened up the back and they armed themselves, hacking and coughing. Then they marched toward the field.

As they walked, Bobby gripped one of the machetes, his knuckles white. Marta swung the other one, getting used to the weight. Sam opted for the chainsaw. If it weren’t for them pausing to hack up a lung every few feet, they’d look pretty formidable.

Sam could still feel the heat from the blaze, even in the vacant lot. He counted six pairs of eyes.

“Winchester,” sneered Leather Jacket when Sam drew closer. His face was a mess. The buckshot had tattered the flesh. “You ran like a squealing little pig back there.”

“Now you have to fight three of us instead of ambushing me.”

The five other vampires clustered around in a semi-circle. Sam recognized Cowboy Boots and a couple of others who had pounded on the van's windows. One of them sported a black Mohawk. Another struck Sam as out of place, a professor type in an honest-to-goodness tweed suit with elbow patches. One circled them in a rockabilly red and black bowling shirt with a skull vomiting fire. The last was a gaunt and pale female, her dark eyes glittering beneath a mane of tangled, ebony hair.

Mohawk held Johennie's shotgun, trained in Sam's direction.

Leather Jacket sneered, moving the blade tighter against Johennie's neck. The spice shop owner's face remained expressionless. He stared up at the sky, unmoving.

“We're willing to make a trade,” said Leather Jacket, apparently the leader of the nest. “The old man for Winchester and Singer.”

Johennie shifted, moving for the first time. “That's hardly a fair trade. I'm worth ten of them.”

That made Bobby smile.

“No trade?” the vampire growled.

“What am I? Chopped liver?” Marta said.

“Listen. We don't want to fight,” the lead vampire said. “We just want to kill you.”

Sam looped his fingers through the pull for the chainsaw.

“Oh, hell,” Leather Jacket added. “Who are we kidding? Of course we want to fight!”

He had no sooner finished his sentence than Johennie spun suddenly, forcing the vampire's knife hand down and stabbing the blade into its belly. In a flash, Johennie threw him to the ground, then lashed out and grabbed the barrel of his sawed-off. He slammed his fist down on the end, causing the stock to careen upward and smash Mohawk's mouth. His hands went slack and Johennie took back the shotgun.

Sam revved up the chainsaw, feeling the powerful thrum of it. The female and Rockabilly scattered at the sound of it, but the other four held their ground.

The creatures attacked, running toward them. Marta stepped in, wielding her machete like a samurai. She swung it forward over her head, connecting with Mohawk. His head flew off in a spray of blood, landing in a bush some ten feet away. Then she ducked and rolled under the Professor as he tried to dive-tackle her. The vampire hit the ground and Sam closed in with the chainsaw, sawing through the creature's neck as he tried to stand up. The body flinched, toppling over in the dirt. Two down, four to go.

Sam moved in toward Leather Jacket, who stood with a hand clasped to his injured side. The chainsaw was bulky and cumbersome, but Sam knew it would be hard for anything to get near him and keep its head.

Leather Jacket started circling.

Bobby closed in on Cowboy Boots. Blood streamed from the vampire's broken lip. Sam saw the eyes flash again, and the vampire barreled toward Bobby. Johennie darted out of the shadows and threw out his leg to trip him. He went sprawling, cowboy boots stretching into the air. He rolled to a stop and Bobby came down fast and hard with the machete blade. The head rolled away.

Sam saw fear enter Leather Jacket's eyes now, replacing some of the cockiness. Marta, Bobby, and Johennie approached him from different sides, and the vampire started to look downright panicky.

Then Sam heard brush break behind him and turned in time to see two eyes flashing in the darkness only feet away. He lashed out with the chainsaw, connecting with something soft and pliable. Blood sprayed outward, coating his shirt and arms. He'd cut right into a vampire's stomach. In the flickering light from the restaurant fire, Sam could just make out a ripped bowling shirt coated with blood. The vampire cried out in agony, and Marta raced in, swinging her machete

down on his neck. The head separated, white bone gleaming in the light.

Sam glanced around for the other vampire who had hightailed it. She could be circling around like Rockabilly had just done. Something whizzed by his ear, *thunking* into the trunk of a tree right next to him. He snapped his head that way, seeing a crossbow bolt thrumming in the wood.

“I’m on it!” Marta shouted, and tucked and rolled as another crossbow bolt hit the dirt when it missed her head. Sam caught movement in the corner of his eye and saw the last vampire, standing up on a small hill, putting another bolt in the weapon. Marta was on her so fast that Sam almost couldn’t believe it. Marta thrust a leg out, kicking the vampire in the chest and knocking her down. Marta punched her in the trachea, then brought the machete down on her neck. Sam heard a sickening *shick* and the head came rolling down the hill, landing at Leather Jacket’s feet.

He really looked nervous now, glancing around for an escape route. Bobby advanced, gripping the machete, while Sam circled around. Leather Jacket turned to run away, but Sam intercepted him. He felt the chainsaw bite into bone as he slid the blade across the top of the vampire’s shoulders. Blood showered Sam, and he wiped his face off with his jacket sleeve. Marta came running down the hill in time to see Leather Jacket’s head fly off his torso and land in some weeds. In one hand she carried the newly acquired crossbow.

Sam did another pass with the jacket sleeve and checked around cautiously for other vampires.

“That was weird,” Bobby said. “Vampires seeking *us* out?”

“Dad said once, they get your scent, they never lose it.”

“You’re thinking old vendetta?”

Sam turned the chainsaw off. “Maybe.”

Marta was staring at her still-burning restaurant.

“That’s quite a blaze,” Johennie said.

The firefighters were making headway though, and Sam let himself hope that they would be able to put it out and some of the structure could be salvaged. They watched for a few minutes longer, but Sam didn't feel safe in the open. The vampires had sought them out, and something told him that they might see more of them.

"I have to get back to check on my shop. If those jerks set fire to my place..." Johennie's voice trailed off. "I'm getting too old for this."

Sam withheld a laugh; he sounded just like Bobby. "I'll drive you."

They left Bobby and Marta staring at the blaze, and Sam returned Johennie to his store. He heard Johennie sigh with relief when they found it untouched. "I'm ready for sleep. Live on the upper floor," he told Sam.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you," Sam told him, and meant it. He hoped he was just as spry when he got to be Johennie's age.

"You, too." Johennie shook his hand in another painfully tight grip, and got out of the van. When he was safely inside, Sam retrieved the spices from under the VW Rabbit. None of the bottles had broken. Relieved, he drove back to the Pelican's Nest.

Bobby and Marta were still watching the terrible fire. Sam joined them, seeing sadness consume Marta's face. He could feel the heat blasting over him, even from hundreds of feet away.

"I hate to rain on this joy parade," Bobby said, "but we still need to finish that weapon."

Marta tore her eyes away from the flames. "We salvaged everything, but we need a place."

"Not enough room in the van."

"We can go to my house, but I live with my niece. She doesn't know squat about hunters and monsters, and I want it to stay that way. So no mention of ghoulies or things that go bump in the night."

Bobby nodded. "Understood. We'd be much obliged."

"Okay, then." She looked at Sam's bleeding head wound. "First we need to get you cleaned up. Let's stop at a gas station."

They piled in the van and reluctantly Marta closed the passenger door behind herself.

From the back seat, Sam tried to reassure her. "I'm sure they'll notify you as soon as they get it under control."

She frowned. "Yeah, but there's some kind of perverse longing to watch it. Like if I take my eyes off it for an instant, it's going to burn to ashes. What's that old saying? 'A watched pot never boils?' Maybe a watched restaurant doesn't burn."

Bobby turned in the driver's seat and met her eyes. His voice was compassionate. "There's nothing you can do here. I know what this feels like."

She crossed her arms. "Hell. Okay. Let's go."

Marta directed Bobby to a nearby gas station and Sam cleaned his head wound in the bathroom, wiping the blood from his face, neck, and hands as best he could. He removed his blood-splattered jacket. When he looked presentable, he emerged, getting back in the van. She told Bobby to turn down a few side streets and they ended up in front of a beautiful Victorian two-story house. A girl in her early teens sat on a porch swing, reading a book. She looked up as they parked.

"Aunt Marta?" she asked, standing up. "What happened?"

Marta did look bad, covered in soot and sweat. "The Nest caught on fire. But no one was hurt, honey."

"Oh no! Will they be able to put it out?"

"We're hoping."

Her niece rushed to her and hugged her. "I'm so sorry."

Marta turned to Bobby and Sam. "This is my niece, Aggie."

Sam shook her hand. "Pleased to meet you. Sam."

Bobby grinned, shaking her hand, too. “And I’m Bobby.”

“Nice to meet you.” She looked shell-shocked. “Are you sure there’s nothing we can do?”

Marta shook her head. “The fire department’s working on it now. We just have to wait.”

“I’ll get iced tea for everyone,” Aggie offered, and they all entered the house.

When she turned her back and walked away, Marta made a zipping motion across her lips and whispered, “Remember! *Nada!*”

Sam and Bobby nodded their understanding.

After Sam washed the grime off his face and hands properly with hot water and soap, he walked into the living room, where iced tea in tall, sweating glasses awaited. Aggie sat on the couch, bare feet tucked up under her. She was engrossed once again in the book.

“What are you reading?” Sam asked.

“This book for school. I was kind of dreading it at first, but it’s actually really good. It’s called *Fahrenheit 451*.”

Sam couldn’t help smiling. “That’s a great book.”

“Yeah, it really is, isn’t it? Kind of creepy, though. It’s supposed to be about some future dystopia, but it kind of feels like this could happen now.”

Bobby and Marta entered the room, and Sam could actually see their skin now all the soot was scrubbed away.

Marta lifted one of the iced-tea glasses and drained half of it in one go. She turned to Aggie. “We’ve got some stuff to do in the art studio. You going to be okay out here?”

Aggie nodded. “Sure.”

Bobby cleared his throat. “Did you see anyone prowling around tonight?”

Marta stomped on his foot, trying to make it look like an accident.

Aggie looked alarmed. “What?”

“It’s just that... the restaurant might have been arson. We want to be careful, that’s all.”

“No, I didn’t see anyone. But now I’m totally freaked out.”

Sam was quick to step in. “It’ll be okay. It might not have been arson at all. Bobby’s just a little paranoid.”

Aggie pursed her lips together. “Okay.”

Marta kissed the top of her head and motioned Sam and Bobby to follow her into the back of the house. At the rear of the property stood an artist’s studio with a locking door. Marta loved to make ceramics in her spare time, when she had any. She invited them into the room. A potter’s wheel stood in one corner, and shelves lined the walls, stacked with vases and saucers. Most hadn’t been glazed yet. Another door led to the back yard.

Sam regarded them appreciatively. “These are good.”

“Thanks. Maybe one day I’ll be able to finish one.” She turned to Bobby as he entered. “Lock the door.”

Against one wall stood a desk, and she moved to it, clearing it off. “We can work here.”

“This is perfect,” Bobby said. “Thanks again.”

“I’ll go get the stuff,” Sam offered, and left through the back door of the studio. As he stepped out into the cool of the night, Sam felt eyes watching him. He didn’t like this. The whole thing didn’t feel right. His gut told him that this was the eye of the storm, and that he had to stay vigilant.

TWENTY-FIVE



Dean started awake, unable to breathe. He panicked, opening his eyes wide, but seeing only white. Jerking upright, he flailed in his sleeping bag. Wet seeped through him. He twisted his arms and legs free and realized he was completely buried under a thick layer of snow. Wiping it from his face, he got his bearings. He was in the clearing where they'd made camp, and a serious storm had moved in. A fresh blanket of powdery snow covered everything. The dim glow of dawn illuminated the east.

Dean looked around for Jason, but didn't see him. He got up, walking to where Jason's bag had been. He felt around underneath the snow. A lump at the base of a tree proved to be Jason's backpack.

Dean retrieved the concoction from his sleeping bag and walked around the clearing, looking for tracks. He didn't find any. Wherever Jason had gone, he'd done it a while ago.

He searched in a widening spiral, finding the tracks of a deer and a rabbit, but no shoe prints.

"Jason!" he shouted.

He listened to the ensuing silence.

Snow continued to fall, and it was cold now. Dean's breath frosted in the air, which felt like it was in the mid-twenties. He moved around in greater and greater circles, radiating outward from their camp. There was no sign of Jason.

Finally he stopped, listening to the heavy silence. The snow-laden forest was eerily still. Not a bird. Not even the wind. Dean waited, but didn't hear anything. Jason had either walked away earlier in the night, or something had taken him.

Dean was beginning to feel really cold. He was grateful for his rain gear, which at least kept him dry. He unpacked his thicker coat and put it on under his rain parka. The snow kept falling, getting deeper and deeper, and his feet were starting to go numb. He'd waited in the clearing, making sure that Jason hadn't just gone off to do some reconnaissance, but he hadn't come back. Dean noticed that his food, water bottle, map, and compass were still in his pack.

How could Dean have slept through Jason being taken? He knew the thing was fast and quiet, but he felt wide open, thinking the aswang had been in the camp, seizing someone only feet away from him.

Dean decided to do a wider patrol, and donned his pack, rolling up his bedding and covering it with a rainproof bag.

He headed out, keeping the bottle with the spice concoction close at hand. He'd hiked about a mile, moving in greater and greater circles, when he found a trail of blood in the snow. It led deeper into the forest, away from the trails. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the cell phone. He'd check in with Bobby and Sam and then follow the trail, try to get Jason back.

He pressed the power button, but his phone wouldn't turn on. He tried again and again, but it was dead. The cold had sucked the juice right out of the battery. Dean dug a pair of gloves out of his pack and a woolly hat and donned them.

He had his phone charger, but the nearest place he could think of that had juice was his car, and he couldn't go back there now. He had to find Jason. If there was a chance the hunter was still alive, Dean had to take it.

He followed the trail of blood in the snow. Indistinct impressions ran alongside the blood, prints filled in by the fresh snow. Dean couldn't tell if they were Jason's boot prints or not. Not enough detail remained. The bleeding grew thicker and penetrated deeper. Jason—if it was Jason and not another hiker—was losing a lot of blood. As Dean walked on, the snow continued to fall. Soon he was stepping in snow up to mid-calf. His feet were even colder now. White was starting to

cover the blood trail, and Dean picked up his pace, trying to catch up before the trail vanished altogether. He walked on, sinking deeper and deeper. The snow fell on and on, soon laying down two feet on the ground. Dean sank up to his knees. The slogging was exhausting. At times he lost the blood trail, having to walk fifty feet or more before he found it again.

The third time he lost sight of it and found it again, he realized something strange. No matter how densely the trees clustered, how many logs he had to step over or boulders he had to walk around, the blood trail remained perfectly straight. It was easy to pick it up again when he lost sight of it because he only had to move forward in the same direction. It didn't deviate at all.

Dean stopped. He wondered with a sudden chill whether he might not be following a wounded person, but something dripping blood, like a sack of meat. The footprints alongside the blood were indistinct, filled in with fresh snow until they were rounded and shallow. He had no way of knowing if he were following Jason's boots or a creature's clawed feet. Dean might be walking himself right into the aswang's lair.

He pulled out his cell phone again, hoping that the warmth of his pocket might have revived the battery. He pressed the power button, but nothing happened. By now Bobby and Sam would be worried he hadn't checked in.

Dean stared ahead at the blood trail, which was quickly vanishing beneath the falling snow. Going forward might mean a trap, but if it was Jason being dragged on by something, he could still be alive. Dean had to reach him. He'd stay low, keep to the trees for cover, and see where the blood trail led.

TWENTY-SIX



Sam sat in Marta's office, feeling bleary-eyed. They had worked through the night to finish the incantation. For the fifth time, he pulled out his cell and dialed Dean, but it went straight to voicemail. "Dean still isn't answering. It's been more than twelve hours."

Bobby glanced up from the preparation for the incantation. "That's not good."

"How much longer will this take?"

Bobby looked to Marta, who started grinding spices and adding them to a mixture in the mortar.

She glanced around, judging their progress. "I think we're just about ready to start the incantation."

"Could be his battery died," Bobby suggested.

"I hope that's all it is."

Marta sorted things into different piles. "Okay. This looks good. We just need to coat the whip with the right spices and cast the spell to enchant the whip."

Between finding all the ingredients in the maze of the shop, fighting the vampires, and preparing the incantation, they'd spent far more time there than they had intended. It was costing them precious time while Dean was out there without them, and Sam was anxious to get back. "What can I do to help?"

Marta laid out some cinnamon, cardamom, vinegar, and salt, along with the ajowan, galangal, screw pine, tamarind, wattle seed, kokum, kaffir lime, and lovage that Sam had brought. She told Sam to roll the whip in it until it was absorbed. Then she fashioned the stingray barb to the whip while Bobby finished the preparations for the incantation.

Sam drew symbols on the floor of her back room and lit candles at the cardinal points. When the whip was ready, they placed it in a large brass bowl in the center of the symbol. Marta stepped before it and began the incantation, reading Latin out of the old book compiled by the eighteenth-century missionary. When she was finished, she threw some powder into the brass pot and flames engulfed the whip. It simmered and blackened, releasing a fragrant mix of spices into the air. When the flames died down, Marta reached into the brass bowl and extracted the whip. "It's ready."

Sam took the weapon from her. "Great! Thank you so much."

Bobby stood up, grabbing his jean jacket off the back of his chair. "We hate to do magic and run..."

Marta waved him off. "I understand. Get back out there."

She walked over to Bobby, hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. Then she hugged Sam. "You two be careful."

"Always are," Bobby lied, smiling at her.

"And let me know what happens, if the whip works."

He nodded to her, touching the rim of his well-used baseball hat, and met Sam at the door. "Really sorry about your place."

She waved him off dismissively. "Been meaning to update the kitchen there, anyway."

"We really do appreciate this," Sam said, feeling a little rude for rushing out as soon as they got what they wanted, especially after her place had been set on fire. But they had to leave.

"Wait!" she said, hurrying to her desk. She pulled out a manila folder stuffed with papers and returned, handing it to Bobby. "When you first called, I did some research. I made copies for you, from the old book, from some history books, and a few newspaper and crime reports I dug up."

Bobby took it. "Thank you."

They said goodbye again and headed out to Bobby's van. Sam looked at the clock on his phone. It was now too many hours since Dean was supposed to check in. He didn't like this. Even if Dean's phone had died, he could have hiked out to the car and charged up his phone with the power converter. It certainly wouldn't have taken him five hours to do that. Either he was hot on the trail of something, or he was in trouble.

TWENTY-SEVEN



Dean continued on, following the blood trail and keeping watch for the skinny figure on the ridgeline. Snow continued to fall, now reaching above his knees. Every few minutes he checked his map and compass, looking backward to familiarize himself with how the trail would look when he turned back. But even with his map, he wasn't exactly sure where he was. With the ground covered in snow, it was almost impossible to see when he crossed actual marked trails that appeared on the map. Though a couple of times he had spotted trail markers in the trees and been able to pinpoint his location.

It had now been more than half an hour since he was positive where he was. He consoled himself with the thought that, if necessary, he could just walk directly backward in a straight line, keeping track of his own old depressions in the snow. The blood continued to be visible, but just barely. The red sank far down into the snow layers, which gave Dean hope that the source was warm and still alive.

He walked for twenty more minutes, slogging through the deep, exhausting snow, his feet getting ever colder. Soon he couldn't feel the toes on his left foot at all, though underneath his rain parka, coat, and pants he was dry, which kept him reasonably warm as long as he kept moving.

Dean crested a small rise, almost slipping on an ice-covered section of granite. The wind kicked up, blowing the snow perpendicular to the ground. For a second he couldn't see and had to stop, closing his eyes against the gale. It buffeted his back, forcing him off the rock. He struggled to remain standing as snow spiraled blindingly around him. The wind shoved him back a step, and he turned away from it, letting it hit him in the back instead of the face. He could hear a great rushing sound from another blast of wind in the trees. When it hit him, he stumbled forward a step. His parka hood

flapped and fluttered around his head. Then the wind eased off.

Dean backtracked to the rock where he'd stepped off, and saw that the blood trail had been completely obliterated. The snow had buried the red trace, and the depressions of footprints had been swallowed by more powder. He walked straight forward, trying to remember exactly where he had stepped off the rock so he could continue in a straight line. He was pretty sure he found the place and started walking again, staggering in the deepening snow.

After a while he began to doubt if he was still on the right path after all. He strained to pick up any strange sounds, but could only hear the roar of the wind. Feeling tired and hungry, he retrieved a pack of jerky from his pack, which he chewed as he resumed walking.

He wondered how Bobby and Sam were doing, if they were on their way back yet. By now they would know something was wrong with Dean. He was overdue to check in by more than fifteen hours. But he couldn't just leave Jason. He decided his best bet was to try to pick up the trail again, find out if Jason was still alive.

Dean headed on in as straight a line as he could manage. The snow continued to cascade down—it hadn't stopped since he'd woken up. The clouds hung so thickly that the light had a dim, grey cast to it, making it darker than it should be. A chill had settled into Dean's bones, and now he kept moving in order to get warm. He stumbled along, finding his water bottle in the pack and drinking without pausing.

Half an hour later, he had to admit to himself that the trail was gone. The snowstorm had obliterated it, laying a pristine, sparkling layer of white over everything.

Dean was exhausted from pushing through the deep snow. He decided that he had to return to his car, recharge his phone, try to get warm. Get Bobby and Sam to pick up some snowshoes on their way in.

His stomach churning with frustration, Dean paused to get his bearings before starting back.

As he looked around, he saw a column of smoke rising up through a clump of trees in the distance. He could smell it on the wind, the scent of a campfire.

Dean started off in the direction of the smoke. If it was a forest fire, it could mean signs of a struggle, maybe a Molotov mishap. Jason might be nearby. If it was a cabin, Dean relished the thought of getting warm.

He pressed close to the trees, approaching cautiously. He could really smell the smoke now, a scent that reminded him of days in front of the fireplace when he was little.

As he got nearer, he saw that it was a little cabin. Tiny, with space for only a couple of rooms, the structure sported a wooden frame and a fireplace pieced together with small granite stones. Dean continued slowly.

He was thirty feet away from the front door when he noticed the blood smear above the door handle. The door stood slightly ajar.

TWENTY-EIGHT



Cautiously, Dean approached the door to the cabin. With his left hand he pulled out the bottle with the spice concoction, keeping his .45 in his right. Above the scent of wood smoke, Dean smelled something else, a sickly sweet aroma of bodily fluids. A mixture of bile and sweat, it hung in the air around the cabin.

He crept toward the door, checking the roof and the perimeter. The blood was spread thickly, and near the handle was a bloody handprint. It might have been from Jason staggering into the place. He could be inside by the fire.

Aiming his gun in front of him, Dean pushed the door all the way open with his foot. It swung open on squeaking hinges and Dean winced. The cabin had only one story, and as he peered inside, he could see two rooms. The main room held a table, two wooden benches, a few chairs, and a fireplace, with a basic kitchen area in one corner. Through an open curtain hanging in a doorway, Dean spied an antique wooden bed layered with woolen blankets.

Drops of blood splattered the floor and trailed across the room to the fireplace.

Dean entered carefully, checking corners and behind the door. He crept to the bedroom and kicked the curtain all the way open, aiming the gun inside. No one lay on the bed. Dean looked under it, and then in the closet. He moved quietly to a small bathroom at the far end of the bedroom. Kicking open the door, he found an empty toilet and tub.

Cautiously, he returned to the cabin's main room. The fire had been laid some time ago. Most of the logs had fallen to ash, and embers gleamed in the grate. Blood dripped down from the firewood basket.

He walked to the small kitchen. Blood spattered the sink, and a first aid kit lay open on the counter, its contents strewn across the worktop. Someone had come in here to get warm and fixed up, then left again.

Dean crossed the room to the front door and locked himself in. The person might be back. If it was Jason, Dean would let him in.

Feeling the warmth creep back into his face, Dean sat by the fireplace and unlaced his boots. Inside, his feet had long since gone numb. He shucked off his socks, revealing bright red toes. At least they weren't white or black—no frostbite. He warmed them by the fire, which was almost too hot after being so long in the cold.

When he could feel his toes again, he looked around for a power outlet or a phone. No luck. This was a true backcountry cabin. He didn't even see a generator. There were no photographs on display, no personal papers stuffed in the desk, no books or diaries in the bedroom. The cabin was completely anonymous.

He opened the kitchen cabinets, finding only dishes and an old box of baking soda. Finally, Dean looked in the cabinet under the sink. Strange shapes were piled up there. He stared. Something glistened beneath the pipes. He pulled out his flashlight. Grey, membranous orbs glistened in the beam of light. Lines like veins ran thickly across their surfaces. It took Dean a second to realize what he was looking at.

Eggs.

Dozens of them.

Dean grabbed a throw rug, placing it in front of the sink. He started pulling out the eggs, wincing at the slick, leathery feel of them. They weren't hard, but mushy, and inside he could feel little bodies forming, could feel their bones and joints and little heads. The veins running through the shells pulsed.

He piled them on the rug, then pulled them toward the fireplace. Dropping one into the flames, he waited to see what

would happen.

Nothing. The shell didn't even blister. The heat had no effect. Inside the egg, he could make out the outline of the baby aswang, curled up as if it were enjoying a soak in a hot tub.

He pulled it out with a pair of fireplace tongs.

Dean sprinkled the spice concoction on one of the eggs. Again, nothing. No sizzling, no puckering. He tried rock salt. Same result. He pulled out his .45 and fired a round point-blank at the shell. The bullet ricocheted off the egg, then the fireplace, then lodged in the wooden wall of the cabin.

He stared at the eggs, realizing that what killed the parent would probably be the only thing to destroy the eggs. He needed the stingray barb.

In the meantime, he could at least get the eggs away from the aswang. He would hide them.

Using the carpet like a giant sack, Dean gathered up the loose ends and tied it shut with a piece of cord he found in a kitchen drawer. Donning his boots again, he hefted the sack over his shoulder and left the cabin. He had to move far away and hide the eggs.

Outside, the wind was still gusting, throwing up so much dry snow that Dean was instantly gripped in a complete whiteout. He stood his ground as the gale pushed at his back. He couldn't tell where the ground ended and the sky began. As soon as the wind eased a bit, he set off.

He only hoped he could find his way back to the cabin. He would need to hole up until the storm blew through. The aswang wouldn't be happy when it found its eggs gone, but maybe it wouldn't be back that night. Besides, he might not be able to kill it, but he could sure as hell douse it with the spice concoction and drive it away.

Dean continued into the cold whiteness.

TWENTY-NINE



Barreling east along I-80, Bobby looked over at Sam, who placed his phone dejectedly in his lap. They'd been on the road for hours, with no further vampire incidents.

"Any luck?"

Sam shook his head. "Going straight to voicemail."

"I still say the battery might be dead."

Sam shrugged. "Then why wouldn't he recharge it at the Impala?"

"Hot on the trail?"

"I hope that's what it is."

Sam dialed another number, then hung up. "Jason isn't answering his, either."

"We'll be there soon. Dean will be fine."

Sam looked over at him. "What about Dean's head not being in the game?"

"I'm sure he's fine," Bobby insisted, but Sam could feel the weight of that white lie.

"I don't like this."

"Well, neither do I, but bitchin' about it isn't going to get us there any faster."

They had left Point Reyes Station two hours ago, and were now passing through Sacramento. The American River sparkled in the sunlight as they passed over it, barges and a paddleboat lining its banks. The drive felt four times longer than it had on their way out.

They climbed into the foothills. As the elevation increased, they passed a sign that warned that snow chains

were required on all vehicles heading east into the Sierra Nevadas. Bobby assured Sam he had chains in the back of the van.

Flurries started as they reached the historic town of Auburn. The snowfall increased as they got higher, and soon it was snowing so hard they could hardly see the road. A layer of ground fog hung thickly just above the highway, and Bobby slowed to a crawl behind a line of cars trying to reach Lake Tahoe and Reno beyond.

“This is terrible,” Sam said as they slowed down to five miles per hour.

A yellow road hazard sign glowed through the mist, warning them that the chain checkpoint was just a mile ahead. Bobby pulled over on the side of the highway and he and Sam quickly fitted the van with chains, tightening them down over the wheels. In five minutes they were back in the car, rattling toward the checkpoint.

As they neared the checkpoint agent, they crept ahead, a few feet at a time. The agent waved them ahead, seeing the chains on the van.

“How heavy is it snowing at Truckee?” Bobby asked.

“Highway might be closed by the time you get there. This is a whopper of a storm. You might have to spend the night there, or at the very least kill a few hours in a restaurant.”

“Thanks,” Bobby said, his mouth pulled into a colorless slit.

He pulled clear of the agent and picked up some speed, though the cars in front of them were only moving about twenty miles an hour. Still, it was better than the agonizing inching along they had been doing.

“Do you think Dean’s out in this?”

“He’s a smart kid. He can handle himself.”

Suddenly, the silver Escort in front lost control, skidding dangerously close to a guard rail.

“Jesus!” Bobby cursed, angling around it just in time.

The Escort recovered and pulled back onto the road.

“Idjits!”

As they moved along, it seemed to Bobby the road was filled with people who had never driven in snow before. Cars skidded dangerously close to each other, and they passed one that had gotten hung up near the median after driving into a snowdrift. A tow truck was attempting to pull it out. The cycling yellow light on top of the truck cut through the snowy haze, causing Sam to squint.

It was going to take them a long time to reach Truckee at this rate. Sam only hoped that Dean was somewhere warm and dry.

He looked into the back seat. The whip rested reassuringly by his winter jacket. Outside, snow obscured the road, making it hard to determine where lanes ended and began. Consequently, everyone had merged into a single, painstakingly slow line. Sam hoped Dean could hang on a little longer.

THIRTY



Plunging into thigh-deep snow, Dean hefted the carpet full of eggs through the blinding storm. Ice crystals stung his eyes and he struggled to see. At times the wind surged up, blowing so much snow at him he had to stop and wait for it to die down.

He needed to find someplace secure, somewhere they couldn't be seen from the air and preferably where he could bury them in case the aswang could track them by scent. Maybe the snow would even help in that way.

He came to a river and walked alongside it, using it as a guide to keep from getting lost in the storm. The water surged past as he hiked upstream, burbling past boulders and fallen tree branches. The driftwood was soaked through and dark red, almost black. He glanced behind, making sure he was long out of sight of the cabin. The cloud layer had descended, so thick that Dean couldn't make out more than forty feet in front of him, let alone see all the way to the cabin. But he kept hiking, trying to stick along the creek bank where the snow wasn't so deep.

After half an hour, he looked back the way he'd come, surprised to see that the snow had covered his tracks completely. It fell hard and fast, unrelenting.

Dean searched around, finding a massive group of granite boulders with a large cleft between the two biggest ones. He hefted his burden over to it and peered inside.

It was tight, but full of wind-blown dirt. He could probably wedge himself all the way to the middle. Deciding on it, he tossed the carpet of eggs into the cleft.

Pulling himself up and into the crevice, he inched along, squeezing himself through. The cleft was so narrow he couldn't straighten his feet, and had to walk on his toes,

wedging his boots against the rock and inching sideways. In some places he had to exhale to even fit.

He reached the makeshift sack and threw it again, farther inside. Then he slithered toward it.

The deeper he penetrated, the darker it grew. Above him, the two granite boulders came together, blocking out the white sky and the storm. The break from the wind was incredibly welcome. Dean squeezed himself closer to the sack, and as he wedged his foot down to pivot and grab it, it slipped, falling down into a small hole. His toe hit something hard and he felt the obstruction move slightly. Granite bit into his ankle and he cursed. He tried to pull his foot up, but it was trapped beneath the huge boulder and the rock that had toppled over.

Dean tried to look down at his foot, but after hitting his forehead against the cold stone, he knew the space was too small for him to dip his head forward. He tried to crane his neck around to see out of the corner of his eye. All he could tell was that his foot had been swallowed up under a lip of granite. He twisted his foot again and tugged upward, trying to free it. He placed his hands on the stone wall in front of him, trying to pull himself up and get leverage. Managing only an inch or so, he let himself settle back into the space. He could smell the cold dank of the stone, the wetness of the soil beneath him.

He tried to take a deep breath and found he couldn't.

To his left, his grasping fingers could just feel the fabric of the carpet.

Damn it!

He lowered his weight a little, straining his foot against the rock that had shifted. It was either huge and weighed more than Dean did, or was wedged tightly against the tremendous boulder. And if he lowered his other foot into the hole, it might get stuck, too.

Dean cursed, then let out a bellow of frustration.

He tried to console himself with the thought that the aswang would have a problem getting into the space. It was

bigger than Dean, and it wouldn't be able to fly in. Of course, he might still be stuck when the eggs hatched.

He checked the sack again out of the corner of his eye. *Please don't be moving*, he asked it silently. It was still, crammed in the cleft.

He tried to pivot his body as much as he could, but it wasn't enough. The granite lip held his foot firmly. He was going to have to risk it and lower his other foot into the crack to try and shift the rock around.

Dean squeezed his foot into the hole and kicked hard. He felt the rock shift. His trapped foot came free and he slammed downward. The granite gouged into his shins as his feet landed in dirt a few inches below. The granite walls on either side of him cinched up painfully. Dean gripped the flat of the boulder and heaved himself up, chimney crawling high enough up the cleft to actually take a deep breath. He breathed in the air. He was no longer stuck.

Be grateful for little things, he thought, *like not suffocating in a cleft in a rock or having to cut your own foot off*.

Dean leant sideways and reached down with grasping fingers to grab the sack of eggs. A bit further in, the lip of rock his foot had gotten trapped under met the ground. Plenty of dirt had gathered there over the years. The space was too tight to bend over in, so he dug with his feet. Gouging out dirt with his boot toe, Dean created a trench.

The loose soil piled up at his feet. The work sent sprays of earth up into the tiny confines and Dean spat out the bittersweet taste of dirt. He started to sweat under all his winter layers. Every few minutes, the wind blew a welcome gust of cold air his way.

Finally, the trench was deep enough for the eggs. He pushed the sack in with his boot, then kicked the soil back over it. When it was done, he turned his head and started out of the cleft, taking care not to step down into the lip again.

After a few minutes of squeezing and crawling, his head came out into the open. A white haze had consumed the forest. Dean could barely make out tree trunks only a few feet away. The wind blew even stronger, swirling snow up into a ground blizzard of ice needles that stung his eyes, making them tear.

He knew which direction the stream lay in, but couldn't see it at all. Hefting himself free of the crevice, he fell into almost hip-deep snow. He trudged in the direction of the stream, each step a tiring effort. He heard the water before he saw it, glad to locate the burbling little river.

Hiking downriver, he hoped he'd recognize where he should break off to get back to the cabin. He worried about Sam and Bobby, wondering if they were out in the storm looking for him. Once it died down, he'd go back to the car and contact them.

The storm had bleached the world of its color. The trees were no longer green, their trunks no longer brown or red. The world had gone monochromatic, a glass painting backdrop from a black-and-white 1930s film.

As he struggled back to the cabin, he wondered if the aswang could survive in a storm like this, or if it, too, would be seeking shelter. Dean felt the reassuring weight of the spice container inside his jacket. He hoped that the reason it hadn't worked on the eggs was their encasing shell. If it didn't work at all, he was in serious trouble.

THIRTY-ONE



For the tenth time in five minutes, Sam looked at his phone's clock. "We're not going to get there before dark."

Bobby peered ahead at the line of cars in front of them. Tail lights burned through the haze of snow. "I know."

They'd just crawled through Emigrant Gap, and Bobby knew it took more than thirty minutes to reach Truckee on a good day. At this rate, they wouldn't get there for another hour and a half or more.

The sun still hung above the peaks to the west, but soon it would dip low. Not that it mattered; they'd hike out in the middle of the night if they had to. With agonizing slowness, the line of traffic ascended and descended, working through the mountains into the town of Truckee. As the gloaming set in, Bobby spied Donner Lake on the right, gleaming in the last of the light.

"We're close."

They peeled off at one of the first exits, near the Donner Party memorial. Bobby saw the statue rising on the side of the road, the brave figure of a man and woman with two little children.

To avoid more traffic, they took side streets toward the main road that led to the trailhead and the ski slopes beyond. When they got there, two sheriff's department SUVs blocked the road.

As Bobby approached, a deputy stepped out of his car and held up his hand, telling him to stop. He slowed to a halt and rolled the window down.

"What's going on?" Bobby asked the deputy.

"Road's closed, sir. You can't go through this way."

“Why?”

“Avalanche danger. Whole mountain’s ready to go.” He sized them up. “You folks headed up to ski?”

Bobby shook his head. “Hike.”

“At night?”

Sam leaned over. “We’re backcountry campers.”

The deputy looked over his shoulder at the forest and mountains beyond. “Well, it’s going to be a while before you can go up there. The ski resort’s in the middle of evacuating all its guests. All those backcountry sites at the bottom of the slope are in extreme avalanche danger. I’m afraid we just can’t allow any hikers in there right now.”

Bobby frowned. “How long until we can?”

The deputy looked pensive. “Storm’s supposed to last at least two more days. Avalanche control is coming up with a plan for some controlled slides, but for now I suggest you find lodging in Truckee and check in with the sheriff’s station tomorrow.”

Sam leaned across again to look at the deputy, flipping open his F.B.I. credentials. “Here’s the truth. This is an emergency. We have an agent out there tracking a homicide suspect, and we were supposed to meet him.”

The ranger stared at his badge. “I’m sorry, but Feds or not, I can’t let anyone in. It’s just too dangerous. You say your colleague is out there right now?” The obvious worry in the ranger’s eyes did nothing to settle their unease.

“Yes,” Bobby told him.

“You should go check with the rangers then. They were patrolling the area, bringing in hikers. Your agent might be at the station.”

If only, Bobby thought grimly, but said, “We’ll do that.”

The deputy wrapped his knuckles on the car door. “All right then, folks. Good luck to you. Stay warm.”

“You, too,” Sam told him.

As Bobby backed up the car and turned around, he glanced at Sam in the growing darkness. "This isn't good."

"We have to get to the ranger station. Maybe Dean is there."

Bobby nodded, but he didn't let on to Sam that he thought that was about as likely as a junkyard dog ignoring a T-bone steak. There was no way Dean would have let a ranger evacuate him when the aswang was out there killing people.

He just hoped the storm hadn't gotten to Dean first.

THIRTY-TWO



The air smelled crisp and wet, and Dean's breath frosted in the air as he labored onward. He reached the part of the creek where he thought he should angle off for the cabin. Eyes searching the forest, he tried to spy smoke from the chimney, but could only see the low cloud layer.

He sniffed, detecting wood smoke, and followed the scent, but the wind tugged and pushed him, blowing the smoke wildly in all directions, and Dean had a tough time pinning down where it came from. He walked in a large semicircle, trying to keep the scent in front of him, losing it from time to time in the gusts.

Finally, he saw the cabin appear out of the ethereal grey haze. He stood next to a tree for several minutes, studying it for any hint of movement. The door was still closed, smoke still billowing out of the chimney. If the aswang had returned, it wasn't walking by any of the windows.

He walked toward the front door. The smear of blood still covered the wood. He pushed it open, finding the place as empty as before.

Dean took up a seat by the fire, pulling out the spice concoction to keep it at the ready. He could feel the heat stealing over his skin, thawing out his blood. He watched the door, tensed for a confrontation. Slowly, as he warmed up, the tension spilled out of him. His eyelids grew heavy. He jerked himself awake a few times, then sank into an exhausted doze.

He started awake at a loud pounding noise and sprang up, hand tightening around the vial of spices. He glanced around the room, his heart hammering. Waiting for the sound again, he became aware that darkness had settled in and the fire had died. Now just glowing embers, it cast long eerie shadows around the room.

The sound didn't repeat. He wondered if he'd dreamed it. It wouldn't be the first time he'd startled himself awake with a terrifying nightmare. He waited a few more minutes, then patrolled through the bedroom and bathroom, ensuring he was still alone. When he didn't find anything, he returned to the fireplace and threw more logs on the embers. They caught quickly, brightening the room.

Dean sat down again. He considered going outside and checking the perimeter, but decided that being lured out wasn't the best idea. If he was going to fight the aswang alone, he may as well do it where he'd be warm.

Five minutes later, something heavy landed on the roof. There was a pause, then the sound of something heavy slamming down. Dean supposed it could be clumps of snow falling off tree branches onto the roof. Then came another thump and another. Something was walking up there.

Soot sifted down the chimney, raining over the fire.

Dean moved away from the hearth, gripping the bottle of spices. There was a scrabbling sound and more black char scattered downward. The thing was coming down the chimney like some kind of perverse Santa Claus.

Dean backed up, leaving plenty of room to launch the bottle. He only had one shot and hoped a little went a long way. Taking a stance in the center of the living room, he braced himself for combat.

A big clump of ash smothered the flames in half the fireplace. Scrabbling erupted inside the chimney, pieces of mortar and brick cascading down.

Then a sudden crash rang out to Dean's left, and the aswang came smashing through the window. A hooked wing caught Dean in the side of the head and he went down, falling against the edge of the couch. Ash and cold wind spiraled in a gale around the room. Dean jumped up as it darted at him. Hooked claws gouged a wad of stuffing out of the couch.

Dean dumped some of the concoction on the aswang's chest and it howled, the first sound Dean had heard it utter.

The creature whipped around, fixing glowing coppery eyes on Dean. Primal fear washed over him, but he stood his ground. He'd never seen anything like it in all his years as a hunter, and now, in the gleaming firelight, he got his first good look. It was muscular and huge, more than six feet tall, with membranous wings that pulsed with veins, recalling the shells of its eggs. Each wing was tipped at its joint with a fearsome four-inch black chitinous claw. Its head was slender, with tremendous bat ears that quivered at every sound. A long, snaking proboscis emerged from a hole where the mouth should be, which sucked and pulsed, revealing a ring of serrated teeth. The eyes were vertical black pupils in orbs of copper. It stared at Dean with seething hatred.

It was one ugly son of a bitch.

Moving faster than Dean could track, it darted forward, ripping at his jacket with its talons. The material shredded and the weight of the blow sent him crashing back over the end of the couch. He landed hard on his head, then slammed over onto his back. Struggling to right himself, he barely had time to react before it landed squarely on his hips, pinning him down. He twisted under the weight.

Jerking to a sitting position, he threw it off balance and it staggered across the floor. Dean swept his leg out, kicking its foot out from under it. The aswang crashed down, and Dean brought his fist up and punched it squarely in the trachea. Making a strangled gargling noise, it staggered backward as he leapt up. He launched another spray of the spice mixture at it, but it darted to one side.

It shot out of the window.

He could hear its wings beating very softly at first, then louder and louder. It must be circling the building. He moved to the exact center of the room, pivoting to face the windows on opposite sides of the cabin. The wing flaps sounded closer and more intense, and he braced himself, ready for it to burst in again.

Then the wings grew quieter and quieter, fading into the distance. It was moving away. He'd won for now. He let his

shoulders slump forward and exhaled.

A wave of fire shot out of the fireplace, raining black soot all over him and the room. The aswang erupted from the flue like an arrow. Dean staggered backward as it collided with his chest, sending him sprawling into the kitchen area. He slammed into the Formica counter, winded. The aswang sneered down at him, the long proboscis attaching onto his face. A sticky wet tongue tasted his skin, then it started inhaling, vacuuming the sweat and grime off his face and leaving a sticky residue behind. Dean felt the graze of teeth.

His grasping hands reached into a drawer and pulled out a steak knife. He drove it hard into the creature's stomach. It jerked away.

Dean darted out of reach and headed toward the bedroom, spices at the ready again.

The aswang put a gnarled hand to its bleeding stomach. Then it snapped its gaze up, staring at Dean with utter contempt. With the hook of a wing, it wrenched open the cabinet under the sink. For a second it stood there, unmoving, staring at the empty cupboard, then it wheeled on Dean, enraged.

Dean closed in, showering it with another dose of the spice concoction. It let out a cry of agony, skin bubbling and blistering on impact. With a screech of rage, it exploded back out through the shattered window.

The sound of its beating wings, faint at first, grew louder as it flew away, and Dean suddenly realized why he and Sam had been so disoriented before when they listened for it. The closer it was, the quieter its wings sounded. People would let their guard down, thinking it was gone.

Sneaky son of a bitch!

Dean ran to the shattered window and stared upward, trying to see it in the sky, but only the grey swirls of the snowstorm greeted him.

He turned back to the fireplace, trying to clear some of the debris from the hearth while staying vigilant. Twenty

minutes passed quietly. The embers started to go out, and he didn't have another match. He put more logs on and stoked it with the poker. He only had to stay warm tonight, and then, when the storm broke tomorrow, he'd hike out.

A sudden pounding on the cabin door made him jump. He spun, staring at the closed door. More pounding erupted on the other side. Someone was knocking. He approached cautiously, peeking his head out of the broken window to see who it was. He couldn't make out a face, just a hooded figure in a storm parka and a huge backcountry pack. Grace.

He hurried to the door and opened it.

"Agent Plant?" she breathed, staggering inside in a pair of ice-caked snowshoes. She took the pack off, letting it slide to the floor, then fell to her knees beside it.

"Under the circumstances, maybe you can call me Dean?" He knelt down beside her. "Are you okay?"

"Lost. Dean." She shook the snow off her hood and lowered it. "I can't believe it, but I got lost out there. I've never seen a storm come up this fast."

She stared around the cabin, eyes landing on the fire. "Oh, fire. Can you help me over there?"

He hooked a hand under her arm and hefted her up. She crossed the room in her snowshoes and collapsed on the stone hearth. Peeling off her soaked mittens and warming her fingers in the heat, she said, "Oh, this is blissful."

After a moment, she removed her winter hat and looked up at him. "Saw the light from the cabin." Her eyes drifted from Dean's face to the shattered window behind him. "What happened?"

"Tree limb crashed through the window earlier." No need to tell his secrets. Besides, he didn't want to alarm her if the aswang wasn't coming back.

"This is the worst storm I've ever seen." She bent over, unbuckling her snowshoes. "Normally, I wouldn't have been carrying these things, but I was planning to do some

snowshoeing in the high country on my day off. Didn't think I'd need them at this elevation."

She shrugged out of her storm parka, then out of the fluffy fleece jacket she wore underneath.

"You certainly have a lot of layers."

"Always be prepared for anything up here."

He stared down at her snowshoes. "Well, I could have used a pair of those out there today."

She glanced around. "Whose cabin is this, anyway?"

Dean shrugged. "I have no idea. I happened across it, too. There are no photos, no personal mementos. Haven't you been up this way before?"

She shook her head. "To be honest, I'm not entirely sure where 'this way' is. Batteries on my GPS went out two hours ago, and the replacement ones went dead in the cold. I have a map, but with the cloud ceiling so low, I couldn't get my bearings by finding any landmarks." She studied the layout of the place. "It's probably a rental if it's so anonymous. There are a few up here." She wiggled her fingers in the heat of the fire. "That's good for you. It means they probably have a storage shed with skis, toboggans, snowshoes, all kinds of stuff for the tourists."

Dean hoped she was right. Come dawn, he'd look around the place for any outbuildings.

She sighed, leaning back against the stones. "Man, I'm glad I found you. I can't tell you how many times I kept thinking about being out there, lost, with that killer on the loose. Overactive imaginations and backcountry rangers are a bad combination." She glanced around. "Where are your partners?"

Dean thought of an easy lie. "They had to chase down another lead on the coast. Lucky bastards missed the storm."

He sat on the other side of the fireplace, watching Grace. She was calm for someone who had come so close to spending a night out in the storm. Maybe that was due to her training.

He let his shoulders relax. His arm where he'd gotten stitches pulsed with pain.

She closed her eyes, tilting her head back. "I didn't relish the thought of building a snow cave. This is much better."

Feeling incredibly drowsy suddenly, Dean stood up, pulling a quilt off the back of the couch.

"What are you doing?"

He nodded toward the broken window. "I need to do something about this, or soon it won't be that much warmer in here than outside."

She stood up. "Let me help you."

Dean retrieved some nails and a hammer he'd seen earlier in one of the kitchen drawers, and they nailed the blanket around the window frame. He stepped back, admiring their work. "Good as new."

She wrinkled her brow. "Yeah. Good as new."

She lay down on the couch then, crossing her legs. "I'm going to get some shut-eye."

Dean noticed her pack. "Hey, you have a radio, right? I need to get a message out to my colleagues. My phone died."

She crossed her arms behind her head and looked at him regretfully. "I wish. I was crossing a snow bank and fell through into a hidden stream. Had my radio out in the middle of a transmission, and it washed away." She frowned. "Searched for it till my hands went numb in the water, but it was gone."

Dean couldn't disguise his disappointment.

She lifted her head to look at him. "Hey, we'll be okay. We're both fit as a fiddle. We'll hike out ourselves tomorrow."

Dean nodded, turning back toward the fire. He watched the gold and blue flames wrap around the wood, flickering up the sides in tendrils. He hoped she was right. But the wintry scene he'd witnessed while nailing up the makeshift curtain didn't look like it was going to end tomorrow.

The wind howled, pressing in on the quilt and making it billow. With it came a tremendously cold gust that curled around Dean and made him shiver in spite of the fire. He shoved a chair in front of the curtain to keep it from blowing into the room. Then he prepared himself for a long, cold night of vigilance.

THIRTY-THREE



Bobby pulled up outside the ranger station on the outskirts of Truckee. It was a simple brown wooden building, and the lights were still on inside. They tried the door but found it locked, so Bobby knocked.

A few minutes later the door opened, and a burly ranger in his fifties appeared. He stared at them a little impatiently from beneath a crop of short brown hair. Sam recognized the red-faced man, especially his impressive Grizzly Adams beard. “Yes?”

“Ranger McGovern,” Sam started amiably. He flashed his F.B.I. badge. “Do you remember me?”

The ranger nodded.

“We were told by the sheriff’s deputy that some hikers were brought out of the Tahoe National Forest?”

“That’s right.”

“Do you remember my partner? Early thirties, short brown hair?”

The ranger knitted his eyebrows together. “I remember him, but he wasn’t among the folks who were escorted out. So far we’ve just had a couple and a woman with her dog.”

Bobby pulled out his F.B.I. credentials, too. “I’m Special Agent Cash. Our colleague’s out there following the trail of a serial killer.”

The ranger lifted his eyebrows and his jaw dropped a little. “Oh, jeez. You’d better come in.” He opened the door wider and they stepped into the warmth of the building. He ushered them over to a small vinyl couch in front of a coffee table that doubled as the crew’s break room. McGovern perched on the corner of a desk and gave a low whistle. “So

he's out there right now, in this blizzard, trying to bring a man in?"

"That's right," Sam told him. "We were supposed to join him, but we couldn't get through the road block."

"So those questions you asked me earlier, about the animal killings, that's your guy?"

"Yes."

"I knew it! Knew it wasn't some rogue bear."

"Agent Plant is out there alone right now," Bobby told him.

"Wow. That's rough." McGovern took a sip of some coffee from a mug sitting on the desk. "But no way can we let additional people up there right now. We're still waiting to see what avalanche control can pull off. If we can force it to slide in the right direction, we could alleviate the tension before a massive avalanche takes out the whole side of the mountain and everything in its path. They've got a team of guys up at Tahoe Summit Ski Lodge. They've got hand charges and even a howitzer up there. Thing is, the cloud ceiling's too low for them to know if they're hitting the right places."

"Listen," Sam said. "We really need to reach our colleague. Is there another access point to that area of the forest?"

"I'm afraid not. That's the closest and most direct route. Any other way would take you twice as long and make you go over far more rugged and dangerous terrain."

Bobby tried another tack. "His cell phone died out there. Is there a radio we can use? Are there any backcountry rangers in the area, still trying to find people to bring out?"

McGovern looked doubtful, then turned and checked a list of names on a clipboard. "Nope, nope," he said, scanning through them. "Our last ranger came in forty-five minutes ago."

Sam stood up. "Well, can we talk to Grace? She knows him and may have even seen him last."

The ranger raised his eyebrows. “Grace?”

“Yeah, Grace Cumberlin, the backcountry patrol ranger?”

McGovern wrinkled his brow and looked thoughtful. “We don’t have a Grace.”

“But we’ve run into her,” Sam insisted. “More than once.”

“Well, all I can tell you is we don’t have a Grace here.”

“Could she be part of another Forest Service branch?” Bobby asked.

“Not if she was patrolling out where your friend is. She’d be with the Tahoe National Forest.”

Bobby and Sam looked at each other, then Sam noticed an employee board where everyone’s photos were tacked up. “May I?” he asked the ranger.

“Be my guest.”

Sam walked to the board, Bobby following. Some twenty-four rangers smiled back at them. Each had a headshot, a list of interests beneath, and how long they’d been with the Forest Service.

Grace was not among them.

Sam clearly recalled her Forest Service uniform, the distinct logo on the upper arm of her jacket. She certainly wasn’t working for a different branch of the government.

“Bobby.”

“I know.”

“It would be a perfect disguise. People would feel safe. People would trust her.”

Bobby looked grim. “I know.”

THIRTY-FOUR



As snow cascaded down over Truckee, Sam and Bobby drove up an old fire road. Sam gripped the armrest as the van rumbled over the rough ground, jostling them and their gear. The road had been washed out so many times that huge gullies created dangerous pits along its entire length. Bobby was doing the best he could, but the heavy snowfall masked the location of the potholes and ravines, and they lurched and skidded all over the place. Sam's snowshoes slid off the backseat and skittered around in the back.

He aimed his flashlight at the topographic map on his lap. "Okay, there should be another road coming up on the right."

In a few more minutes, the headlights shone on the intersection, which was marked only with a small metal sign bearing the fire number 145GPH24. Bobby turned onto it and they rumbled on.

"We're almost there," Sam told him.

It was the closest they would be able to get to where they'd left Dean. They had tried again to get through the roadblock with no success. Most of the guests had been evacuated from the Tahoe Summit Ski Resort, and absolutely no one was being allowed up the road to the trailhead where the Impala sat. Dean would not be happy that his baby was getting buried in feet upon feet of snow.

As the car jerked and lurched, Sam tried Dean's cell again. Straight to voicemail. He tried Jason's, too, with the same result.

The van jammed up against a boulder hidden under the snow, and Bobby had to reverse and try again. "Can't make anything out in this storm!" he cursed.

“Just a little farther,” Sam said, consulting the map again. “There’s another road on the right in 0.2 miles.”

When they reached it, Bobby turned right, but the road ascended steeply and became even more washed out and treacherous.

“I don’t know how far we’re going to make it. This looks more like a fire break than a fire road.”

Branches scraped along the sides of the van as they climbed. A few times the vegetation grew so thick on either side that Sam thought the car might get wedged. But they pushed through.

“Not far now,” he assured Bobby. “The secondary trail should come into view in the next couple minutes.”

They rose higher, the tires spinning on patches of ice beneath the snow. They saw a large pullout, and Sam checked their GPS location against the map. “This is it, Bobby.”

Bobby parked in the wide gravel spot and they geared up in the warmth of the van. Sam donned a Capilene shirt, fleece pullover, and rainproof parka. On his bottom half he wore Capilene long johns and a pair of warm pile pants under waterproof rain pants. He slid on a warm black balaclava and a Turtle Fur hat. Then he stepped outside, his breath instantly sucked out by the sheer cold of the air.

He buckled on the snowshoes over his waterproof boots and cinched a pair of gaiters around his ankles and calves. No snow was getting in.

On the other side of the van, he could hear Bobby tightening up his snowshoes. Starting to feel warm despite the temperatures being in the low twenties, Sam strapped his rifle to his back, grabbed a handgun, the stingray whip, three bottles of the spice concoction, and stuffed them all in his parka pockets. In his pack he put food, water, an emergency blanket, map, compass, phone, phone charger, and extra batteries. On the bottom he lashed a waterproof bag with a tent and his sleeping bag.

“You ready?” Bobby asked from behind him.

Sam turned to his friend. Bobby was so thickly suited up in cold weather gear that he looked like the Michelin Man, if the Michelin Man walked around with an arsenal strapped to his back. Bobby placed four jars of the spice concoction into pockets in his parka, too.

“I’m ready,” Sam told him.

Side by side, they lowered their snow goggles in place, grabbed their trekking poles, and started off into the dark and the heart of the blizzard.

THIRTY-FIVE



Dean startled awake to a thunderous roar. He sat up in bed, unsure for a moment where he was. For a second he thought he'd fallen asleep in the car next to a freight train yard. Something loud was approaching. He propped his elbow behind him, his heart thumping wildly. Then he remembered where he was, in the bedroom of the cabin in the Tahoe National Forest. Exhaustion had claimed him some time in the early hours.

The roar grew louder, reminding him of the cacophony of funnel clouds he'd seen in Kansas. He swung his legs to the ground and peered up through the window above the bed. Only white swirled there.

He stood up, moving to the window and staring out. The higher viewpoint didn't offer anything else. Only white fog met his eyes.

"Grace?" he called, walking quickly into the main room.

She wasn't on the couch where he'd left her. The quilt over the broken window had billowed out, blowing over the chair.

He pulled on his boots and moved to the door. Outside, the roar intensified. He found the door unlocked and swung it open just as the ground began to shake. He gripped the doorjamb with both hands as the cabin started to vibrate and shudder. He could make out the vague, hazy outline of trees in the swirling white. The snow on the ground quaked and jumped, breaking into chunks that cracked and shifted. The vibrations moved up through his boots into his legs and torso until he could feel the tremors through his whole body, a deep thrumming at his core.

He scanned for the ranger, not seeing anything but the storm.

“Grace!” he shouted above the din.

Suddenly, the shaking stopped. The roar was instantly replaced with a hiss that faded to silence. Dean strained his ears. All he could hear was the quiet musical tinkle of snowflakes cascading down around him.

“Grace!” he shouted again.

There was crunching in the snow, and a second later she came running around the side of the cabin, breathless. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold, and she bent over, catching her breath.

“What was that?” Dean asked.

She pointed up and behind her, toward the obscured mountain slopes above them. She swallowed, her throat sounding dry. “Avalanche!” she said between gasps. “A huge one!” She shook her head, hands on her knees. “Thought it was going to arc this way and take us out!” She stood up, looking back. “As it is, it barely missed us. I’ve never heard one that huge.” She stared around her. “And it’s still snowing.”

Dean stepped aside as she moved into the warm cabin. She stripped out of her jacket and hat, tossing her gloves onto the couch.

“We can’t stay here, Dean. Another avalanche and we could easily be buried.”

He shut the door, then moved to the fireplace. Grace had evidently piled more logs on the fire before she went out.

“Someone built this cabin in an avalanche path?” he asked incredulously.

She shook her head. “No. It was probably fine for decades. But for a second the clouds parted, and I could see that one just took out a swath of the forest that was protecting this cabin. We couldn’t withstand another one, and they can come in swarms.”

Dean thought of Bobby and Sam. He suspected they were on the way back with the weapon. If they left now, they could hike out, avoid the avalanche, and get the weapon.

“I have to get back to my car.”

She put her hands on her hips, still laboring to breathe. “No—you can’t do that. You’d be walking right across the foot of the avalanche path. In fact...” She pulled out her map as her words trailed off. She spread it out on the coffee table and gestured him over. “I did some place finding out there. When the clouds parted for just a couple of minutes, it was long enough for me to see that we’re at the bottom of this escarpment here.” She pointed to a steep cliff on the map. “If you hike out to your car,” she trailed her finger along the path he would take, “you’re not just crossing this avalanche zone, but three more.” She met his gaze. “Dean, there’s a good chance you simply wouldn’t make it. And with it continuing to snow like this, the danger is just going to get worse.”

Dean felt his stomach sink. He had to reach Bobby and Sam.

“We can’t stay here, either.”

“Right.” Grace moved her finger to the symbol of a downhill skier on the map. “I think we should head for the Tahoe Summit Ski Resort. They’ve got to know about the avalanche danger, and the avalanche patrol might be able to do a controlled slide we won’t get caught in. That’ll release the pressure and we’d be able to hike safely across the avalanche zones.”

Dean studied the map. The ski resort lay six miles from where they were, and up one thousand vertical feet.

“Why would we be safer going there, crossing this area, instead of back toward the car?”

She pointed out the trail they would use. “It’s up and across some very dense forest. We’d be a lot safer doing that trek than trying to get out and crossing large open spaces. The ski resort will have electricity, food, water, emergency supplies, and a medic.”

Dean considered it. With electricity, he’d be able to recharge his phone and call Bobby and Sam. A ski resort also

meant roads going up to it, and maybe they could reach him that way.

He looked at Grace, still concerned, but leaning her way. “If there really is such a high avalanche danger, how do you know if the resort will still be open? Wouldn’t they have evacuated it?”

“They would have evacuated the guests, but not the skeleton crew. The avalanche control team and the mountain manager will still be up there, as will members of the ski patrol.”

Dean looked back at the map. The lines of contour appeared tiny and simple on the paper, but he knew from his trek yesterday that walking six miles in thigh-deep snow would be exhausting and take a ridiculously long time. Trying to do that with an injured leg, like Jason, would be nearly impossible. He worried the hunter might not have made it out alive, even without the aswang hunting them.

Heading to the resort was their best bet. “Let’s do it.”

“Okay.” Grace folded up the map and stowed it back in her bag, then started to suit up again.

“I’m going to look for an outbuilding with supplies.”

“I saw one when I was out there trying to get my bearings. Head around back.”

Dean slung on his coat and left the cabin. A few feet from the door, he sank up to his waist. Each step was an effort, as he had to extract his legs and swing them over the top of the snow. Fifty feet behind the cabin stood a small shed. Dean hadn’t seen it at all in the whiteout the day before. He pushed through the white powder and reached the door. Thankfully it swung inward, or he’d have to shovel the whole thing out. He lifted the latch and pushed it open. Inside were two inner tubes, an old-fashioned sled, four pairs of cross-country skis with poles, and four pairs of snowshoes. He breathed a huge sigh of relief. Six miles would have been hell without snowshoes. This was starting to look possible.

He grabbed the pair that were about the right length for his height and sat down on the dusty floor of the shed next to the sled. Quickly he lashed the snowshoes on, grateful he'd found them.

While he sat there, he unloaded his rifle and .45. Carefully he dipped each bullet in the spice concoction. Since it had made the aswang's skin bubble, maybe he'd be able to get some inside the creature this way. He reloaded the anointed ammunition back into the guns, and put the extras into his parka pocket.

When he left the shed, he stepped up into the mound of snow, finding the going infinitely easier. He walked along the surface, sinking just slightly into the soft, powdery snow.

He gazed around him. Smoke curled from the cabin's chimney. Above the roof, mist gathered, creeping slowly through the forest. He looked up in the direction of the slope where Grace had seen the avalanche. He couldn't see anything but clouds there, obscuring the peaks.

A wind kicked up, swirling snow in front of him and blinding him for a second. Then it whirled away, and suddenly he could see the whole extent of the mountain slope above them.

Dean had never seen a swath cut by an avalanche before, but now he found himself staring at the raw power of nature. A staggeringly huge mass of disturbed snow wound down the entire mountain, splintered tree trunks sticking out at odd angles. It had cut a track for itself hundreds of feet wide.

He understood what Grace had tried to explain; only a small patch of protective forest stood between the cabin and the massive destruction of the avalanche. That tiny patch of trees would not survive the next big rumble of snow.

They had to get out of there now.

THIRTY-SIX



Grateful for his snowshoes, Bobby trekked through the powder with Sam walking beside him. At first they had walked single file, taking turns in the lead, but the wind was so powerful that the person behind could never hear the person in front unless they stopped and turned around.

Every twenty minutes or so, Bobby pulled out the map and compass and checked their location. Not only were they hiking into an unknown area, but the snow fell so intensely beneath such a low cloud cover that he wasn't able to check for landmarks. The battery-operated device that he'd sneered at before had now come in handy more times than he could count. He stopped, pulling out the GPS unit from the warmth of his pocket and powering it on.

He waited while it found their location, then waited another thirty seconds while it averaged readings, making the outcome more accurate. He checked the map against the coordinates. They were on the right track, thankfully. To save time, they were trailblazing, not sticking to any known route. It had seemed like a good idea at first, but now Bobby would have welcomed a marked trail in the blizzard. While any sign of a trail would have been lost beneath the feet upon feet of snow, the forest service regularly marked them by leaving small metal placards in trees.

"How we doing?" Sam yelled above the gale, lifting his goggles. Bobby could only make out Sam's eyes. Snow completely encrusted his balaclava, and his hood was pulled low over his hat.

Bobby struggled with the map as a sudden gust tugged at it. He knelt down, smoothing it back. They needed to go another 1.7 miles northwest, and they would intersect the trail on which they'd last seen Dean. Of course, that had been more than a day ago. Now it was light, but Sam and Bobby had

hiked through the bitter darkness, only the effort of trekking through the snow keeping them warm. That first vague glow in the east had been a welcome sight to Bobby. It would be a hell of a lot easier to navigate in the daylight.

He turned off the GPS unit, got out his compass to ensure the right direction to head in, and folded up the map. He pointed in the direction they'd been heading and nodded to Sam. Sam lowered his goggles back in place, and they trudged on in silence.

The crunch of the snow beneath their feet filled Bobby's world. His breath frosted beneath his fleece face covering. He was glad they'd brought snow goggles as the world around them grew brighter and brighter. He couldn't make out the sun overhead, the clouds were too thick, but the diffused light gave everything an almost ghostly glow.

It was obvious Dean and Jason wouldn't be out in this. Even with their tents and warm bags, they would likely have sought shelter of some kind. Bobby knew there were a few backcountry cabins out this way, and hoped Dean had found his way to one of them.

The lack of sleep burned Bobby's eyes, making him want to rest. But first they had to find Dean, then he'd get a few hours of shut-eye. He had to know Dean was all right.

The powdery snow was easy to walk in, and the snowshoes made it simple to ascend and descend the steep hills that separated them from the trail they sought. They walked up forested knolls and crossed a few areas of exposed granite.

As they summited a rounded section of rock, Bobby's snowshoe slid on a patch of ice beneath the powder. His foot slipped out from under him. At the last minute he lashed out with his trekking pole, saving himself.

"Nice moves," Sam told him.

"Thanks. Don't think I'll be applying for a spot on the Ice Capades any time soon, though."

They continued on in silence once again, then Bobby stopped to check the map. Still they couldn't see any cliffs or landmarks around them. The mist crept through the forest, making it impossible to see more than twenty feet in front of them. The GPS unit told Bobby they were still on the right track.

"0.6 miles to go!" he called to Sam above the wind.

They walked on, Bobby looking forward to reaching terrain that Sam might recognize. Then they could start searching for Dean's trail.

The wind buffeted Bobby's back and snow spiraled around him, landing on his eyelashes. His fingers felt warm inside the thick mittens as he moved with the trekking poles, working himself into a rhythm. They crested a small hill and descended the other side, moving around tremendous boulders and a few stunted trees. At the bottom, Bobby spotted a trail running to the northeast and southwest. Trees had been cleared out for it, forming a perfect tunnel through the snow-laden forest.

"Look familiar?" he asked Sam.

Sam looked both ways, studying the area. "I don't know... Everything looks so different in the snow, and I can't see into the distance."

Bobby hooked his thumb toward the southwest. "You think the car's back this way?"

Sam squinted. "Maybe. Sorry, Bobby, it all looks so different."

Bobby pulled out the GPS unit and checked their location. They were right where Bobby thought, according to the map. They'd intercepted the trail Dean had been using. Two miles to the southwest was likely the Impala.

"If he made it back to the car, he would have driven out, or at the very least recharged his phone and called us," Sam said.

Bobby tightened his mouth. "So you're thinking he hasn't made it back to the car?"

“Maybe he didn’t even try in all this.”

Bobby looked up at the heavily snow-laden trees. “You could be right.”

“He might be hot on the trail, reluctant to lose it,” Sam suggested.

Bobby pointed up the trail. “I say we rule out that he’s back at the car, and go check it out.”

“Good idea. If it’s still there, we come back and follow the trail, searching for any sign of him.”

Bobby nodded. “Right.” He considered separating, one of them trekking back to the Impala to see if it was still there. But in this storm, finding each other again might be impossible.

Bobby had never been in a snowstorm this bad, and he was starting to worry about Dean. He knew he could take care of himself, but even the most experienced outdoorsman could get hopelessly lost in whiteout conditions like this.

As they set off toward the last known location of the Impala, Bobby hoped that Dean had held on to his map and compass, because without it, he could be freezing to death even now.

THIRTY-SEVEN



Dean stepped around a tree, suddenly sinking up to his knee, even with the snowshoe on. “What the hell?” He struggled to pull his foot free.

“It’s a tree well,” Grace told him, hooking a hand under his arm and hefting him upward. “Snow collects at the base of a tree, and it gets really powdery and deep. People have been known to suffocate in them.”

“Great. I’ll keep that in mind.” He extracted his foot, then gave the tree a wide berth.

They’d been walking for over two hours, the progress painfully slow, while the storm raged on. He had hoped they’d come across some sign of Jason. Dean dismissed images of the hunter lying frozen at the base of a tree. Jason could easily have gotten hopelessly lost. He wasn’t even entirely sure Grace knew which way they were going. She kept staring off into the distance, waiting for clouds to part. Sometimes they waited more than ten minutes, just standing and staring. Then they’d either move on without getting a glimpse of landmarks, or the landmarks would be treated with the briefest of looks before Grace hurriedly jotted down notes and studied the map again.

They entered a very dense section of forest. Dean had slipped more than once on strange shapes under the snow, logs and huge rocks. Once he’d even stumbled over what turned out to be an old mine car. At least that meant they weren’t the first humans here, though it felt like it to Dean.

All he could hear was the wind sighing through the trees. They hadn’t seen a single sign of human habitation since they left the cabin.

“How are we doing?” Dean asked Grace when she stopped again to look at the map.

“Good, I think.”

“You think?”

“Well, it’s hard. I’m pretty much having to use dead reckoning.”

“That sounds about as cheerful as I feel.”

“It works, that’s the good part. You just try to keep track of the distance and time you’ve traveled. Well, it works most of the time. Unless you’re a complete idiot, which I’m not.”

“As long as this doesn’t end with one of us slicing the other open for warmth, I’m game.”

“Don’t worry. You smell better on the outside.”

He peered over her shoulder at the map while she consulted it. His breath frosted in the air. Beyond them, the clouds slid through the tree trunks, creating an unsettling, eerie landscape.

Dean had been watching for the gaunt figure, but hadn’t seen any sign of him.

“Okay.” She checked the bearing with her compass. “Let’s head slightly to the northeast. It’ll take us around a massive ridge that we can’t see, but is only a half-mile away from us right now. If we keep going straight, we’ll be looking at an impossible ascent. So instead we’ll skirt around the base. It’ll still be a bit steep in parts, but we’ll go around the worst bits.”

Dean quickly compared his own map to hers, seeing what she was talking about. The last thing he wanted to do was to be completely lost if they somehow got separated. He stared around, tried to get his bearings. Behind him, according to the map, was that ridge, ahead of him this ridge. It seemed impossible in the whiteout. He stuffed the map back in his parka pocket.

They started climbing at a slight angle. The snowshoes which at first had felt cumbersome and awkward now felt like part of Dean’s feet. They hissed in the powder when he

stepped down, and the metal teeth on the underside made climbing easy.

He glanced around the snow as they walked, searching for another blood trail, but not seeing anything but white. He put his sunglasses on as the whiteness grew too much to look at. With his scarf wrapped around his nose and mouth, though, the lenses kept fogging up. Having to choose between squinting and having a numb face, he chose the numb face. He couldn't afford to go snow-blind.

He thought he heard something moving behind them and spun around. Only forest greeted him, their tracks vanishing into its depths. He continued on, hearing a distinct rustling behind them again. He jerked around, stopping.

By the time Grace noticed he'd stopped, she was thirty feet ahead of him. "What is it?" she called back.

He stared around the forest, then turned to her and pointed at his ear.

She glanced around, then over to him. "What is it?" she repeated in a whisper.

"I thought I heard something. A rustling."

She scanned the area. "It's probably your parka hood. It can play tricks on you in the wind, making you think you're hearing things as it flaps against your head." She pulled hers down, exposing her ears. "Mine does all the time."

Dean lowered his hood and listened. All he could hear was the wind. It howled around them, instantly chilling his face and exposed head.

They stood for five minutes, just listening, until, reluctantly, Dean pulled his hood up. "Okay. Let's go."

She did the same and started out ahead of him.

He followed in her footprints, taking advantage of her trailblazing to stare around them furtively. He did not relish the idea of a fight. He was more trussed up than the little brother in *A Christmas Story*. He thought if someone knocked

him over in all his gear he'd just land on his back like a turtle, feet and arms flailing ridiculously.

Then he had the unmistakable hair-on-the-back-of-the-neck feeling of being watched. He stopped, whirling around.

Behind them, staring out from a tree some thirty feet away, was the gaunt figure. He stood just at the range of visibility, with tendrils of grey sweeping around him. The hood was still pulled low over the face, but Dean could just see inside it now, making out a pale face and a pair of snow goggles.

Instantly, Dean grabbed his rifle and fired. The man moved fast, but Dean was pretty sure he'd hit him in the upper arm. Mist swallowed the retreating figure, but Dean was not going to let him get away this time. He was tired of checking over his shoulder every two minutes.

"Stay here!" he shouted to Grace, then took off running on the snowshoes in pursuit.

THIRTY-EIGHT



Dean reached the spot where he'd seen the man. Dark blood in the snow meant he'd definitely hit his target. He ran on, pack thumping against his back.

He followed the blood, glancing up into the trees to be sure nothing dropped down on him. The drops got farther and farther between, indicating the man could run fast. He came upon a patch of disturbed snow, a big puddle of blood in the middle of it. Dean circled the area, looking for another drop, but didn't find anything. Heavy snow cascaded around him, already starting to obscure the blood patch.

Dean pressed himself against a tree and peered out cautiously, eyes searching for any hint of motion. He didn't see anything. He waited, listening. Then he turned to retrace his steps, disappointed. The last thing he wanted on top of everything else was that thing out there, tailing them. And where was Jason? Dead? Frozen?

As Dean turned to rejoin Grace, he looked back at the disturbed snow. Was it possible the thing had buried itself?

He reached down, finding icy chunks of older snow under the fresh powder. He felt an old log and a few bushes, but nothing animal. Finally, he turned back, and found to his alarm that the snow had already completely obscured the blood trail. He could barely make out the depressions where his snowshoes had been. He followed his route back, finding Grace sitting down on a stump in the snow.

"You okay?" she asked, standing up. "What did you shoot at?"

"I thought I saw something."

"And by 'something' you mean serial killer?"

Dean was quiet.

“So you leave me here to fight the killer on my own?”

“No, I left to fight the killer on my own.”

“While he doubles back and makes a meat rug out of me to match his scalp throw pillows.”

“He might be more of a leg bone end table kind of guy. Haven’t decided yet.”

“Thanks for that.” She glanced around nervously. “So it’s nothing?”

“It was something, but it’s prowling, not attacking for some reason.”

“Well, that makes me feel loads better.” She started walking again, hurrying. “On toward the avalanche zone.”

Dean checked behind them once more before slinging his rifle around to his back. He reached into his pocket, feeling the reassuring weight of his silver .45.

They came to the edge of the dense section of forest and entered a small meadow with a few dead trees standing stark and grey against the white.

They were halfway across it when Dean heard the now-familiar deep rumble of another avalanche above them.

THIRTY-NINE



Sam looked around at the quiet, snowy forest as they made their way toward the Impala. At least that was the direction he hoped they were heading. If it weren't for Bobby's GPS, they would have no idea where they even were. Everything looked so different. He knew he'd walked this very path with Dean not too long ago, but with everything covered in snow and the clouds obscuring anything in the distance, Sam found it difficult to get his bearings.

As they walked, they looked for signs of Dean. The only thing that let Sam know they were actually on a trail was that the trees had been cleared on either side. The path wasn't very wide, and more than once he and Bobby had to walk single file through trees and around massive boulders.

They weren't saying much to each other. He knew that both of them worried about Dean, about the storm, and most of all about Dean being out in it with the aswang. He hated that he couldn't warn Dean about Grace. His only hope was that he wasn't with her right now. She could be luring him into anything. He hoped his brother's hunter sense was tingling, but Sam's and even Bobby's hadn't gone off in her presence. She was good.

He watched Bobby's back as they moved single file again, going up over a little rise. They hiked down it, another featureless area in this whiteout. Sam had no idea how far they were from the Impala.

Bobby stopped, pointing ahead. "I think I see something!"

Sam followed his hand, and thought he did, too—a long, low line of black something in all the white.

"It's the fence! The one by the parking area!" Bobby called back to him.

They moved forward, renewed vigor to their steps. Sure enough, it was the parking lot. They'd actually found it. Sam felt like a minor miracle had happened.

They snowshoed past the fence and looked at the parking lot. Two huge lumps of snow provided the only relief to the flat expanse of the trailhead lot. The lumps stood exactly where Jason's truck and the Impala had been parked. To be sure, Sam crossed to the shorter one and lifted some snow off the side. The entire thing was absolutely buried. He dug down to the driver's side door, his mitten finding glossy black beneath. He cleared off a window and peered in. It was the Impala.

"It hasn't moved since we left," Sam noted.

Bobby checked out the hulk of snow that was likely Jason's truck. He cleared off the driver's side window. "It's Jason's, all right," he said. "I recognize the fuzzy dice hanging from the rear view mirror." He stepped back and took in the sheer amount of snow on top of the vehicle.

Sam frowned. "The fact that Dean hasn't called could be because his phone is dead or that he lost it." He glanced toward the trail they'd come from. "Either way, it means he's out of contact, and if his phone's dead, then he's in a place with no electricity."

"Which could be very cold."

"We need to find him."

"We'll have to track him. Gonna be hard as hell in this storm, but we have to try."

Bobby headed back to the trailhead a few feet away, and Sam joined him. They stared at the intensely falling snow, which had already partially filled their tracks in just a few minutes.

"This is going to be tough, Bobby."

Bobby didn't respond, just stared at the storm with a grey slash of a mouth.

FORTY



Dean felt a primal wave of self-preservation sweep over him. “Is that another avalanche?”

Grace trained her ears toward the sound. As they listened, the ground beneath their feet started rumbling. Snow shook, moving in shifting drifts around their boots. Adrenaline kicked up the pace of Dean’s heart.

“Yes. But we should be safe in the trees,” Grace told him.

Dean wasn’t convinced. “Did you see the section of forest the last one took out?”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

“And you think that won’t happen here?”

“We’re higher up on the slope, in denser trees.”

The mountain really started to shake beneath them, and Dean grabbed onto a tree trunk to steady himself. “Where is it?”

Grace tried to see upslope, past the trees. “Must be on the slope to our left.” She waited. “I think it’ll pass us by.”

The mist was so dense that Dean couldn’t see past the edge of the trees. For all he knew, the avalanche could be speeding their way. It was humbling to think that a wall of snow could just wipe them off the mountain. He listened for the crunching of wood, the splitting of trunks, anything that would give away the direction of the avalanche or if it were taking out another swath of trees.

“Maybe we should move in the other direction, or go upslope?”

Grace stood still, listening. Beneath them the snow had shifted so much from the vibrations that their boots were completely covered. Then the quaking lessened.

“I think it’s ending,” she said finally.

The rumbling stopped, the roar in the distance fading away as the snow settled.

“So we’re safe?” Dean asked.

“For now.”

“That doesn’t instill a lot of confidence. We need to get to the ski resort.”

Dean started upslope again, winding between the trees. Grace followed, occasionally glancing nervously in the direction of the avalanche noise.

The low cloud layer was almost claustrophobic at times. Their stalker could be following them and Dean would never see him. In fact, he was pretty sure he was still following them. He could feel eyes staring into his back.

FORTY-ONE



Dean and Grace slowly worked their way toward the ski resort through the driving snow. At least, Dean hoped that's where they were going. He estimated they'd walked four of the six miles and made about half of the one thousand foot elevation gain.

He could certainly feel the five hundred feet they'd climbed. While that was nothing to him on a regular hike, slogging in the snow took a lot more energy.

They reached a large meadow, and Grace stopped, checking her map. She pointed out a meadow that ran alongside a slope. "This is Seven Boulder Meadow. Once we cross this, it'll be up a rockslide on the far side, and then we'll be within range of the resort."

Dean looked up from her map. The visibility was so poor, he couldn't even see the edge of the meadow. It just looked like a flat expanse of deep snow ending in a sky of white.

She followed his gaze. "If it were clear and sunny, we'd be able to see the ski runs of the resort by now." She stared out over the field. "We're close."

On the map, she pointed out the resort in relation to the meadow, and she was right. They were close.

She started across the flat expanse of snow. The wind created a hypnotic effect on the ground, like snow snakes winding in and out of each other.

Dean followed in Grace's trail, keeping an eye on their six. But he hadn't seen their pursuer since he shot him.

Grace reached the center of the expanse. Dean didn't like being so out in the open, but he did appreciate finally moving on a level surface, and felt some of his energy returning. He

hadn't eaten anything but a few strips of jerky in over twenty-four hours.

He slowed, getting his water bottle out of his pack and taking a long drink. The cold dry air sucked the moisture right out of him, making him constantly thirsty. As he paused to put the bottle back, he heard a loud cracking noise.

At first, he glanced upward, afraid it was another avalanche. Then Grace cried out. He turned just in time to see her apparently fall into the snow. There was another tremendous cracking sound, and suddenly the ground around her tipped upward. Water sprayed up and she disappeared.

"Grace!" Dean yelled, hurrying in her direction.

Then he saw their terrible mistake. They weren't on a meadow, but on a frozen lake. He dropped to his stomach and crawled forward to the hole where she'd gone in. He didn't see her at all, just a dark hole in the ice, sloshing with turbulent water.

He felt something thump under him, and realized she'd been sucked under the ice sheet. She was pounding on the ice beneath him, trying to find her way out.

Dean knew the icy water would almost instantly paralyze her lungs and body. He had seconds to get her out. He pulled his glove off, slid to the edge of the hole, and thrust his hand into the water.

He waved it around, thrashing it so she'd see the movement. Too many seconds passed. Suddenly, something brushed his fingers. It was her pack. Dean grabbed it, heaving upward with all his strength. For a second the pack caught on the edge of the ice, and he worried she'd slip out of it. Then he saw her head emerge, sagging forward. He pulled hard, slithering backward on the ice. His snowshoes dug in and he managed to pull her partially out, then grab her shoulders and tug her all the way out of the water. She collapsed on the ice next to him, shuddering. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and Dean knew he had to get her warm and dry as quickly as possible.

Continuing to lie on the ice, he elbowed his way to the edge of the hidden lake, dragging Grace along with him.

When they entered the trees again, he stood up and threw her over his shoulder. After carrying her a few feet to safety, he set her down against a tree and shucked off her wet pack. Her teeth chattered, her lips already blue. He shrugged his own pack off and left it next to her.

Dean replaced his glove and looked around for kindling that wasn't soaked through with snow. Quickly, he moved through the denser undergrowth. He found a few logs that didn't look too bad and carried them back to her. She remained silent, shuddering, teeth chattering.

Good. As long as she kept shivering, she wasn't going hypothermic. But she wasn't cognizant, either.

Dean clustered some pine needles and kindling around the logs and pulled out his Zippo. But when he tried to light them, they wouldn't catch. He tried again and again, but everything was just too wet. Some of the pine needles caught, but it wasn't enough heat to even catch the kindling on fire. He tried for a few more minutes, then knew it was futile.

He had to get Grace out of her wet clothes.

Dean rummaged through his pack, pulling out his tent and sleeping bag. He set the tent up in the snow, efficiently snapping the poles together and sliding them through the nylon sleeves. When it was up, he tossed his sleeping bag inside and unrolled it.

Grace hadn't moved or said anything. He picked her up and slid her into the tent, laying her next to the bag. He grabbed a pair of pants and a flannel shirt from his pack and laid them out.

Then he quickly stripped her out of her wet clothes and dressed her in the dry ones. Crawling into the tent with her, he zipped up the tent fly, blocking out the wind. He folded her inside the sleeping bag and then got in himself. Wrapping his arms around her, he warmed her with his body heat. She continued to shiver, and pressed in close to him. Even her

breath on his neck was icy cold, and he pulled the sleeping bag tightly around her.

“You’re going to be okay, Grace.”

She shuddered against him, her wet hair cold against his face, and muttered unintelligibly.

Dean stared up at the tent ceiling, feeling a tinge of fear in his gut. One thing was clear. They’d somehow gone off course. There was no lake on the map where they thought they were. They could be miles from the resort.

Dean listened to the wind as it made the tent flutter and quake.

They were lost, and Grace could die out there.

FORTY-TWO



Dean kept talking to Grace, jostling her when she started to fall asleep. If she lost consciousness, she would be at even greater risk of hypothermia.

Her body was starting to warm up. Her wet hair had at first frozen into spiky strands, but the tent grew slowly warmer with their body heat, and finally they thawed out.

She started talking a little bit. Dean had asked her trivial questions at first, trying to get her to stay awake, but those hadn't worked well, so now he asked her tough ones that made her stir.

“What’s your family like?”

That one had earned him a jab to his ribs. She didn't answer, just shifted around, trying to shove him away, drifting in and out. He held on to her. The light outside dimmed and night set in, the temperature lowering. But with the thick cloud cover, it only felt a few degrees cooler.

Dean wondered where Sam and Bobby were. They must be out there looking for him. He had to get to a phone or electricity.

Grace was warming up; at least that was going well. If she had fallen into unconsciousness or hypothermia, he would have had to hike out and get her help.

It had been dark for a couple of hours when she stirred next to him and spoke. “Dean?”

He looked down, meeting her blue eyes. “Grace.”

“What happened?”

“The meadow turned out to be a lake. You fell in.”

She brought a hand up, rubbing her forehead. “My head’s killing me.”

“I’m not surprised. It was pretty dicey for a while there.”

“Good thinking with the sleeping bag.”

He smiled.

“So where are we, then?” she asked. She tried to focus on his face, but her head tilted to the side.

“That’s a good question. Figured we could look at the map once you were *compos mentis*.”

She looked at him groggily. “So where is it?”

Dean reached his hand out of the sleeping bag, and felt around in his pack until he grabbed the map. He picked up his headlamp and switched it on so they could see.

Staying hunkered down in the warm bag, Grace took the light and examined the map. “Damn.”

“Don’t tell me. We’re in an avalanche area.”

“No.” Her voice trailed off. Then she said, “I’m just mad I got us off course.”

“Frankly, I’m impressed you could get us anywhere without seeing any landmarks.”

She blinked, trying to make sense of the map. Dean could tell she was struggling to focus. He reached his hand out. “This is where you thought we were.” He pointed to the place on the map.

She turned the map in her hands, closed her eyes for several long moments, then opened them again. She pulled the map closer, staring at it. “I think we walked on the wrong side of this ridge here.” She pointed to a steep incline. “See that?”

Dean did. On one side of the ridge stood Seven Boulder Meadow. On the other was a tiny alpine tarn called Little Heron Lake. “Your unexpected dip in the water?” he asked, pointing to it.

“I think so.”

She studied the map for a few more minutes.

Dean pointed to Seven Boulder Meadow. “As soon as it’s light, we’ll backtrack to here, then cross the meadow. Then it’s just up the rockslide to the resort.”

“Sounds good.” Her speech was a little slurred. “Did you try to start a fire?”

“Everything was too wet. We’ll just have to hike fast tomorrow. Your boots will still be wet, and you’ll be a prime candidate for frostbite in those things.”

She lifted back the sleeping bag, seeing that she was dressed in Dean’s clothes. “I’m not wearing any underwear, am I?”

“You know what they say. Cotton kills. It was for your own good, I assure you.” He lifted his palm up to show he meant no harm. “I was a total gentleman.”

She looked at him begrudgingly. “Well, thanks. You saved my bacon.”

“And it’s very nice bacon, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

That earned him a weak punch to the ribs.

She folded up the map and gave it back to Dean. “Let’s try to get some sleep. We’ll need all our strength tomorrow.”

Exhaustion had long ago crept over him, and now that she was out of danger, he welcomed sleep. “Sounds good.”

She curled up next to him and soon he drifted off to the sounds of the gale tearing at the tent door.

The morning appeared as a slow lightening at the tent walls. Dean sat up, peering out of the tent’s small window. Snow had almost buried them, which explained why he’d been so toasty all night long. Grace stirred at his movement.

“It’s light.”

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. “Is it?”

“Yep.”

Outside, the snow fell heavily. The wind gusted, sending up columns of white through the trees. He still couldn't see more than forty feet away.

"You sure about the way we have to go?" Dean asked.

"I better be."

"That's not very reassuring."

"We'll make it."

They slipped on their boots and parkas, hats and gloves. When Grace stepped out of the tent, Dean stuffed the sleeping bag back in his pack, then took down the tent. When it was lashed onto his pack, they set out.

Grace walked faster today, probably worried about her feet. It was slightly warmer than yesterday, the temperature fluctuating as they moved on. They retraced their steps, skirting around the massive ridge this time. Every fifteen minutes or so, the wind would blow the clouds away, allowing Dean a glimpse at the huge outcropping of granite.

They walked next to it for half an hour, then another vast snow-covered expanse opened before them.

"*This* is Seven Boulder Meadow," Grace announced.

Dean paused. "You're sure this time?"

She smirked. "You want to go first?"

Dean stared out at the even layer of snow. It could be a meadow. Or another lake.

Before he could answer, Grace started across.

She pulled out an ice axe and every few feet pushed down on the ground in front of her. "Solid!" she announced. "It's the meadow."

Dean crossed it with her. At the far side, he saw the rockslide.

"This is it?" he asked.

"Yep. Ready to climb?"

"Let's go."

Grace started up the boulders. Some of them were as big as a VW Beetle, others as small as Dean's boot. It was a tough scramble at times, the rocks icy in patches. Obscured by snow, crevices kept fouling them up, catching their boots. But they made fast progress, gaining altitude by the minute.

Eventually they reached the top of the slide. The head of it lay in a narrow valley. Parting clouds let Dean see steep, open mountain slopes.

He spotted something that made his heart sing. It was a slalom marker. He walked to it. Farther up on the slope, he saw another one.

"This is it!"

Dean resisted the urge to shout, afraid he'd send an avalanche down on their heads.

"We made it!" Grace agreed. They hugged. "I recognize this section. We need to head northeast to get to the lodge."

A lodge meant hot beverages, food, beer, and electricity. Dean's spirit lifted. He'd be able to call Sam and Bobby. Maybe they would have heard from Jason, too. At that moment, finally knowing exactly where they were, and with the promise of warmth and shelter, anything felt possible.

Dean hiked beside Grace, gazing up at the mountain whenever the clouds allowed him a view. It really was gorgeous up there.

They crossed through a section of trees, and when they came out, Dean saw the glorious sight of a ski lift sweeping up into the clouds. They walked on, passing a large metal pylon that supported the lift, then angled across and downward through the next section of trees. When they emerged, Dean had to fight back another shout of triumph when he spotted the ski lodge. A building of grey stone with large, scenic windows, it loomed up out of the snowy haze. Smoke curled from a massive chimney. Dean could already picture the crackling flames, the radiating warmth.

"How are your feet?" he asked Grace.

"They feel like dancing."

They reached the patio, with picnic benches and a few closed up food vendors' carts. Racks for storing skis lined the area. They passed through a small outdoor alcove with lockers, and found the back entrance for the lodge. Huge floor-to-ceiling two-story windows faced out onto the mountain. A pair of double doors stood closed. When Dean tried them, they were locked.

Grace pounded on the glass. They waited. Someone had to be in there if the fire was going. At least Dean hoped someone was in there. If not, hell, he'd just break in.

A few minutes later, a small, red-faced, portly man sporting a brown mustache came hurrying up. He unlocked the door, ushering them in. "What the hell were you folks doing out there?" he demanded. "The mountain's been evacuated. You could have been killed!"

Grace, still wearing Dean's clothes, flashed her badge as identification. "Grace Cumberlin. US Forest Service. I was escorting this hiker off the mountain when we got stuck in the blizzard."

The man's face softened a little. "I'm Don Charbonneau, the mountain manager here." He shut and locked the door behind him as he spoke. "Well, we can't get you down now. One of the avalanches took out a huge section of the road. Going to be days before that gets cleared. Come in and warm yourselves. It's just a skeleton crew left up here, along with the avalanche control team."

Grace looked over her shoulder. "Where are they now?"

"Gearing up. They're going to the top of the mountain to throw some hand charges. If that doesn't work, we're bringing out the howitzer."

"You guys have a howitzer?" Dean asked, incredulous.

"Hell yes, we do. But we have to have a Forest Service snow ranger fire it, and we're still waiting for him to show up."

Grace shifted uncomfortably. "I really need to get into some dry boots. You got anything?"

“Sure. Down in the equipment room under us. Just go down those crew stairs there,” Don said, pointing to a wooden door marked “Employees Only.”

“Great. My feet feel like blocks of ice.”

He frowned. “That’s not good. Oh, and food services is all shut down, of course, but you can help yourself to what’s in the fridge.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ve been here before. I remember where that is.” She looked up at Dean. “See you in a bit.” She headed off.

“It’s pretty bad out there, son,” Don told Dean. “You’re lucky you’re okay.”

Dean heartily agreed. He couldn’t wait to shuck off his boots and warm his toes up, but first he had to reach Sam and Bobby. “You got a place where I can recharge my phone?”

“Sure. You can use my office. I’ll show you the way.”

Dean followed the little man through the elegant ski lodge. Artful chandeliers decorated with pine tree and bear motifs hung from high cathedral ceilings. On the walls, old-fashioned skis and snowshoes hung next to watercolor paintings of mountain meadows filled with wildflowers. In the main foyer, a waterfall cascaded over stones, landing in a small pool.

They passed behind the front desk and entered a room marked “Private.”

“Here it is,” Don said. “Help yourself.” He pointed out an outlet next to his cluttered desk. “I have to see how the avalanche boys are doing.”

He left hurriedly.

Dean slipped off his pack, happy to be free of the weight. He got out his phone and plugged it in, pressed the power button and felt good just to see the boot-up screen. He called Sam.

His brother picked up on the second ring. “Dean?” He sounded amazed and relieved.

“Hey, Sammy. Good to hear you.” Dean could hear the wind howling on Sam’s end. The reception was terrible, cutting in and out.

“Where... been?”

Dean could barely make out his words. Then the call dropped.

“Damn it!” Dean cursed, and called Sam back. It went straight to voicemail. He remembered how terrible reception was out there. He would wait for Sam to climb up something high and call him back.

Dean paced in the small office, willing the phone to ring. Three minutes later it did.

“Sam?”

“Dean!”

“You okay?”

“As well as can be expected. Where have you been?”

“In snow up to my ass. Where are you?”

“Ditto. We’ve been trying to track you.”

“Is Bobby with you?”

“Yeah, he’s here.”

“What about Jason?”

Sam hesitated. “We thought he was with you.”

“We got separated. I think something may have taken him. I tracked him for a while, but lost the trail in the snow.”

“Dean, listen.” The wind howled even louder, and for a second Dean thought he’d lost Sam again.

“Sam?”

The connection crackled, went silent, then came back on. “...not a ranger.”

“What?”

“... doesn’t work for...”

“I can’t hear you.”

“Hold on.”

Dean waited, hearing Sam breathe as he walked, probably climbing to a higher location.

“Can you hear me now?” Sam asked. The connection was much better.

“Yes.”

“Grace is not a ranger.”

“What?”

“We went to the ranger station. She doesn’t work for them.”

“Then who the hell is she?” Dean asked.

“The better question might be what.”

Dean couldn’t believe it. “But she just helped me get to this ski lodge.”

“Is that where you are now?”

“Yes. Tahoe Summit Ski Lodge.”

Sam relayed the information to Bobby. “We can backtrack to the car, try to get through the roadblock to reach you.”

“Won’t do you any good. The mountain manager here said the last avalanche took out the road.”

“Then we’ll hike to you. Is Grace with you now?”

“She’s here at the resort.”

“Don’t let her leave your sight.”

Too late. “Okay. Tell Bobby I found some aswang eggs.”

“You’re kidding. Did you destroy them?”

“I couldn’t. So I hid them.”

The phone crackled again, and Sam’s voice went in and out.

“Hang... be there soon.”

“Okay. Be careful. It’s hell out there.”

“You’re... me,” Sam said and gave a sad laugh.

Then the connection blinked out. Dean waited for the phone to ring again, but knew it wouldn’t. At least they each knew where the other was now. Just in case, Dean hid his phone behind Don’s file cabinet while it recharged.

Rummaging through his pack, he grabbed his Bowie knife and his bottle of the spice concoction. Then, leaving the small office, he stalked off to find Grace.

FORTY-THREE



Sliding the spice concoction into his jacket pocket, Dean descended the stairs toward the employee area and equipment room. In a small crew room with lockers, he found five men milling around, suiting up.

Dean stepped inside. “You guys seen a short woman with blonde hair?”

One of the men turned to him. His face was covered with exposure wounds. Strips of raw flesh were exposed on his nose and cheekbones. Bloody cracks covered his lips. “Sorry, man,” he said.

“Anyone else?” Dean prompted.

Distracted, they looked at him briefly and a murmur of “no” went through the rest of the group. Dean left them getting their gear on and made a circuit of the entire understory of the lodge. Except for the crew room, the place was abandoned, most of the lights shut off.

Dean ascended the lodge’s stairs to the upper level, which held a kitchen and food court. He grabbed a couple of sandwiches out of the fridge and stuffed them in his pocket. Wide patios opened up onto balconies with vistas of the mountain and ski lifts. All Dean could see through the windows was blowing snow and hazy white.

Grace was not in the kitchen or the dining area. While he ate a sandwich, Dean searched through the pantries, meat lockers, and larders.

As he started down the stairs again, his eyes spotted movement outside in the snowstorm. He walked to a window, staring down, and saw a figure in white snowshoeing toward the lodge doors. For a second he hoped it was Bobby or Sam, but soon realized the person was far too slight to be either.

He jogged down the stairs as the person entered. A man clomped ice and snow off his snowshoes, then unbuckled them. Don rushed down the hall and greeted him. "Steven! Thank you for coming up. That must have been one hell of a hike with the road out." The newcomer stripped off his hat, balaclava, and snow goggles, revealing a lean man in his early thirties with a tanned face and black hair. Snow clustered in his goatee. He wore a National Forest Service uniform.

Steven looked at Dean. "I thought this place had been evacuated."

"It was, it was," Don insisted. "But two hikers came out about half an hour ago. This is Dean, and Grace is one of yours."

Steven held his hand out and shook Dean's. "What do you mean 'one of mine?'" Steven asked.

"A ranger," Don clarified.

"Oh. She must be new."

"Steven's the snow ranger," Don explained to Dean. "He's the one who can fire the howitzer."

"If I could see where the hell to aim it, anyway," Steven said, gesturing at the whiteout beyond the windows.

"We can guestimate," Don said.

Dean laughed mirthlessly. "Guestimate. Just the word you want to hear when firing a seventy-five millimeter shell."

"You know about howitzers?"

"Weapons are... a hobby," Dean said.

"Well, it's a mess to fire the thing," Steven told him. "It shoots backward. Usually lands in a snowdrift. Then we have to dig it out and do it all over again."

Steven brushed the snow off his coat, then asked Don where the ski patrol was.

"Waiting for you in the crew room," Don told him.

“So you don’t know Grace?” Dean said as Steven walked away.

Steven shrugged. “I’m a snow ranger. I don’t usually get to mix with the others.”

Dean turned to the mountain manager. “Have you seen her since we arrived?”

Don frowned. “Nope. I assume she’s still in the equipment room, changing into dry clothes.”

“Let me know if you see her.” Dean stared out into the storm, worrying about Bobby and Sam. Before Steven left, he asked, “Do you know if this will work? Will we be able to leave?”

“It’s hard to say. We’ll give it our best shot.” He glanced out at the grey. “But with no visibility, and the winds barreling down from the slopes, it’s going to be dicey. Right now the winds are cross-loading the slopes with snow much faster than it’s actually falling. That and the fluctuating temperature makes for bad avalanche conditions.”

Steven headed for the crew room, and Dean resumed his search for Grace.

He searched the public areas, including another circuit of the food court, the bar, two restaurants, the skating rink, the ski rental rooms. Nothing. Another round of the employee areas didn’t yield anything, either. She wasn’t in the break room, the locker room, or the equipment check-in room. He searched the outbuildings, including the ski lift mechanism shed, and the weather and avalanche forecasting station. He even checked the bathrooms and changing rooms.

Grace had vanished.

FORTY-FOUR



Heading steadily toward the ski resort, Sam and Bobby worked their way upslope, reaching a section where they had to cut around a ridge. The route continued upward, and Sam saw that they had to climb across a relatively open area of granite. To get to the next elevation level, they'd have to scale a nearly vertical wall, walk along a ridgeline for about twenty feet, and then enter the forest again.

Bobby looked at his map, then stared up at the cliff. "Climbing this is a necessary evil. Once we cut across the top, we'll be back in the trees."

"How narrow is the top?"

"Let's hope wider than it looks."

"Won't we be a little exposed up there?"

"Not as exposed as we'd be if we'd taken the avalanche route." Bobby pulled a rope out of his pack. "It's going to be windy up there. We should rope ourselves together in case one of us falls."

As they tied themselves to each other, Sam stared up at the vertical wall. Bobby noticed his worried look. "It's still better than the route back to the trailhead. A single avalanche could wipe us off the mountain." Bobby stooped over and unbuckled his snowshoes. "We'll have to take these off. Make it easier to find toeholds." He eyed the ascent. "It'll be easier if we stick to the big boulders going up. Just be careful not to slip down any cracks and break a leg."

"You paint such a cheerful picture."

They strapped the snowshoes to their packs. Instantly Sam sank up to his thighs, and he knew it was actually a lot deeper than that. They struggled through the drifts to the edge of the boulder field, and stepped up onto large granite rocks.

Bobby pulled out an ice axe from his pack and Sam did the same. If either fell, the other would dig in with their ice axe to arrest the descent.

Bobby took the lead, creeping upward, using his hands to steady himself. The rough granite was a lot easier going than the snow had been. Sam jumped from boulder to boulder, gaining altitude a lot faster than they'd been able to do slogging through the snow. He watched the rope between them go slack and taut as they gained and lost distance between each other.

Within a few minutes, they were a quarter of the way up. It grew steeper then, and the boulders smaller. Progress slowed a bit. When they'd climbed halfway, Sam looked down as they moved above the height of the trees. The layer of cloud stayed low, and for the first time, he could actually see more than thirty feet.

In the near distance were steep granite cliffs. Clouds hung in front of them like shawls made of spider webs. Fresh snow covered the slopes, collecting in all the crags.

Now outside the forest, exposed on the rock face, the wind hit them.

They were almost all the way up, and Sam could see the crest of the cliff above them.

Bobby reached the top first and started making his way along the ridge. A sudden gust of wind kicked up, pinning Sam momentarily to the rocks. He gripped the stone in front of him as it blew even harder, almost knocking him off balance.

"Wooooo!" Sam heard Bobby call out in surprise. "That was a hell of a breeze."

As it died down, they both straightened up. Sam reached the top of the ridge and could see down the other side of it, a dizzying two hundred foot sheer drop onto a pile of rocks below. They walked along the narrow line of the top, only two feet wide in places and full of loose stones.

A blur of movement flashed up the side of the cliff they had just climbed. Sam saw a dark shape leap to the top of the

ridge and slam into Bobby. Bobby cried out and fell backward, plunging over the sickening drop. Instantly, the rope cinched up on Sam, and he lost his footing. He slammed down hard on his tailbone, then spun around to his stomach, clutching the ice axe. He held it tight to his chest, letting his weight drive it down into the rock. The axe dragged through loose soil, and Sam felt his legs swing free as his lower body went over the edge. The weight on the rope tugged him downward. He gritted his teeth, pressing on the axe as he felt his elbows go over the edge. Then, suddenly, the axe found purchase and Sam hung, swinging on the end of it.

As he hung there, he dared a look down and saw Bobby on the end of the rope, suspended above the two hundred foot drop.

Something slammed down onto Sam's hands where he gripped the axe. He looked up into the face of a black-haired man in his thirties, dressed in a long, black wool overcoat. The man's mouth parted into a smile full of sharp teeth. His eyes glinted reflectively as he stared down at Sam with utter contempt.

Not a man, a vampire.

The vampire smashed his foot down again, crushing Sam's fingers, but Sam refused to let go of the axe. Sam's flailing feet kicked the rock face below him, trying to find a place to stand. He looked to his left, seeing a handhold in the granite. Just as he brought his boot down a third time, Sam's foot found a small ledge. He let go of the axe with his right hand, knowing the wrist strap would keep him connected to it. With his left, he grabbed the handhold. The wounds from where the aswang had pierced his chest muscles throbbed in agony.

The vampire's combat boot landed harmlessly on the ice axe, and as he stepped back off it, Sam grabbed it, swinging it up into his thigh. He felt the axe bite through muscle and yanked downward, hoping to pull his assailant off the mountain. But as the vampire pitched forward, another, a female with bright blue spiked hair, ran up and grabbed him. She reached down, yanking the axe head out of his leg. Sam

nearly lost his balance as she tried to snatch the axe away from him. He gripped it, but Bobby's weight threatened to yank him backward. His left fingers started slipping in the handhold, and he could feel the granite tearing through his glove and cutting his skin.

She crashed her boot down on Sam's left hand. Instantly, they went numb from the blow. He felt his hold slipping further. With a sickening feeling, he dipped backward. Instinctively, he swung forward with the axe, catching a lip of stone as he fell. He pulled himself back flush with the cliff, his left hand finding another nook to grip. Now he hung just below the summit where the vampires couldn't stomp on his hands.

Sam's heart thudded in his chest. He took a moment to catch his breath. He looked down, seeing Bobby swinging below.

"You okay?" he shouted down.

"Never better."

Sam angled his head up, seeing the two vampires leaning over the edge. Black Overcoat pointed out to his partner a narrow ledge they could move down to in order to reach Sam and knock him loose.

As Sam searched the rock face for another position to move to, the creatures slid over the top of the ridge, moving closer to his precarious position.

FORTY-FIVE



Dean walked another circuit of the ground floor, then stopped before one of the large windows that looked out over the parking lot. The ski patrol were out there, gathered around a small cannon on a wheeled cart. He saw the hooded parka of Steven, the snow ranger, who bent over the howitzer. Five others clustered around him, but there was a sixth member in a red parka who was very short. Dean realized Grace had probably changed into dry clothes, and he might not recognize her in new outdoor gear.

Donning his winter jacket and hat again, he ventured out into the storm. As he approached the group, they watched while the snow ranger looked at a map, then manually adjusted the sights on the howitzer. Dean reached them. Steven didn't look up from his task.

"Hey," Dean said, hoping they would all turn. The wind carried his voice away, and almost tore the map from Steven's hand.

One of them turned and saw Dean standing there. "What the hell are you doing out here?" he demanded. He was in his early twenties, long blond hair encrusted with snow. Dean recognized him from the crew room.

"I'm still looking for the person I arrived with. Grace."

"You shouldn't be out here. There's extreme avalanche danger."

A second man turned around, the exposure victim from earlier. "Don't be rude, Ambrose. Dude lost his friend," he admonished. He sized Dean up. "I'm Hank. Everyone's been evacuated."

Dean felt a flush of impatience. "I know. We just hiked in together about an hour ago."

Hank looked thoughtful. “Right. Well, I haven’t seen her.”

Dean shifted his position and was able to see the faces of the rest of the group. They were the same from the crew room, plus a short woman in her mid-twenties wearing the red parka. From under a short crop of coppery hair, almond eyes set in a tanned face peered up at Dean.

She straightened up and moved away from the howitzer toward him. “Steve’s getting ready to fire. Susan,” she introduced herself.

“Dean.”

“You new to the ski patrol?” she asked, eyeing him dubiously.

Hank spoke up. “Dude can’t find his friend.”

“Oh, jeez. She’s not on the mountain, is she?”

Dean shook his head. “No. Believe it or not, I lost her inside the resort.”

Susan let out a short laugh. “Well, the place is a maze. ‘Luxury skiing at its finest.’ Lots of meeting rooms and places where guests can get a drink or sit by the fire. When the place isn’t empty, that is.”

“Everyone clear!” Steve shouted suddenly, and Susan pushed Dean back with the others.

With the help of two of the ski patrol, Steve loaded a massive four-foot bullet into the howitzer. When the others had moved away, Steve gripped a long cord trailing from the cannon.

“Ear protection! Don’t forget to open your mouths so your eardrums don’t burst!”

Dean slapped his hands over his ears as the howitzer went off with a deafening boom. Black smoke billowed around them. As Steven had predicted, the wheeled cart holding the howitzer shot backward, skittering across the ice, and lodged itself into a snow bank a few feet behind them. People coughed as the acrid smoke cleared.

“Okay! Let’s do it again!” Steven yelled.

Immediately, three of the ski patrol dug around in the snow bank for the cart. They found it and with great effort pulled it free from the drift.

Dean looked up on the slope where they had just fired. He couldn’t see anything but low-hanging clouds. Haze and fog drifted across the mountain, completely obscuring it. Visibility on the ground had cleared a little, though, and he could see the loading area of the ski lift, where it wound around and people jumped on.

“How can you know what you’re firing at?” he asked Susan.

“Certain areas are more prone to avalanching than others. We obviously can’t do it by sight right now, so Steve uses the map and adjusts the sights on the howitzer as best he can.”

“You mean he’s guessing.”

She looked away, and he could see that despite her businesslike tone, she was afraid. “Yeah. Basically we are guessing right now.” She gestured toward Hank. “Hank’s been up on the slopes for two days, throwing hand charges. He got caught in a little mini avalanche while he was up there. He managed to swim to the surface as it swept him down the mountain, but he still lost his water, his pack, his compass. He wandered for a bit before he found us again.”

That explained the condition of his lips and face.

Hank and the others repositioned the howitzer and Steve started adjusting the sights again.

Susan tugged at Dean’s sleeve. “You need to get inside now. What does your friend look like?”

“Five-two. Short blonde hair. She’s a ranger.” He added, “If you see her, keep her around a group of people who can watch her.” Dean thought people would be safer in groups. “It’s possible she has concussion. I’m worried she may have passed out somewhere,” he said, giving more weight to his lie.

“Okay. Will do. When we finish here, a couple of us will go inside and look for her.”

Susan gazed out toward the ski lift.

“What happens now?” Dean asked her.

“We wait. See if this triggers a directed avalanche that will release some of the tension down a safe channel. Then some of us might have to go up on the mountain again and throw hand charges.”

“Good luck,” he told her, and started off for the lodge again.

As he passed through the door into the welcome warmth, a man’s voice called from across the room. “Dean?”

He looked up to see Jason standing in front of one of the huge fireplaces.

“Jason!”

“No way! I thought you must have bought it on the mountain!” Jason sauntered toward Dean, clasping his hand warmly.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Hell, I didn’t mean it like that! It almost got me.”

“Where did you go?”

Jason looked around nervously. “Anyone around?” His face was covered with red exposure wounds, his lips chapped even worse than Hank’s.

“They’re all outside.”

“That thing came in the night. Swooped down and grabbed me before I could even pull my gun.”

Dean noticed torn holes in Jason’s parka, in the same places where the talons had ripped through Sam’s shirt.

“It flew over the trees, bee-lining for some cabin.”

Dean knew now why the blood trail had been perfectly straight.

“That thing dumped me by the door and went straight into the kitchen. It seemed desperate to check something—or maybe it wanted to get a knife and fork.” He laughed a joyless laugh. “Anyway, I took a chance and ran out into the storm. Then I just wandered. Got lost. One of the ski patrol guys found me and brought me here. There were times I wished I’d let that thing eat me.” He laughed again. “Well, not really. But there were times I wished I’d gutted that sucker in the cabin and stayed by that fire.”

“You can’t kill it that way, anyway.”

“How are your guys and the weapon? You got it?”

Dean shook his head. “They’re on their way here with it, but they’re out in that.” He hooked a thumb toward the storm. “You ever meet Grace Cumberlin?”

“She a hunter?”

“Nope. A ranger. Supposedly. Patrols the backcountry where we fought the wendigo.”

“What do you mean ‘supposedly?’”

“Sam told me she didn’t check out at the ranger station. They’d never heard of her.”

“Only ranger I ever knew was the one we left that family with.”

“She helped me get here to the resort.”

“So who is she?”

Dean raised one eyebrow.

“Oh.”

Dean glanced around the room. “Anyway, she’s petite. Got short blonde hair. As soon as we got here, she went off for a change of clothes, and now I can’t find her anywhere. So if you see her—”

Dean heard shouting from outside. He looked out the large picture windows overlooking the ski lift area to see the howitzer team scattering. He ran to the door, opening it and letting in an uproar of shouting. The whole ski patrol was

running for the building, shouting and waving for him to move inside. Then he felt it. The ground shaking. A dull rumble from up on the mountain. The windows started vibrating and shuddering.

“Get behind something solid!” Susan shouted at him. She reached the door and they rushed inside. “The avalanche didn’t trigger the way we thought! The whole mountain’s coming down!”

Then Dean was running with the others, heading for an area with a large, interior stone wall and fireplaces on the far side of the room. He’d almost reached them when he heard the massive windows shatter. One of the ski patrol guys flew through the air beside him.

When he was on the mountain with Grace, Dean had imagined getting swept up in an avalanche, being hit by a wall of snow. But it wasn’t snow or ice that hit him now. It was air. A powerful sheet of air traveling at the foot of the avalanche swung his feet up, twisting him around. It thrust him four feet off the ground, and as he flailed, he caught a brief glimpse of the avalanche as it poured in through the shattered windows. He saw the jagged metal of ski lift chairs, picnic tables, all roiling around in the unbelievably fast-moving surge of snow. Dean was hurled through a window and crashed down, momentarily at a standstill. He looked up in time to see the avalanche sweeping around the corner of the building.

The moving sea of snow caught him, tumbling him head over feet. Susan’s words about swimming came back to him in a flash, and Dean thrust out in the snow, kicking as hard as he could and fanning out his arms, trying to stay on the surface.

Suddenly, the snow covered his head, throwing him in a somersault, and he couldn’t figure out which way was up. He tried to see around him. One side was darker than the other, so Dean swam for the lighter side. Something sharp scraped along his shoulders and then moved past him. He tried to gasp for air, but snow filled his mouth. He pushed it out with his tongue, gagging. He tried to suck in oxygen, but there was none. He kicked his feet out, reaching up with his arms and

trying to breaststroke his way out of the tumbling cascade of snow.

The rumble filled his body, thrumming in his chest. He couldn't get a breath. His vision started to tunnel as he thrust his arms out, trying to reach air. Cold filled his nose and mouth. As his lungs burned, panic seized him.

Then his head burst above the snow. He gulped in oxygen, his lungs filling with it, giving him a sense of euphoria and another burst of energy. He kicked harder, struggling to stay upright.

The surge plowed him down into the parking lot, engulfing the cars there. He barreled headfirst toward a silver SUV. At the last second, he pivoted his body so his feet were in front. His boot struck the bumper on one side, deflecting him away, but the speed of the snow bent him at the waist, forcing him back under the surface. Dean flipped onto his stomach, swimming once more toward the light, his lungs aching for a breath. Panic crept in again, but Dean forced himself to think. He let the snow continue to flip him until he thought he was on his back. He kicked and did the backstroke, letting the snow continue to turn him until he flipped back over onto his stomach. Now he used all his strength to swim up to the surface.

His head broke through into sweet, fresh air. All he could hear was the roar around him, and the sounds of twisting metal as the avalanche picked up cars and shattered windshields.

Then the motion started to slow. Dean kept swimming, trying to free his entire body from the snow. He was still waist-deep when he came to a standstill. At first, he felt relieved, thinking he could just pull his legs out, but the snow had settled into a solid force as impenetrable as concrete. Dean managed to work his hands free and pushed as hard as he could at the snow crushing his legs and hips. He didn't have the leverage.

The wind howled around him, and for the first time, Dean looked back toward the lodge. What he saw didn't resemble much of a building anymore. Twisted timber and the empty

frames of devastated windows jutted from the ruins of the shattered building. The west wall and part of the roof had managed to stay standing, and Dean saw a door leading to the interior. Snow spilled out of all the broken windows. The east side wasn't so lucky. The roof had caved in, staircases knocked over. Miraculously, one crossbeam still hung, a massive chandelier swinging from it.

Trying to twist around, he looked to where the howitzer had been set up in the parking lot. There was no sign of it now, and the cars that had been parked out there were completely buried.

"We got someone here!" Dean recognized Susan's voice, calling from nearer the lodge. "Get a shovel! Anyone who can hear me, turn on your avalanche transceivers!"

As Dean thrashed around again, trying to pull his lower body free, he saw a pale hand sticking out of the snow a few feet away. It waved weakly. Dean knew the person was suffocating and had only minutes to live, if that.

With renewed vigor, he started digging around his waist, desperate to free himself.

FORTY-SIX



Sam shifted sideways on the cliff face, finding a handhold to his left. He dug in with the ice axe, making sure his grip was firm before moving his feet to another section of the tiny lip he perched on. If it weren't for the axe, Sam had no doubt his hold would rip free of the cliff and he'd plummet to his death, taking Bobby with him.

Below, Bobby hung on the rope, no longer swinging now, but too far out to grab the rock wall himself. He was dead weight, pulling heavily on Sam.

"I can't get close enough to the rock!" Bobby yelled up. "Do you have a good enough grip for me to swing toward it?"

Sam felt the narrow little lip that his left hand clung to pathetically. He'd crammed his toes into little holes in the rock, but not more than an inch or two. The weight pulling on him made it hard to talk.

"I don't think so, Bobby. Don't try it!" he yelled down.

The vampires had moved to a ledge just up and to the right of Sam. The female drew closer, as the male lowered her down. She kicked out, landing a blow right in Sam's face. Pain exploded in his nose, stars erupting across his field of vision.

She kicked out again, this time trying to dislodge the ice axe. Her boot landed solidly on the handle where Sam gripped it, and he felt it shift a little. A rain of pebbles cascaded down from where he'd driven it into the rock. She kicked it again, and Sam searched to his left for another place to move to. He found a hole about two feet away, pushed his fingers into the tiny crevice, then felt around with his feet for another perch. She kicked the axe again, and this time it moved outward so quickly that Sam's heart pounded in his chest. As it slipped out of the crevice, he swung it up and to his left. The toothed end drove into a crack in the rock, but it wasn't enough to hold

Sam's weight. He strained against the incredible downward force of the rope.

His searching left foot found a tiny lip of rock and stepped over to it while his left hand gripped the tiny crevice with everything in him. Only his fingers and sheer will held him to the cliff face. He felt like his grip would slip off as he swung the axe out again, this time finding a bigger crevice to sink into. He felt the axe catch and shuffled his right foot closer to his left.

Now he was just out of reach of the vampires on the ledge to his upper right. His hold felt a little more secure.

"Okay, Bobby. Swing!" he shouted.

He prepared himself for the movement, his heart racing, then he felt Bobby start to move back and forth, building up momentum.

When he looked down, he saw the challenge facing his old friend. Up near the top, where Sam clung, the rock face was littered with holes, albeit tiny, to cram fingers and toes in, but where Bobby hung was only smooth granite, weathered away by a glacier in the distant past.

The vampires moved up the cliff face, returning to the top, and started searching for another way down. Bobby swung heavily on the rope below, and Sam felt the weight jerk as he hit the cliff face.

"God damn it!" Bobby cursed, his grasping hands not finding anything to hang onto.

He swung out again, fingers and feet scraping along the granite for any hint of a crevice. Sam gritted his teeth against the weight, feeling his left fingers start to slip. He couldn't readjust with Bobby swinging like a pendulum below him. It would tear them right off the rock. He had to hang tight, hope that Bobby could grab hold of something.

Bobby swung back and forth three more times, each time colliding with the rock and not finding purchase.

"I have to adjust," Sam called down, straining against the pull of the rope.

Bobby slowed the swinging, and when Sam felt the back-and-forth reduce to a straight-down weight, he readjusted his fingers in the little crevice.

Small rocks rained down on his face, and he looked up to see Black Overcoat lowering his partner over a sheer section of rock. In another second, she'd be in range to kick Sam squarely in the face again, knocking him clear off the rock face.

FORTY-SEVEN



With what felt like infuriating slowness, Dean shoveled out snow from around his waist and hips with his hands.

He shouted up to Susan near the lodge building. “There’s another one here!” But she didn’t turn. He waved at her, but she was busily digging someone else out and couldn’t hear him. Dean looked around for anyone else, but Susan was the only person he could see out and moving. It was up to him to save this guy.

The bare fingers flexed, grasping for help.

“Hold on,” Dean shouted, not even sure if the guy could hear him.

He dug down to the tops of his thighs, throwing up snow around himself. He reached his left knee, and suddenly he was able to lift his leg. He tore it free from the snow, then used the resulting hole to pull out his other leg. He heaved himself up and out and staggered over to the clasping hand.

He squeezed the fingers to let the buried man know he was there, and started digging. But doing it by hand was just too slow. He had to find a shovel, fast. Throwing off his parka to mark the spot, Dean ran toward Susan, who was crouched over a foot sticking out of the snow.

“I need a shovel,” he told her.

She dug hurriedly, trying to find the victim’s head to get them some air. She pointed to her left without looking up.

“Try that pack there.”

A blue avalanche control pack lay on its side above the snow. He grabbed the shovel lashed to the outside. As he straightened up, he spotted Jason, digging in the snow a few feet away in the gale.

Dean turned around, locating his coat's color in all the white. When he saw the expanse of the slide, he was grateful he'd thought to mark the spot, or he might not have been able to find the guy again.

He ran back, squeezing the guy's fingers again to let him know to hold on. But this time, the fingers didn't grip back. Dean estimated where the guy's head should be, and started digging down. He found another hand, and worked upward from it. Throwing shovel after shovel over his shoulder, Dean dug as fast as he could, his fingers going numb in the howling wind. When he unearthed a crown of brown hair in the snow, he planted the shovel to his side. He dug down in front of the face with his hands, his fingers reaching past the forehead and freeing up some space in front of the nose and mouth. He was rewarded with a loud gasp of air. The man looked up, and Dean instantly recognized him as Hank, the ski patrol guy who'd suffered from exposure.

"Thank you," Hank croaked. "Get my arms free. I'll dig myself the rest of the way out while you help others."

Dean nodded, grabbing the shovel again and digging out Hank's arms and torso.

"You sure about this?" he asked, handing over the shovel. "You can get out?"

"Positive."

Dean stood up. Near the lodge door, Susan still worked to free the man who belonged to the boot. Dean ran over to help. She'd gotten his face free. It was Steven, the snow ranger. He was still breathing.

She reached up, slapping a handheld electronic device in Dean's freezing hand. "You know how to use one of these?"

Dean studied the red plastic case and the small LCD screen. "What the heck is it?"

"It's an avalanche beacon transceiver. Switch it to receive mode and cover the slide area. It should respond if you come close to anyone buried who's wearing a beacon."

Dean grabbed another shovel from a fallen pack and took the transceiver. Switching it to receive mode, he read the display, which showed directionality and distance to any beacon signals. He walked around first in front of the lodge, thinking that if he and Hank got swept that way, others might have, too. It picked up a signal about twenty feet to the left of where Hank was furiously digging himself out. Dean watched the LCD screen, closing in on the location.

“Got one!” Dean yelled.

He started digging with the shovel, acutely aware of how much time had passed since people got buried. Too much time. If this person didn’t have an air pocket, they were probably already dead.

“I’m coming!” Hank shouted. He was still working to dig out his thighs.

Dean dug in with the shovel, eyes starting to hurt in the brilliant white of the snow. The wind whipped around the sides of the lodge, bringing with it biting cold. Dean found the sleeve of a jacket, with no arm inside. He pulled it aside, looking beneath. He followed the sleeve to the body of the jacket and felt something hard inside. He cleared snow around it, realizing it was a man’s rib cage. “Hold on!” Dean yelled. He worked sideways, toward the head, and cleared enough snow from the person’s face for him to breathe. But he wasn’t breathing.

“Hey,” Dean shouted. His eyes were closed. Dean recognized him as one of the ski patrol guys who’d helped Hank drag the howitzer out of the drift. He shoveled around the man’s chest to give his lungs room to expand.

Suddenly, Hank was beside him. “It’s Bill,” he said. “Watch out.” He bent down, clearing Bill’s airway of a chunk of ice. Then he performed C.P.R. for two minutes. Dean was impressed. Hank seemed to be indestructible. Bill coughed, spewing water all over Hank. Hank slapped him on the arm. “Right on! You made it!”

Bill laughed weakly. “What a ride! All I needed were my skis.”

Hank stood up. Someone shouted from the lodge. It was Don, the mountain manager, emerging from the one remaining door. Don's words were being whipped away by the wind, but Dean managed to make out that he was saying two of the ski patrol team were safe inside: "Scott" and a name Dean didn't catch.

"Ambrose!" shouted Hank, noticing the overly protective ski patroller's absence. They scanned the disturbed patch of snow.

With Don's help, Susan finished digging Steven out. Then they rushed over and started clearing compacted snow away from Bill.

Dean stared around, and then he saw Ambrose. Or what was left of him. The avalanche had carried him into a security light pole in the parking lot. From what Dean could see, a four-by-four truck had smashed into him after that and then been scraped away, taking half of Ambrose's body with it. His top half lay on the snow, sightless eyes staring up into the grey sky, his bottom half lay bleeding, half buried in front of the demolished truck.

"I think I found Ambrose," Dean said flatly, pointing him out to Hank.

Hank sat back on the snow. "Oh, Jesus."

Susan started walking that way and Dean joined her. She stared ahead blankly, her face gone slack. When she reached Ambrose's torso, she reached out and put one gloved hand on his. His jaw was broken and part of his scalp had been torn off. It dripped blood into the snow. She bent down to touch his face, and Dean placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Something churning in the avalanche must have torn through the back of his jacket, gouging long tears in the material. Blood seeped from the holes.

Dean bent closer, and saw that the skin beneath wasn't torn. Puncture marks covered Ambrose's lower back above the kidneys. He parted the rips in the jacket, seeing that Ambrose's lungs had been sucked out through his ribs and past his spine. Dean drew in a sharp breath, glancing around for the

aswang. His hand felt for the container of spices, and his fingers closed around it. He couldn't believe it was actually still in his coat.

In the blinding snow, he could only see about forty feet out into the parking lot. The avalanche had stopped about twenty feet from where he stood, the cars on the far side blasted by the air mass, but not buried.

The scent of bile and urine blew around him on the wind. He pulled out his .45 with the spice-soaked bullets, ready to take a shot.

"Look what the avalanche did to him," Susan said. "It tore him to pieces."

Hank joined them. Don walked up beside them, solemnly taking in the view of their friend.

"All members of the ski patrol accounted for," Hank said to Don.

Dean scanned around again, seeing another patch of blood in the snow about ten feet from Ambrose's legs. He walked toward it. It stained the snow next to another light pole. When Dean reached it, he heard something scratch on the far side of the post. The post was wide, almost three feet, plenty of room to hide behind.

Dean lifted his gun, pointing it and circling. Standing on the opposite side was a familiar figure. His black hood was still pulled tightly around his face, but this time Dean could see him clearly. It was Jimmy from the Aces and Eights Saloon, the barkeep who'd been so eager to join them on the hunt. He clutched one hand to his upper arm, which streamed blood. The wound wasn't from the avalanche, though. It was a gunshot wound, exactly where Dean had hit the person who'd been trailing him.

"Jimmy?" Dean said.

Jimmy's eyes flashed reflectively. He opened his mouth, teeth growing long and sharp. Dean pulled out his Bowie knife from his hip sheath and Jimmy snarled at him, moving away from the pole. A sudden powerful blast of wind gusted down

on top of them, throwing them off balance. It screamed over the top of the snow, sending up a blinding ground blizzard. Dean caught sight of Jimmy moving away, back toward the lodge. He staggered in the wind, running after him.

“We have to get inside!” he heard Don yell.

Voices shouted from the lodge, and as Dean ran, he saw Grace standing by the door, arguing with Jason. He towered over her, angrily pointing at her, and she stood defiantly shouting back.

Dean forced his exhausted body to run faster. Jimmy ran up to Grace and shoved Jason down hard in the snow. Then he brought his boot down on Jason’s head and grabbed Grace, forcing her through the doors into the lodge.

“Get inside! Get behind something solid!” Don was still shouting from somewhere ahead of Dean. Dean couldn’t make out where the mountain manager was.

Suddenly, running became almost impossible. The ground shook beneath him. The wind kicked up higher, swirling around him and obscuring the lodge.

He heard shouts and followed them. The grey hulk of the building swam up before him. Beneath his feet, the snow shifted, making it impossible to make headway.

“It’s released another one!” he heard Don yell. “Get inside!”

In the blinding snowstorm, Dean could see the ski patrol members running toward the lodge. He saw Susan’s red parka and focused on it in the gale. He tripped, realized he’d reached the stairs to the lodge, and bounded up them. Don stood at the door, ushering people inside.

“There’s no time!”

As Dean entered the ruins of the lodge, he spotted Jimmy dragging Grace through the employees-only door that led to the crew rooms below. He glanced around for Jason, but didn’t see him. Then he took off for the employee door, wrenching it open.

He was halfway down the cement stairs when a massive shockwave hit the building. He slammed against the far side of the stairwell, then lost his footing and stumbled, grabbing the railing as he went. He caught himself before he hit the bottom. The whole building started shaking and heaving as if someone had tossed it into a washing machine. Dean held on to the metal railing. Bricks came loose, raining down on him, and he heard the shrieking of massive beams breaking up above his head. Then the ceiling collapsed. Dean pitched forward, his head hitting a pile of dusty bricks. He could hear other people screaming as the floor beneath him buckled upward, and then the wall closed in on him, crushing the full weight of the ceiling into his back, compressing him. He felt the air squeeze out of his lungs and his grasping fingers found a rough wooden beam that had fallen in front of him.

The roar became deafening. Every jostle and upward thrust of the building sent debris slamming into Dean's body. He couldn't get a breath. He could hear a woman screaming about her leg somewhere close by, and a man's voice pleading with the avalanche to stop.

But it thundered on, taking over Dean's entire world, suffocating him.

FORTY-EIGHT



Straining under the massive downward pull, Sam extracted his fingers and tried to find a lower spot to move to. He felt along the rock, finding a crack to wedge them in about a foot down. Then he let his body ease downward, his right foot feeling for a toehold. He scraped his boot along the rough granite, finding a tiny lip of rock. He tested his weight on it, and it held. Then he moved his left foot down, trying not to let the agonizing weight pulling at his back yank him too far. He felt a small protuberance of rock and rested his left foot on it. It held too. He carefully dislodged the axe, aimed for a crevice to the right of his chest, and drove the toothed side in. He tugged on it, and it remained embedded.

More dirt and tiny rocks spilled down over him. The female vampire's boot couldn't reach him now. She cursed.

"Pull me up!" she yelled. "He's too low."

Little victories, Sam thought. He clung to the rock face, feeling his strength drain away by the minute, his arms and legs starting to shake with muscle fatigue.

The ridiculous position they hung in now meant that neither Sam nor Bobby could fight, just make tiny defensive moves. And Sam knew he couldn't hold on forever. The vampires knew that, too. They hovered at the top of the ridge, staring down and grinning. Maybe they wouldn't have to climb down and finish off Sam at all.

Sam decided to climb up, taking a route to his left that wouldn't allow the vampires to lower themselves down and kick him off. If they did attempt to reach him, they'd be in the same clinging-to-the-rock situation Sam was, and he guessed they wouldn't risk it. This way they wouldn't be able to attack him until he reached the top.

He moved his left hand out of its crevice and felt around for another handhold. When he found one, he followed suit with his feet. Then he heaved himself upward, pulling Bobby's dead weight. His finger bones felt like they might snap, but he held on. He swung the ice axe out and in, biting into a fresh nook in the rock. He continued to drag himself upward, finding handholds and toeholds where he could, swinging the ice axe, wedging it in tightly enough to support both him and Bobby.

Bobby had grown quiet. Sam put all his concentration into pulling them up the cliff face, one little step at a time, one handhold after another handhold. The wind howled around him, though at least he was a little sheltered on this side of the rock. He worked his way steadily upward, thinking each time he'd see the top of the ridge, only to be confronted with more rock face.

Then, with the next heave upward, he reached it. He could see clear over the ridge to the clouds filling the valley on the other side.

A blinding kick to his face snapped his head back. Bright stars flashed as blood spilled from his nose and filled his mouth. Sam reached up with his left hand, trying to grab the vampire's leg and fling her off the cliff. But they both kept their distance, just out of sight at the top of the ridge. Sam's searching hand felt around for a boot.

Blue Spikes' heel drove into the back of his head. Black Overcoat snaked his hand down and grabbed the axe head, wriggling it free. She kicked Sam again in the back of the head, slamming his face into the sharp granite. Blood from a cut in his forehead trickled down into his eyes, blurring his vision. She kicked him again and again. He reached up with his left hand, grabbing her boot, but she wrenched it away, then cracked the back of his head with her heel, driving his face into the jagged rock once more.

Sam felt the axe rip free of its hold and reached for the rock wall desperately with his left hand while trying to wedge it in again with his right. Another swift kick to his head disoriented him. He felt the ice axe start to slip out of his hand.

As he strained to hold on to that lifeline, the female vampire pulled him violently to the right, wrenching his left hand away from its hold. He started to fall backward, his feet the only thing holding him and Bobby up. The weight on the rope tugged inexorably downward and Sam's hand searched the granite surface for anything to cling to.

He and Bobby were going to die.

Suddenly, the weight on the rope vanished. Sam heard Bobby shout, his voice falling away. Sam's arms reached out, scraping along the granite, the toothed axe ripping down the side of the rock face. Then it caught. Sam's left hand struggled for a hold and he scrambled his feet against the cliff, both finding purchase. He clung to the wall, breath coming in gasps.

Blinking his eyes clear, he looked down. The end of the lifeline flapped loose. Bobby had cut the rope. The sheer cliff face stretched below, ending two hundred feet down in a jumble of rocks. A few snow-covered ledges protruded out, but he didn't see Bobby on any of them.

"Bobby!" Sam shouted. "Bobby!"

A gust of wind came screaming around the ridge, pinning him against the rock. No one answered.

Above, he heard the vampires laugh.

FORTY-NINE



Dean came to slowly. He couldn't quite remember where he was and tried to move his body, but something pressed down on him, making it impossible. He could barely breathe. As he tried to suck in air, he instantly went into a coughing fit. Dust drifted thickly around him and a strange red haze permeated the air.

Across from him in the gloom, a red 'exit' sign glowed above a hopelessly askew doorway. Heavy beams lay in front of it, along with broken ceiling tiles and plaster dust. Wiring hung down in clumps, sparking and swinging.

Dean remembered. There had been another avalanche.

He lay on his stomach, something heavy across his upper back. He tried to crane his neck around to see, but couldn't. Someone whimpered nearby.

"Hello?" he said, spitting out plaster dust.

A man continued to mutter and plead softly.

He could hear something moving near him, but couldn't tell if it was shifting debris or someone crawling around.

"We're dead, we're dead," the man muttered.

"No, we're not," Dean told him, and started coughing again.

When the fit subsided, he glanced around for anything he could use as a pry bar. A few feet away, a piece of rebar lay against a pile of cement rubble. Dean's left arm was free, and he reached for the rebar. At first he could barely graze it with the tips of his fingers, but he managed to grip it enough to drag it a little nearer, then grasp it properly. Something above him groaned and shifted, pushing even harder down on him.

The man whimpered softly.

“Hey, buddy,” Dean called out. “You free? Can you give me a hand here?”

But the man just went on crying.

Another groan filled the gloom, and Dean felt the debris on his back shift again. But this time the weight eased. Suddenly, he could take a deep breath. Pushing with his legs, he managed to wriggle out from under the debris. When he scrambled free, he sat up and looked back. Part of the stone wall from above had crashed over the staircase. He’d been pinned under one end of a massive beam. Luckily, as more debris fell on the other end of the beam, it had lifted off him.

He tried to stand and found that he could only crouch. The ceiling had caved in all around him. He followed the sound of the crying man. Dean recognized him as Bill, who he’d helped dig out of the first avalanche. A massive head injury yawned in his forehead. His eyes were unfocused and glassy. Dean shucked off his jacket and folded it tightly, then pressed it against the wound.

“Anyone else down here?” Dean yelled. “Jason!”

He listened, hearing only the sparking of the wires and water dripping from somewhere nearby.

He told Bill to put pressure on the wound and moved away in the darkness. Crawling over debris and walking bent over when the space allowed it, Dean entered the neighboring room. It was the locker room where he’d originally seen the avalanche control team.

One wall had completely caved in, the lockers fallen over against the benches in the center of the room. It left a space big enough to protect someone. Dean bent down and peered in. The red emergency lighting had kicked on, and he could just make out the shapes of two bodies in the confined space.

“Hey,” he said.

A hand reached out for him, and he grasped it. Pulling gently, he dragged the person out. It was Steven, the snow ranger.

“Thanks, man,” he said. “I can get Hank out. He was next to me in there. We’re both okay, I think.”

Dean nodded and continued on, crawling through the wreckage. Beyond the crew locker room lay the equipment room. Dean moved to it at a crouch. He wondered if anyone who’d been on the floor above when the avalanche hit could possibly have survived. He wondered if Don had dashed down here at the last minute, but somehow he doubted he could have made it in time.

As Dean made his way toward the equipment room, Steven and Hank emerged from the locker room and crawled away toward Bill. “Everyone should try to stay together,” Dean told them.

Steven nodded dreamily, showing signs of shock.

Dean could hear Bill’s voice echoing down the hall. “Hey, dude. You seen my car? It was parked out in the lot. We’re probably going to go out later and cruise around.”

Hank responded, his voice strained. “We’ll do that.”

The equipment room lay at the end of a narrow corridor sparking with live wires. Before he went in, Dean searched for additional rooms, but didn’t see any other spaces where people could have survived the building’s collapse.

Finally, he slunk down the hallway, keeping well away from the live wires. The equipment room lay in ruins. Splintered skis and snowboards stuck out from a collapsed ceiling that descended at an angle. Some of it still held, creating a triangular space.

He saw two shapes moving in the gloom and crept closer. A man lay on the floor with a figure bent over him. Suddenly the man cried out in pain, and Dean recognized Jason’s voice. He crept closer and saw Grace stooping over him, her back to Dean. Blood soaked her hands and Jason’s chest. She bent her head low over him, and he screamed.

Dean dug around in his pockets, his hand closing around the spice concoction. “Hey!” he shouted.

Grace turned around, and Dean released a big splash of the mixture, hitting her squarely in the face.

FIFTY



Grace reached up and wiped the fluid from her face with one sleeve. “Jesus, Dean! What the hell are you doing?”

Dean crept closer. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to stabilize him before he goes into shock.”

Dean moved toward them at a crouch, still unable to stand. He could see now that Jason’s stomach had been torn up by something sharp. His shirt and jacket lay ripped open, and a bloody, ragged wound gaped in his abdomen. Next to Grace lay an open medical kit. She was in the middle of preparing a gauze pad to apply pressure.

When she did, Jason cried out again in pain.

“You’re more of a wuss than an incontinent kid at a summer camp,” she told him. “This is nothing. I bet you cry over paper cuts, too.”

Dean knew Grace was lying to Jason, trying to force him to fight against the pain. It was no paper cut, and Dean was sure he’d seen the glistening white of Jason’s intestines before Grace covered them with the pad.

“Anyone else need help?” she asked Dean.

“There’s a guy back there with a pretty bad head wound.”

“How many people are down here?”

“Three others that I saw.”

She frowned, leaning over Jason and applying tape to the gauze pad. “There have to be more. I saw at least seven people when I ran down here.”

Dean glanced around. “They might be buried. I’m going back to double check.” He spoke to her back as she bent over Jason. “What about Jimmy?”

“Who?”

“That skinny guy who punched him out,” Dean said, pointing at Jason.

Grace stared around, looking haunted. “God, I don’t know. It all came down so fast.”

“Don’t be alone with Jimmy,” Dean told her.

Dean heard a sizzling sound. He stared down at Grace’s arm. Some of the spice concoction was dripping from her sleeve. It fell on Jason’s exposed stomach, the flesh there sizzling and bubbling. He groaned, stirring, only partially aware of his surroundings.

Jason is the aswang.

“Grace.” Dean hooked his thumb out the door. “That guy back there with the bad head wound—I think you should come take a look now.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’m almost done here.” She attached the bandage to the ragged cut, then stepped away. “He needs stitches,” she said to Dean. “How long, you think, till they can dig us out?”

Dean ushered her past him and she started down the dangerous corridor.

“It’s going to be a while,” he said. “With the road out, rescuers will have to come in on foot.” He thought of Sam and Bobby. “And we’ve got other problems.”

He glanced over his shoulder at Jason, who grabbed his stomach and writhed in agony.

“How long were you in there with him?” Dean asked as she started crawling out.

She furrowed her brow. “Just a few minutes. He was unconscious when I found him. He hit his head pretty hard, too.”

“I think we should give him some space.”

“Space? That’s the last thing he needs.”

“Listen, Grace, there’s something you don’t know about him.”

They crouched down, moving down the destroyed hallway to the hole at the end. A scrambling sound behind them made Dean turn. Jason still lay on the ruined floor of the room, pretty out of it. But something moved in the wall above him. Debris rained down. A chunk of insulation tile fell into the room.

“Is the place coming down again?” Grace asked, and for the first time Dean heard real fear in her voice.

Then an air duct panel banged open and a hand came out.

“Help!” a man said.

Jason stirred on the floor, sitting up.

“Hold on!” Dean said to the guy. “We’re coming.” He put a hand on Grace’s shoulder. “Stay here.”

Dean squeezed back down the hallway, moving as quickly as he could, placing and extracting his feet among all the wiring and exposed foundations.

The man in the air vent started slithering out, his arms and face covered in blood.

Jason jumped to his feet so lightning-fast that Dean hardly saw him move. One moment he was lying down, the next he was at the air vent. He grabbed the man’s arms, wrenching him down out of the hole.

“What the—” the man said. He slammed down onto the floor, and Dean recognized him from the locker room earlier.

“Jason!” Dean shouted, but Jason didn’t even turn around as he bent over the man. Dean jumped over debris as a long, snaking tongue extruded from Jason’s lips. Jason flipped him over and the tube attached itself to the man’s back. As Dean reached the doorway, he heard a horrific sucking sound, seeing organs pumping up the proboscis into Jason’s mouth. He chewed, eyes rolling back in his head with delight.

Dean pulled out the concoction, spraying Jason with it. It sizzled and burned his skin, and Jason screeched.

He turned on Dean, eyes narrowing in the darkness. That familiar coppery glow erupted in the gloom. Jason swallowed and Dean watched, horrified, as the wound Grace had treated sealed up instantly. Wings ripped free of the parka.

Dean doused the aswang with the mixture. His victim lay motionless on the floor, and Dean could hear someone else moving through the vent. “Stay back!” he shouted at them. “There’s a fire on this side!”

“What?” a voice asked, muffled by all the ductwork.

“Dean, what’s going on?” He heard Grace’s voice behind him.

“Go back!” he shouted at her. He glanced over his shoulder, saw her emerging from the narrow passageway. He grabbed her shoulders and turned her around, shoving her backward.

An agonizing pain erupted in his side. He looked down to see the proboscis attached below his ribs. He poured the spices on it, and it detached. A hot, searing pain burned in the wound. Jason stared at him, keeping his distance.

Dean tried to grip the jar with the spices, but no matter how tightly he held it, it wasn’t tight enough. It kept slipping. Jason wavered in the corner over the man. Dean’s body listed to one side, and he grabbed part of the wall to steady himself. A sweeping dizziness overcame him, and his legs felt rubbery and uncertain under him. He fell to his knees, head bobbing under an incredible weight. He tried to focus on Jason in the dim light, but the creature swayed and loomed and all his features became blurred and mixed together.

“Dean!” he heard Grace call behind him. “What’s wrong?” But her voice was muffled and muted, and he could barely make out the words.

He opened his mouth to tell her to stay away, but found he couldn’t speak. His tongue weighed too much and filled up too much of his mouth.

Dean slumped forward, over a broken snowboard. He felt his hands go heavy and useless, falling down inside the debris

of wiring and plaster. He blinked, trying to breathe. Jason stepped forward and took the concoction out of Dean's useless fingers. Dean tried to resist, but his limbs wouldn't obey him. He lay there, feeling heavy and useless, his mind going numb.

Jason stepped over him toward the door. Dean heard Grace screaming in the dark. Then blackness stole over him, sweeping him away into oblivion.

FIFTY-ONE



Sam knew he couldn't do anything for Bobby until he got to the top of the ridge.

Climbing as quickly as he dared, he dragged himself over the top as the vampires kicked at him. He endured blow after blow, his only thought to climb safely off the rock face. He dug the axe in at the top, hauling himself up over the edge. Wiping blood away from his eyes, Sam stood up. The two vampires advanced and he swung the axe out defensively. The male vampire leapt back, his black jacket flapping in the wind.

Sam gauged his situation. They stood on the narrow strip of flat rock at the top of the ridge. Both sides dropped away steeply. Sam faced back the way he and Bobby had originally come. To his right, the fall was likely fatal. To his left, the way they'd scrambled up, a fall could still end in some serious broken bones. He had to be careful not to let the vampires close enough to throw him off balance.

He squared off, steadying his feet on the three-foot-wide trail, then he started moving backward carefully, trying to lure them off the ridge and into the trees beyond. But they moved in too quickly, darting closer to him.

"You killed our friends at Point Reyes," the female said to him angrily, "and now we're going to finish you."

Sam sighed. *What the hell was up with that kind of mentality? It's okay if we kill you, but don't dare defend yourself, or we'll get even.*

He continued to back up slowly, glancing down every few seconds to be sure he had rock to step on to.

Blue Spikes darted in and Sam swung the axe, connecting with her shoulder. She howled in pain as the toothed edge bit into the meat there. She staggered backward. For a hopeful

second, Sam thought she would tumble off the cliff, but she regained her balance and backed away.

Now Black Overcoat closed in, sneering, cocky. Sam continued to step backward. The vampire leapt, trying to dive-tackle Sam like he'd done to Bobby, but Sam moved to one side at the last moment, the vampire landing only a glancing blow. Sam grabbed him in a headlock and brought the axe down on the back of his neck. He shoved the axe head in, feeling the grinding of bone against metal. The vampire struggled, arms thrashing, trying to pull out of Sam's grip.

Clutching her shoulder, the female watched warily. Sam continued to dig the axe into her partner's neck. It bit through bone, then tore through the remaining flesh. The vampire's head swung by a strip of skin. His body went limp in Sam's arms and he flung the vampire over the edge. Blue Spikes screamed in anger as he tumbled down the rock face, landing in a heap at the bottom.

"I'll kill you!" she shouted, barreling toward Sam.

He braced himself, and when she got close enough, he readied to take a swing with the axe. At the last minute, she jumped to one side, bounding down across some rocks just below the summit, moving like a spider. She came up behind him, shoving him before he had a chance to spin around. For one dizzying moment he leaned out over the steep edge that had taken Bobby. His arms windmilled, trying to regain his balance, and she shoved at his back again, sending him over the edge.

He clung to the ice axe, flipping in mid-air and striking out with it.

It caught on the top edge. Without pausing, he scrambled his feet up and heaved himself over the top again. There was no way he was going back down that rock face again.

The vampire moved forward, kicking at his axe's hold on the rock. Sam grabbed a ledge with his left hand and gripped tightly while he lifted the axe lightning fast and slammed it down again, this time through the toe of her boot. She cried out, trying to rip her foot backward, but Sam held it firmly. He

used this new perch to swing his body back up, then lay belly flat on the top.

She stomped on his hands and landed another kick to his head with her free boot. He felt a surge of nausea and knew he'd suffered too many blows to the head. He wrenched the axe out of her foot and swung it upward, feeling it sink into soft flesh. Blood leaked down his arm. Head spinning, he flipped over onto his back. The axe was embedded in her stomach.

Kicking out with his boot, he knocked her on to her back. His vision started to tunnel, blood rushing to his head. He struggled to his feet, wrenched the axe free, then took aim for her neck and drove it down hard. The dizziness threw him off balance and he missed. He took a backswing and connected. Blood sprayed the granite as he went in for a second and third blow. It was a messy decapitation instrument, but Sam swung down again, thinking of Bobby falling. A final blow finished her. Her detached head rolled onto its cheek.

Sam breathed deeply, leaning over, hands on his knees. Gore dripped from the axe, staining the snow and rock beneath. His vision grew darker and darker. The adrenaline leeches from his system, the pain of his battered head and hands sweeping over him. He fell to his knees, then collapsed onto the granite, still gripping the axe. His cheek rested against the cool stone.

As unconsciousness swept over him, he relived the painfully clear memory of the weight vanishing off that rope as Bobby plummeted from the cliff.

FIFTY-TWO



Dean's head bobbed down, jerking him awake. He tried to open his eyes, but they were crusty, as if he'd been asleep for days. He meant to bring a hand up to wipe the sleep away, but it wouldn't move. He forced his lids apart. Dim light filtered into his world. A red exit sign glowed above him. He was sitting against a wall. His gaze traveled down his body, expecting to find his hands bound, but they hung limply at his sides. His feet weren't tied, but he couldn't move them, either.

He looked around for Grace, but couldn't see her. In one corner, the man still lay under the hole of the air duct. Now two other people lay next to him, Bill and Steven, heaped together in a pile.

"Hey," he tried to say, but his mouth wouldn't work.

He couldn't see Jason. His ears heard nothing but the roaring of blood through his veins. He didn't know if he had gone temporarily deaf, or if it was just that quiet down there. No one whimpered for help now. The naked wires that had sparked before now hung dead and black below the exit sign.

Realization dawned. Something in Jason's saliva had paralyzed him. Dean willed his little finger on his right hand to move, just a little bit. He stared down at the pinkie intently, begging it to move.

It didn't.

The sound of shuffling in the narrow hallway outside brought Dean's attention to the ragged doorway. Relief flooded through him that he could still hear.

Ragged, labored breathing rose and fell above the shuffling sound. Jason appeared in the doorway, pulling something through after him. Dean closed his eyes, not wanting to tip Jason off that he was awake.

He watched through barely opened eyelids as Jason backed into the room. The aswang had abandoned his human form completely. Dean saw the familiar clawed feet, the leathery skin.

Jason dragged a body into the room. He hefted the body up as if it were a pillow and threw it down with the others. It was Don, the mountain manager. His open eyes stared at Dean, his mouth parted. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes, and Dean knew that, like him, Don was conscious but couldn't move.

Dean wondered where Grace was. Had she been able to get away? Fear pushed in on him. Even if she had, she was trapped under here with everyone else.

Jason labored over to the air duct, pushing aside broken skis and poles. He peered inside, then pulled out a flashlight to check it. Dean could see that a ragged wound ran the length of his back. The collapse of the building had done a number on him. Blood and bile seeped down the aswang's back.

He stooped over the ski patrol guy, elongated snout emerging once again.

Dean tried to shout, willed his body to jump up and fight. His eyes darted over the room and fell on the container of spices, but it lay on its side, empty.

Jason ripped off the man's parka and the slithery proboscis attached itself to his back. As a sucking sound filled the room, Dean's eyes met the mountain manager's in the gloom. Fear gleamed in Don's eyes. Dean blinked at him. It was all he could do.

As slurping filled the confines of the room, Dean looked back at the aswang. The bulky shapes of organs slithered up the slender feeding tube and Jason swallowed eagerly. The snout detached, probed along the man's naked back to another spot. Dean heard Jason sniffing in the darkness. Then the circle of teeth at the end bit down. As the aswang sucked down another organ, Dean heard something that made cold sweep up his back. The man was still breathing. His puncture wounds glistened in the dim light, sealed up by the adhesive saliva

Bobby had described. Dean saw the unmistakable rise and fall of his breathing. Jason was taking his time, harvesting only those organs humans don't immediately need to survive. He'd do the same to all of them, and then move on to the ones they did need.

Dean blinked furiously. He had to get the hell out of there.

Jason stood up, apparently sated, for now. Dean squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to let him know he was conscious.

Don let out a tiny mewl, and Dean had to look. Jason wheeled on Don. The snout whipped out, attaching to the side of Don's face. Something pumped out from Jason's mouth, down the tube, passing into Don's flesh. His terrified eyes went wide, and then they closed. Jason jerked the snout back, leaving a ring of needle teeth holes in Don's cheek.

Dean shut his eyes as Jason stepped over the men and entered the narrow hallway leading out of the room. After, he sat in the gloom, listening to the sound of the others breathing raggedly around him, trying to make out as much as he could, but he couldn't see the faces of anyone except Don, who was now unconscious.

Movement in the vent caught Dean's eye. It was on the periphery of his vision, but he could just see part of the hole the unfortunate man had left in the wall. Two pinpoints of light flashed in the dark.

At first Dean thought it was a flashlight, someone coming through again, thinking this side was safe. He tried to warn them off, tried to lift his heavy head, but nothing worked. Then the pinpoints grew larger, the shuffling sound growing closer. A face swam up from the darkness. The two points of light became eyes, flashing reflectively in a gaunt face.

Jimmy.

Dean tried to thrash around, tried to stand, but all he could do was lean against the wall with his head down, staring out of the corners of his eyes.

FIFTY-THREE



Light leaked into Sam's blood-encrusted eyes. He forced them open, the rock against his cheek rough and freezing. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious. The clouds had moved, no longer veiling the nearby cliffs. He couldn't tell if it was later that same day, or if he'd spent the night out on the exposed ridge. His body was frozen through, and he could barely move his fingers. He struggled to his hands and knees. He couldn't quite make out the sun's position, but it looked a little brighter in the east than it had before the vampires showed up. Sam had the terrible feeling that he had been unconscious all night. His mouth felt completely parched, his body aching for a drink of water.

He rummaged through his pack, pulling out his bottle of water, but there wasn't much left. He drank some eagerly, feeling the liquid refresh him.

Next to him lay the decapitated body of the female vampire. Somewhere below, on the pile of rocks that he and Bobby had climbed, lay the body of the other.

Sam crept to the edge of the ridge as a tremendous gust of wind swept over him. Bracing himself, he lay down and grasped the rocks around him. His parka hood nearly ripped free in an almost deafening burst of fluttering material. He leant over where Bobby had fallen and peered down.

"Bobby!" he shouted.

He didn't see the orange of Bobby's parka anywhere, no tangled mass of color among the rocks below.

Then, on a ledge about thirty feet down, Sam spotted an orange shape. He leaned out a little more, snow raining down as he scrunched forward.

"Bobby!" he shouted again.

The orange patch didn't move. He couldn't make out legs or arms. It was half buried in the white. Bobby's pack was nowhere to be seen, no longer on his back.

"Bobby!"

The orange stirred a little. Sam heard a groan, and then a gloved hand appeared from beneath the snow, accompanied by a sharp cry of pain. Bobby cried out again as he flipped over, moving his legs as though he was preparing to stand.

"Don't try to move!" Sam called down.

Either Bobby was in shock or didn't hear him, because he kept shifting his position around. He got dangerously close to the edge. Sam shouted down again.

"Bobby! You're going to fall!"

He stopped moving and stared up, then signaled to Sam, weakly waving an arm.

"God damn mess I've gotten myself into here," he shouted.

At least he was conscious. Sam watched as he tried to sit up, struggled with it, and collapsed back, cradling his arm.

"You waste those two losers?" Bobby called after a moment.

"Yep."

"Good." Moving all his limbs now, Bobby added, "My wrist is screwed." He reached gingerly up to his head. "And I've smashed my head pretty good."

Sam could see the blood, even from his height, staining the snow.

"How long have we been here?"

Sam stared up at the sky again. "I don't know. Maybe overnight."

"That's not good. I'm damn thirsty."

"What should we do?" Sam shouted down.

“I could try to climb up,” Bobby said, “but that’ll take too long.”

“Do you have more rope?”

“In my pack.” Bobby glanced around on the ledge. “Where’s my pack?”

Sam scanned the boulders at the bottom, not seeing anything. Then he spotted the pack on a ledge above Bobby, about ten feet under and to the right of him. It had ripped open in the fall, some of its contents spilling out and falling to the bottom of the ridge.

“It’s up here,” he called down.

“Can you reach it?”

Sam saw a couple of likely hand- and footholds descending down to the ledge with the pack.

“I think so,” he shouted back.

Another blast of wind buffeted Sam. Once he swung over to the other side of the ridge, though, he’d be on the lee side and safer from getting blown off the rock.

Sam debated whether he should take off his pack before attempting the descent. It had his tent, food, and water in, and if Bobby’s food had fallen out, that was all they had left. On the other hand, the pack was heavy and ungainly on his back, with the potential to throw him dangerously off balance. Finally, he decided to keep it.

He swung his legs over the edge of the ridge and flipped over on his stomach. Reaching down with each foot, he found good handholds and lowered himself down. The storm raged around him as he descended, huge snowflakes getting in his eyes every time he craned his neck around to find his next foothold. He knew that if he fell, both he and Bobby were toast.

After fifteen painstakingly slow minutes, he reached the ledge with Bobby’s pack. Stepping down gingerly onto the rock, Sam tested its solidity, hoping it would hold his weight. It did.

“I’ve got it!” he called down to Bobby.

He stared over the lip of his platform at his ledge some twenty feet below.

Bobby didn’t stir.

“Bobby!” he shouted.

When he still didn’t move, Sam dug into his pack, relieved to see the rope hadn’t fallen out. Bobby’s tent and sleeping bag were still lashed to the outside of the pack, and his weapons and the research folder Marta had given him were still safe inside another zip pocket, but his food, his water bottle, and the stove they’d been using to melt snow for additional drinking water were all gone.

Sam was scouring the rocks around him for something to anchor the rope to when he heard Bobby shout, “I can do it myself, you idjit. Just tie the rope to something solid up there and toss it down.”

Sam leaned over. Bobby was awake, but a lot of blood had run down his face and stained his orange parka.

“I can come down and get you.”

“What am I, a helpless namby-pamby? Just toss it down. Find an anchor up at the top of the ridge.”

Sam lowered one end of the rope to Bobby, swinging it so it reached his ledge. Bobby grabbed it with his good hand. Sam stuffed the other end inside his parka to keep from jostling it.

Sam put Bobby’s pack on one shoulder and his own on the other, then tied them together with some of the rope. He studied the rock face above him, looking for a quicker route back up than the one he had followed down. Not seeing one, he started retracing each careful step.

It took him longer to get back up than it had to descend. He glanced down at Bobby a few times, worried he might find him passed out in the snow, but he was busy tying the rope around himself.

The snowfall near the top of the ridge was so thick that it coated Sam's face instantly and a powerful gust of wind screamed up the opposite side, creating a wall of white at the crest, a vertical, unyielding snowfall. With the rope tied to a loop in his rainproof pants, Sam crept on hands and knees across the ridge. Each time he heard the roar of an upcoming gust, he laid flat, waiting for it to blow over him and die down again.

He crawled the remaining feet to the tree line. It felt incredible to stand up and walk into the trees. He found a massive ponderosa and anchored the rope around it.

He walked to the edge, braced himself against a tremendous boulder, and called out to Bobby, motioning that he was ready. Bobby gave him a thumbs up. Then, cautiously, he placed both feet on the cliff wall, hung onto the rope with his good hand, and walked his way laterally across the cliff face.

Bobby moved fast, Sam noticed, and with a great deal of agility for someone who must be in a world of pain. When he was directly under him, Sam pulled him up.

Bobby crested the ridge and they fell back in the shelter of the trees. Bobby groaned in pain. Up close, Sam could see how soaked his hat and parka were with blood. He examined his eyes, finding one pupil wide and the other dilated. Concussion.

"Let me see your wrist."

Bobby bit his lip. "I don't think it's broken. I was worried for a second there that it had shattered and was more boneless than an octopus tentacle. It might be fractured." He gestured toward his pack. "I can take that now."

"What about your tentacle arm?"

"I'll live."

Damn, he was tough.

"Besides, if I get separated from you in the storm, I can't afford to be without it."

Sam relented. He slid the two packs off his shoulders and untied the rope binding them together. Together they looked through what remained in Bobby's pack, Bobby happy to see his guns and Bowie knife remained.

Sam checked his own food supply. Two packages of jerky and three granola bars. It wasn't much. Bobby had had the bulk of their food. He indicated the research folder. "You can do some light reading tonight. That'll take your mind off starving."

Bobby still had his map, but the GPS unit was gone. It was a blow. The GPS had been the only thing keeping them on track in the whiteout.

"What are we going to do?" Sam asked.

"We know where we are now. We'll just have to be really careful as we proceed. The cloud layer's a little higher. We'll keep getting glimpses of where we are. That'll help."

Sam used the rope to tie Bobby's torn pack together, then helped Bobby heave the pack on and fasten the hip and chest straps.

"Now we really have to make it fast to the resort. The more we're out with injuries like this, the faster we're going to weaken."

Blood had crusted around Bobby's eye, and they used some snow to clear it away. Bobby strapped his snowshoes back on and continued into the forest. Sam hurriedly put his pack back on and took up the rear.

Already the brief glimpse he'd had of their surroundings were gone. The clouds had returned, packing in tightly around them. He watched Bobby making fast headway in front of him. He glanced backward, seeing a patch of red where Bobby had been resting to put on his snowshoes.

He was bleeding a lot worse than he let on.

FIFTY-FOUR



“Is he gone?” Jimmy asked from the vent.

Dean blinked, unable to do anything else.

“Oh, damn. He got you, too.”

He pulled himself out a little farther, and now Dean could see his shoulders and head. The black hoodie was ripped, the hood pulled down to reveal Jimmy’s shortly cropped blond hair.

“Listen, that stuff wears off. It just takes time, and he may have bitten you more than once, but play it cool. If he’s distracted, he might not remember to bite you again before you get your body back.”

Dean stared at Jimmy.

“I’m going to try to dig myself out. Get help. I don’t think I can fight him on my own. If I can’t get out, I’ll come back and try to get the jump on him somehow.”

He shimmied back into the hole, leaving Dean alone and wondering what the hell he was going to do.

Cold began to creep around Dean. He still wore his parka and warm layers beneath, but the wall he leaned against felt unbearably cold. He guessed that on the other side of it, snow pressed in. He tried to imagine the scene from above. Was any part of the lodge still visible? How much snow had buried them?

His mind felt fuzzy. The desire to sleep pressed in on him, his dry eyes longing to close for a while, but he couldn’t let himself drift into unconsciousness.

Somewhere, far away down the corridors and in another devastated room, Dean heard a woman’s voice. “Is anyone alive in here?”

It was Susan. Maybe she had dug down. Maybe she was with rescuers. Hope filled him.

“My leg is trapped. Can someone help me?”

He squeezed his eyes shut. *Damn it!*

“Hello?”

Dean willed her to be quiet.

“Can someone come help me?”

Shut up, shut up, shut up, he pleaded with her silently, *because someone is coming.*

FIFTY-FIVE



Sam looked back at Bobby, who now trailed him. “We need to rest,” he said.

His friend waved him on. Blood from Bobby’s head wound soaked the parka. They had tried to stop the bleeding by applying pressure, but it kept opening up again with Bobby’s exertions.

Sam bit his lip. He knew Bobby was going to hate him for this. “Why don’t we put up your tent? I’ll set you up in there, all warm, and come back and get you after I reach the resort.”

Bobby stopped, staring at him with narrowed eyes. “What are you, some kind of idjit?” He gestured dismissively at his head. “You think I haven’t had worse than this? Son, I’ve been near death so many times it would astound you. Now shut your trap and keep hiking. I’m fine, god damn it.”

Yeah. Bobby hated that.

Sam turned around and kept walking, stopping every half-hour to double check the map. They’d had precious few glimpses of the cliffs around them, but were fairly certain they were headed in the right direction. But now the light was starting to fade, and with both of them injured, he knew that the plummeting temperature would be brutal.

Still, they had at least an hour of daylight left, and were determined to make it count. They hiked through the forest, the snow drifts many feet deep in places. Sam listened to the rhythmic pace of his snowshoes as they moved through the powder.

Bobby shivered and muttered to himself, and Sam started to worry about hypothermia. They had laid out in the snow all night. Their only water was what Sam had in his water bottle,

and that was almost gone. Dehydration and blood loss were taking their toll.

Sam felt colder than he ever had before. Sometimes Lucifer walked beside him, whispering of the fires of Hell, of the warmth there. Lucifer told him to lie down in the snow and sleep.

Shaking his head, Sam pushed away the images.

He'd stopped the bleeding on his forehead and washed most of the dried blood from his face with snow, but he felt it sticking in his hair and woolen hat. His battered fingers stung in the cold despite the gloves. Still, none of his injuries were as bad as Bobby's. That blow to the head was a nasty one, and he definitely had a concussion. His wrist may not be broken, but it was badly swollen.

As he trudged, Sam's thoughts wandered to the Donner Party. He imagined the Forlorn Hope slogging through the snow like this with makeshift snowshoes. Sam's stomach rumbled. He and Bobby had split the last of the jerky more than an hour ago. He couldn't imagine being out here and not having eaten for a week. Mired in during a blizzard, the Forlorn Hope had been reduced to eating the oxhide laces of their snowshoes. The desperation of eating the very mode of conveyance that could deliver you to safety was a bleak act.

His thoughts turned to Dean. His brother had always been there for him, defending him no matter what, always looking out for him. There was no way he was going to let Dean down. No way.

He glanced back at Bobby, who was still grumbling.

Bobby tore off his warm cap and threw it down in the snow, then kept walking.

"Bobby."

Bobby tore off his gloves and started to unzip his jacket.

"What are you doing?"

"It's too damn hot. I'm burning up in all these layers."

Sam rushed back to him. “Bobby. It’s not hot. It’s freezing.”

“Maybe you’re freezing. I’m burning up.” He shucked off his jacket, casting it aside. “It ain’t enough that we can’t get the floors clean. Now we have to deal with this.”

“Floors?” Bobby shoved past him, leaving his warm clothes behind. Sam picked them up. “Bobby, put these back on.”

He waved at Sam dismissively. “Hell if I will.”

The anger, the illusion of warmth... Sam stopped. This was advanced hypothermia. They had to stop now and build a fire, or Bobby would be dead within a few hours.

FIFTY-SIX



Dean snapped awake, horrified that he'd dozed off. He was useless. Uselessness had taken over his whole life. He was unable to help Sam in the aftermath of Hell. Every time he saved the world, it was ready to off itself again. Now here he was, unable to even lift his pinkie, struggling merely to stay awake while people around him died.

He could feel the weight of his .45 in his jacket pocket. He still had it, with the bullets soaked in the spice concoction. If he could just reach it somehow, unload it into Jason, maybe getting the mixture inside his body would do some damage.

His breath frosted in the air, and he knew then that it wouldn't be long before the place really cooled down. It could be night outside. He had no idea how much time had passed since the avalanche or how long he'd been unconscious. It could be days. The air felt stale and thin, making him breathe shallowly.

Across from him the mountain manager lay awake again, eyes finding Dean's in the gloom. Dean blinked at him.

Movement in the narrow corridor let them know someone was coming. Don's eyes went wild, his pupils darting around as Jason entered the room.

Dean closed his eyes. He heard Jason's clawed feet crunching on the debris of broken glass, insulation, and destroyed ski equipment. The footsteps moved away from Dean and he allowed his eyes to open just a slit.

Jason stood over Don, studying him. The proboscis snaked in the air, and Dean could hear Jason sniffing as he had before. He was going to take one of Don's organs.

Frustration welled up inside Dean. He willed himself to move, to move *anything*, just an inch. *Just one inch.*

Suddenly his foot twitched. He felt the toe of his boot nudge a fallen ceiling tile.

His arms hung limply at his sides, and he concentrated on moving his hands. *Just an inch.*

His right hand came forward. Dean slid it upward into his pocket. Jason's back was still to him. His fingers closed around the welcome cold of the .45. With great effort, he pulled it out.

Jason flipped Don over onto his back, and Dean could hear the man hyperventilating in fear. Dean slid the .45 onto his lap, unable to lift it higher than a couple of inches. He used his leg to steady himself, sliding the gun toward his kneecap to get some elevation on the barrel.

Jason tore open Don's parka, exposing the bare skin. Dark bruises covered Don's flesh, the avalanche already having taken a toll. The aswang bent over him, exposing his side to Dean, and Dean took his chance. He fired three rounds. The shots rang out deafeningly in the tiny space and Dean thrilled to the scent of cordite.

Jason staggered backward, gripping his side, and let out a piercing scream. He whirled toward Dean, eyes narrowing. Dean could hear Jason's flesh bubbling already, the bullets working their way through his organs.

Jason advanced on him, and Dean fired again, hitting him in the face, the chest, then again in the stomach. He unloaded the whole clip, knowing that if Jason survived, he'd take the gun, and probably a whole hell of a lot more—like Dean's heart and brain.

Smoke billowed out from the bullet holes, the smell of sizzling meat stealing over the room. Jason reached him, clawed hand coming down hard on Dean's gun. It flew out of his grip, landing in the far corner near the hallway entrance. The crack and pop of roasting meat filled Dean's ears as Jason bent down over him. Dean tried to kick him, but all he could do was weakly punch Jason in the chest and face. He grabbed the feeding tube, trying to tear it off, but his hand wouldn't

close tightly enough around the glistening flesh. He could see bits of cooking fat jumping out of the bullet holes.

Jason grabbed him by the throat and squeezed. Dean felt his veins throb. His head swam, red filling his vision. He tried to breathe, but couldn't. Then the proboscis attached itself to Dean's chest. The needle teeth bit down and he felt cold venom entering his body. The aswang held him there, hand tightly around Dean's throat. The lethargic feeling of paralysis returned, stealing over him. He ached for a breath, but the clenched hand around his trachea made it impossible.

Dean's world went black.

FIFTY-SEVEN



Sam put up Bobby's tent and got him inside his sleeping bag. Snow continued to fall, blanketing the tent fly as soon as they got it set up. He'd finally convinced Bobby to put his warm clothes back on. Bobby grew quiet, sitting very still.

Sam took the opportunity to gather kindling and logs in the dwindling light. He found a few dry sticks and pine needles and was incredibly grateful to find a box of waterproof matches still in his pack. He moved nearer the tent, gently laying out all the pine needles around the smaller twigs. His whole body shook with the cold. His fingers barely worked. As he struck the match and willed the pine needles to catch, his mind flashed back to 'To Build a Fire,' which he'd read in fourth grade. They were not going to suffer the terrible fate of Jack London's character.

His trembling hands got a match lit and when the pine needles caught, it was the most glorious flash of light Sam had ever seen. It swept through the collection of kindling, and slowly he added more and more sticks and eventually a few logs. They hissed and sizzled, wet from the snow, but they still burned.

He got Bobby out of the tent and sat him in front of the fire. Filling his water bottle with snow, Sam set it close enough to the heat to melt the contents. Then he offered it to Bobby, who welcomed the drink. Sam took a few swigs, too. Slowly the warmth spread to their faces and hands. Bobby wriggled his fingers in front of the flames, then winced when his wrist gave him grief.

They sat in silence, drinking more water. Sam occasionally got up to find more logs. The snow cascaded down, hissing when it hit the flames. Utter quiet hung in the forest.

When he was sufficiently warmed up, Sam put up his own tent, laying his sleeping bag out, then returning to the fire.

Bobby met Sam's eyes. "Thanks for back there."

"No problem."

"Kind of lost my mind."

"It was the cold."

"Yeah."

They subsided into silence again, the only noise the occasional growl of Sam's empty stomach. Neither mentioned food or how hungry they were. They both knew that as soon as it was light, they would set out again.

FIFTY-EIGHT



Dean regained consciousness, his eyes flying open. Again, he couldn't move. He still sat against the freezing wall, and now he was really cold. He had lost all sensation in his toes and fingers. His breath frosted in the air, and he could feel a rime of ice around his mouth.

Across from him, Don still lay on his stomach. Dean couldn't see his face anymore.

In the other corner, the body of the man the aswang had fed on had been flipped on its back, puncture holes covering the bare chest above the heart, stomach, and lungs. Another hole, not sealed, yawned in the temple. Dean could see the empty black inside the skull.

Dean scanned the room, but still didn't see Grace. Where was she? And what had happened to Susan? He wondered how many people were alive down there, how many victims for Jason to devour to prolong his own life?

"Hey," he heard from the air vent.

His eyes darted in that direction. Jimmy's silvery eyes flashed at him in return.

"I couldn't get out. We have to wait for rescuers."

"There isn't time. Don't you see that?" Dean wanted to shout at Jimmy. "You have to kill Jason." But even Dean knew that Jason couldn't be killed. Not until Bobby and Sam brought the weapon.

Dean thought of the other clip in his pocket, of the gun lying by the hallway entrance. Had Jason taken it? He looked at Jimmy, then at the area where the gun was, trying to get his attention.

"He took your gun," Jimmy said, understanding. "I don't know where to. I heard that girl crying out, but I couldn't find

her—the one shouting that her leg was trapped? I think she’s in another part of the building, cut off from us. But that’s good. Maybe she’ll be able to get out, or maybe rescuers will spot her faster.”

Dean stared at the thin man’s glowing eyes.

Jimmy looked down, shame creeping over his head. “I’m such a goddamn fool. You know that?”

Dean waited. There wasn’t anything else he could do.

“I wanted to be a hunter so bad. Wanted to go with you guys to hunt that wendigo. Then Jason said I could come when more killings happened, said you guys needed all the help you could get. Only he didn’t take me out hunting. He took me to a nest of vamps outside Dayton. He told them where they could find the infamous Winchesters, and left me there as a little treat to sweeten the deal.” He sighed, gritting his teeth.

“Suckers near bled me dry, then they turned me. I got away when they were gearing up to leave for Point Reyes. They went out there to kill your brother and Bobby.” His brow furrowed. “Now I’m one of those *things*. But I didn’t want to leave you alone out here with Jason.” He stuck his chin out defiantly. “And I wanted to kill the son of a bitch.”

Dean breathed in the gloom, alarmed by Jimmy’s news about the vampires. At least Dean knew Sam and Bobby had made it out okay. Sam hadn’t mentioned anything about it on the phone. Maybe they’d missed them.

Dean’s own situation was dire, too. The aswang could eat its way through all the people trapped down here and Bobby and Sam might not even know they were buried yet. Again, he wondered how long it had been since the avalanche. He looked to Jimmy, hoping he could tell him, but this time the vampire failed to pick up what Dean was thinking.

“I just don’t know how to do it,” Jimmy continued. “I was going to lure him outside. He’s vulnerable to cold. I know that. He was kneeling over you at your camp in the forest, about to attack while you slept, when he saw me and slashed at me, but I got away. He got me pretty good, though. Left a hell

of a blood trail. He wandered around in the snow and got lost. I did it twice, luring him out like that, but it didn't kill him. I think it came close, though." He shifted his position, staring down at Dean. "But I can't find any way out of this place."

Dean blinked, eyes searching the gloom of the room for anything that could help him. This was ridiculous. He was paralyzed once again, and seriously doubted Jason would be careless a second time. Right now, his hopes rested on a clip of ammo with no gun, a missing ranger who wasn't a ranger, and a vampire in an air duct.

He heard the now-familiar sound of something being dragged along the hallway. In an instant, Jimmy shimmied back the way he came and fell silent.

Jason appeared, pulling someone along. Dean's heart sank when he saw the short crop of blonde hair. It was Grace.

Grace's terrified eyes found Dean's in the gloom. She was paralyzed, too. Jason dragged her over by Don and dumped her. Dean shut his eyes as Jason turned.

Dean heard the aswang crunching along the ruined floor towards him. There was a pause, and Dean could sense Jason standing over him. Dean didn't open his eyes, but he could feel the weight of his stare.

"You awake?" Jason asked. He slapped Dean hard in the face. Dean forced himself to keep his eyes closed. "I need you awake!"

From the pocket of his parka, Jason pulled out a length of rope. He pushed Dean over on his stomach. His face hit the dirty floor, and he felt the sharpness of a ski binding under his cheekbone. His face flushed with anger at the helplessness of his situation. Was Jason about to feed on him?

But instead of ripping Dean's jacket open, Jason wrenched his arms behind his back. He bound his wrists, then his ankles, finishing by hog-tying them to each other.

"Wake up, you son of a bitch. I have a question for you." Jason brutally kicked Dean in the side for emphasis. Then he stormed out of the room, clawed feet clicking on the floor.

Dean tried to see Grace, but too much debris covered the floor for him to get a line of sight on her. He couldn't see the air vent, either.

Dean took being tied up as a good sign, though. Maybe Jason was going to let the paralysis wear off so Dean could talk. If so, the second it did, hog-tied or not, Dean was going to do everything he could to destroy Jason. If he had to, he'd hack off all Jason's limbs with his Bowie knife. It would take the son of a bitch a while to recover from that.

Dean lay waiting for the feeling to return to his body.

FIFTY-NINE



Huddled around the tiny fire, Bobby finally felt his bones thawing out. He watched the snow curl upward into the grey sky. He'd never been in a winter storm this bad. Their progress was too slow. They would have reached the resort by now if the snow weren't so deep.

Sam shivered across from him, sitting with his arms crossed. He stared into the fire, eyes troubled, brow creased. Bobby could guess what terrible visions Sam conjured in that blaze. Hell.

"Sam." He looked up at Bobby, his gaze haunted. "You're not there anymore."

Sam exhaled. "I know. I think I know, anyway." He pressed his thumb into the palm of his scarred hand.

Bobby worried about him. The more time they spent out here, the more consumed and withdrawn Sam had become. Maybe it was all the quiet that did it to him, but his thoughts seemed to take him over.

After a couple of hours of warmth, the crackling died down. Bobby felt thoroughly thawed out and crawled into his sleeping bag in his tent.

Sam did the same, and a few minutes later, as Bobby zipped up his tent-fly, he asked, "Do you think it's weird that we haven't run across Dean's trail, or that that thing hasn't attacked us?"

Bobby stared at him over the dying fire. "This storm's the worst I've ever seen. It's all but wiped out any trail of Dean. Could be the aswang's trapped in it, too. It may be tougher than hell, but that don't make it immune to the weather."

Sam frowned, obviously not satisfied. "I guess so," he said. "Goodnight."

Bobby heard Sam close his tent-fly.

Bobby had wondered why the aswang hadn't attacked, too. Though he wouldn't admit as much to Sam. They were exposed prime meat and exhausted in the storm, after all. It was possible the aswang didn't even know they were out there.

Bobby couldn't sleep. His wrist was giving him fits. He held it outside the tent for a few minutes, letting it cool in the snow, but ultimately he preferred the warmth of the bag. Eventually, he hunkered down inside his sleeping bag's fleecy depths and pulled out the folder Marta had given him. He'd been carrying it around since they set off, but this was the first moment he'd had to look at it.

Switching on his headlamp, he opened the manila file. Dozens of articles spilled out. Marta had certainly done a lot of ground work. Some pages were photocopies of the diary of the eighteenth-century Spanish missionary, others were copies of old newspaper articles going back to the 1800s.

He flipped through the pages of the old diary, reading account after account of aswangs creeping into villages at night and sucking fetuses out of pregnant women, and kidneys and livers out of men and children. One family's son had gone missing while out fishing one day. For ten days they searched for him with no luck. Then one day he just wandered back into the village and lay down on his bed. They couldn't get him to eat or drink anything, and he just thrashed around restlessly, unable to lie still. As the family watched in desperation, he slowly stopped moving altogether. When the village doctor examined him, he found him filled with the organs of other people and had no idea how he could have walked back to the village.

At night, villagers could hear the aswang flying overhead. Wing beats that sounded far off actually meant the creature was close by, ready to strike. Bobby filed that information away in case it came in useful. An old man had rushed out of his house to shout at what he thought was a retreating aswang, and it descended on him, sucking his full stomach right out of his body.

Bobby turned over more pages in the folder. Marta had even managed to dig up an article from the Point Reyes National Seashore bulletin published by the National Park Service. An historical piece, it covered an early shipwreck by Chimney Rock near Drake's Bay. A Spanish three-masted ship carrying colonists and a few missionaries had crashed up on the rocks in 1863. Only a handful of survivors lived to relate the tale of bad weather. Some talked of a ghost living aboard the ship who would suck the life out of the mariners on stormy nights. The article included a grainy black and white photograph of the survivors, huddled in blankets on the beach. In the near-background, rowboats recovered more passengers and some of the cargo. In the distance, dashed against the rocks, stood the remains of the ship, its skeletal masts reaching up toward the bluffs of Chimney Rock.

Bobby aimed his headlamp at the photograph, scanning the faces of the sailors and passengers. A nun shivered inside a blanket. A tough-looking sailor stared to the left of the cameraman, a haunted look on his face. Another man peered out from a wide-brimmed hat that was pushed low over his forehead. His face was darker than the others, with deep-set eyes and a square jaw. Bobby peered closer. Something was familiar about him. The photo didn't have very good resolution. He pulled out the magnifying glass on his lensatic compass and held it over the face.

It was Jason.

Gathering up the folder, Bobby rolled over on his side in the sleeping bag. The wind howled at the tent door, flapping the material. The storm showed no signs of slowing down, and already the snow had drifted around his tent. He'd read through the rest of the clippings. Most described grisly murders of people found without organs, or with extra organs sealed up inside them. They happened in small towns along the coast in the 1860s, eventually moving into San Francisco. He'd only found the one photo of Jason, but it was enough.

"Sam!"

He heard him stir in the neighboring tent.

“Yeah?”

“Dean’s really in the drink this time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know who the aswang is. It’s not Grace.”

“Then who?”

“Jason.”

“What?”

“Check this out.”

Bobby unzipped his tent and handed the article over to Sam. He heard an answering zip and felt Sam take the photo. In another moment, light from Sam’s headlamp flooded the dark.

“Oh, my god. It’s him. And look at the date! 1863.”

Sam read over the article.

“What I want to know,” Bobby said, propping himself up on one elbow, “is how the hell he infiltrated a hunter’s bar?”

“He did a damn fine job. I believed him.”

“Me, too.”

“He knew dad. Or said he did.”

“And Bill Harvelle, and Ellen and Jo.”

“Even Ash and his mullet,” Sam added. “He was good.” Sam went quiet for a minute. “Dean has no idea.”

“Maybe he knows by now. We haven’t talked to him for a long time.”

“How long did you say it would take us to get to the resort?”

“Maybe we’ll reach it tomorrow, if the weather stays this good.”

“We’ve got to pick up the pace, Bobby.”

Bobby knew Sam was right, but unfortunately, they were already pushing themselves as much as they could. The

weather held them at its mercy. Showing up a little late was better than not showing up at all because they were buried under ten feet of snow. But that didn't make him any less impatient at how long it was taking to get up there.

SIXTY-ONE



Dean lay in the darkness, ears tensed for the slightest sound. He hadn't heard Susan cry out for hours. Maybe Jimmy was right, maybe she'd gotten out. The venom had made him doze off a couple of times, he was pretty sure. He'd lost all sense of time, and the coldness of the trash-littered floor had seeped into his bones. He'd started shivering violently about an hour ago. He concentrated on staying awake. The space was so cramped that oxygen was getting slim now. He couldn't get a deep enough breath.

But already he could wriggle his fingers. The paralysis was wearing off. He flexed his toes inside his boots. He could move his tongue now, too, and his lips.

When he was sure Jason was not in the room, he whispered, "Grace?" but she didn't answer. "Don?" he whispered. No response there, either. He wondered if Don were still alive, if Jason had fed on him while Dean was unconscious. He waited to hear Jimmy at the vent again, now that he could talk, but only silence hovered in the room.

He heard someone walking through the narrow hallway. Jason entered the room and walked straight to him. Dean pretended to be unconscious, but a swift kick in his ribs brought forth an uncontrollable *oomph*.

Jason knelt down over him.

"What did you do with them?" He prodded Dean's back with his sharp fingers. Then he punched him in the face, grabbing a fistful of his hair and wrenching his head back. "Where did you put the eggs?"

Dean felt blood streaming down from his nose, but he kept his eyes shut.

“I know you’re awake, you piece of crap hunter. Where did you put them?”

Dean could hear more than anger in his voice. Desperation tinged it. Dean wondered if aswangs only had one shot at producing offspring in a lifetime.

He kept his body limp, hoping to buy time. He couldn’t fight Jason when he was tied up like this.

“Just tell me. You already helped me once, you and your brother and that sad alcoholic excuse for a hunter you call Bobby Singer.” He hit Dean in the back of the head.

Dean was really starting to hate the guy.

“That damn wendigo was finishing all my kills. I like to take my time. Stupid ape was finding my half-finished meals and stealing them.” He leaned closer to Dean, rank breath creeping into Dean’s nostrils. “But you made quick work of him for me.”

Dean felt rage fill him, but he remained silent. He was so going to kill this son of a bitch.

“Okay then,” Jason spat angrily.

He stood up and stomped across the room. At the small pile of people, he seized Grace. He slammed her down next to Dean, then turned her face so she stared straight at him. Her eyes were wide and teary, desperate and terrified.

“If you don’t tell me, I’m going to suck every organ out of her right in front of you.” He sneered in the gloom. “And I’ll make it last.”

Grace’s eyes widened.

He kicked Dean again. “I know you can talk!”

Dean flinched. If he told Jason, he’d kill them both anyway. But he couldn’t watch Grace die in front of him like that. If only he knew how far out Bobby and Sam were.

“I’ll ask you one more time. Where are the eggs?”

Dean remained silent.

Jason flipped Grace over on her stomach. He ripped open the back of her parka, exposing her bare skin. Then the feeding tube came down, finding just the right spot. Dean could see the glistening needle teeth inside the pulsing snout. It paused over her kidneys.

“No!” he shouted, struggling against the ropes.

“Something you want to tell me?” Jason asked.

Dean stared into his coppery eyes in the gloom. “Let her go! Your fight is with me!”

“Not a chance. I know you won’t talk. You’re a hunter. It’s the greater good with you lot. You’re not going to spill your guts unless some innocent person is in danger. Maybe not even then,” he added.

The proboscis returned to sliding down Grace’s back. “What do you think? The appendix? The gall bladder? What can she live without for now?”

The needle teeth pierced the skin of her back, and Dean heard her draw in a sharp breath.

“Stop, stop, stop!” Dean shouted, thrashing around.

Blood spilled from the wound and the feeding tube started thrumming.

A two-by-four came swinging out of the shadows, striking Jason on the back of the head. He sprawled forward, teeth tearing free. Jimmy swung for a second time.

Dean struggled to reach the Bowie knife in his jacket pocket, but couldn’t even get close.

Jimmy struck Jason again and again, driving him back toward the hallway. He shoved him through the door. When the aswang stumbled onto his back in the hallway, Jimmy tugged on the lockers against the wall, heaving them up and over on their side. Metal clanged loudly as they fell into place between the room and the corridor.

Stuck on the other side, Jason banged furiously on the metal. The lockers shuddered under the force of his blows.

“My knife! In my left jacket pocket!” Dean yelled to Jimmy.

The vampire darted back, kneeling in front of Dean. He pulled out the knife and sliced through the rope. Dean felt his arms and feet fall to the ground with exquisite relief. He rolled over onto his back, taking the knife from Jimmy, then cut through the rope at his wrists and ankles.

Panic seized Jimmy. “I don’t know what we’re going to do now! That’s going to hold him for about five seconds.”

Jason still pounded on the lockers.

“Where does that air vent go?” Dean asked him.

“Into another part of the building.”

“Has Jason been in there yet?”

Jimmy shook his head. “No, but you’ll never fit. You’re huge.”

“Get into the vent.”

With vampire speed and reflexes, Jimmy spun and leapt up into the vent. Dean stood up on shaking legs. Grabbing Grace fireman-style, he hefted her over his shoulder. Rushing to the air vent, he lifted her up and Jimmy grabbed her shoulders.

“Drag her through to the other side.”

As cacophonous blows echoed through the little room, Dean hurried to where Don lay. He was still alive, but Dean realized that, with his beer belly, his girth would make the air vent too tight a squeeze. He turned Don over and grabbed Steven instead. The snow ranger was breathing steadily. Dean hefted him over to Jimmy.

“Take him, too!”

Jimmy pulled Steven all the way through, then wriggled back. “Give me someone else!”

With the wrenching of metal, the lockers toppled over. Jason stood in the doorway, wings flexing, eyes glowing angrily.

Dean braced himself to fight.

SIXTY-TWO



Dean was momentarily confused when the banging sound continued after the lockers had settled onto the floor. Then plaster rained down on him and he realized someone was trying to get in from above.

Jason grabbed Dean, throwing him to the side. He crashed painfully into a wall and slumped down next to the empty body. The aswang reached inside the air vent and Dean heard Jimmy cry out in surprise. He jumped up to help, but another backhanded blow from Jason sent Dean crashing backward, landing on a ruined desk.

Jason dragged Jimmy out of the hole, the vampire kicking him and clawing at him. Dean struggled to his feet, still shaky from the paralysis.

The banging sound continued overhead, filling the room.

Jimmy snarled at Jason, all his teeth growing sharp and his eyes gleaming in the dim light. He bit into Jason's throat, blood spraying out. Jason placed his hands on both sides of Jimmy's head and, in an instant, ripped his head from his torso. He tossed the head against the far wall.

Another surge of rage swept over Dean. Jason turned to him, eyes full of hate. Dean's hand closed around the extra gun clip in his jacket, but he couldn't see his gun. He'd hoped maybe Jimmy had been wrong, that Jason had left it there, but he hadn't.

A large chunk of debris crashed down from above. Brilliant light spilled into the room. Dean glanced up to see blue sky, with snow falling toward him. He breathed in a gulp of the fresh air. He felt a sharp pain in his side and looked down to find Jason's feeding tube attached to his stomach. He grabbed it, wrenching it out.

Something shattered at his feet. Jason screamed.

Bobby and Sam stood framed against the blue above him. They threw another vial of the spice concoction on Jason and his skin erupted in boils.

“More! More!” Dean yelled.

Vial after vial exploded onto Jason’s skin, causing the flesh to peel away in burning, sizzling strips. Screeching, his wings opened wide and he shot through the hole above, shoving Bobby and Sam aside.

Dean watched him wing away across the blue. Then he was out of sight.

“God damn it!” he cursed. “Is he gone?”

Sam’s head turned to look back down at his brother. “Yes.”

Dean blinked against the brightness. “It’s good to see you. Get me the hell out of here!”

Two hours later, rescuers had gotten all the survivors out of the air vent and the collapsed building. The storm had lifted, and now only a few clouds drifted across the azure sky. Though the temperature was still hovering in the thirties, the sun beating down on Dean felt warm and reassuring. He sat in the snow, Susan beside him, cooling her broken leg in the frozen white.

She stared at Grace and Steven, who were lying a few feet away on stretchers. “They don’t have any wounds,” she said. “There was really a paralysis-causing gas leak down there?”

Dean shrugged. “Something did that to us. It wears off, though. I’m proof of that.”

“Jesus, this was the scariest time of my life.”

Dean thought about how lucky she was to have been in another part of the building. She’d been the first person the rescuers had found when the storm broke.

Sam appeared from behind one of the wrecked walls of the resort. The avalanche had decimated almost the entire lodge, leaving only a couple of pillars and one of the stone walls intact. Amazingly, the chandelier still hung from the only crossbeam standing.

Sam walked over to his brother. While Dean recovered feeling in his body, he and Bobby had been helping dig people out. He looked tired as hell.

“Grace is talking,” he told Dean.

Dean got up, hurrying over to her. Sam joined him.

“Dean,” she said, smiling when she saw him. “What the hell was that thing?”

Dean looked around carefully, then brought a finger to his lips. “I’ll tell you in a minute when we have more privacy.”

Bobby walked over too. He eyed Grace suspiciously.

“We know you’re not a ranger,” Sam told her.

Weakly, she lifted a finger to her lips, imitating Dean. “I’m out here tracking bear poachers,” she whispered. “It’s easier to check people’s permits and find out if they’re legit when you pretend to be a ranger. Some assholes have been killing bears to take their organs to sell on the black market as aphrodisiacs. I was tracking them up by Silverado Ridge. I found a bear killed, with its gall bladder missing. Then the trail just went dead, as if those guys had vanished. I thought you guys were the poachers at first.” She gripped Dean’s hand. “Do you think that thing got them?”

He frowned, realizing how close she must have come to the aswang on numerous occasions. “Could be.”

“So you’re just an animal rights activist?” Bobby said, trying to suppress a smile.

“What’s funny about that?”

“Nothing. Nothing,” he said quickly.

“And what do you mean ‘just’ an animal rights activist?” She eyed him irritably.

Dean grinned, happy to see her fire back.

Sam scanned the horizon. “Bobby, it’s getting dark. We need to stay on this thing’s trail before it vanishes completely. Everyone’s been pulled out of the wreckage who made it. We need to go.”

Bobby met his gaze. “Agreed.”

Grace wriggled her boot. “I can come, too. I’m fine.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah? Move your legs.”

She couldn’t. She frowned. “You see those bear poachers, you tell me where I can find them.”

“Will do,” Bobby told her.

They suited up, got fresh water and a little more food. Dean still felt weak, but he knew they couldn’t lose the trail now. They had to find the aswang.

Donning their snowshoes, the three of them trekked off into the snowy forest to find Jason and end it.

SIXTY-THREE



Sam snowshoed along next to Bobby and Dean, grateful for the shafts of sunshine sneaking through the trees. Memories of the fight on the narrow ledge and Bobby cutting the rope surfaced and he pushed them away. The three of them were together, and in reasonably good shape, despite everything. Now they just had to find the aswang. They had started out in the direction it had flown, but had no further glimpse of it.

Bobby stopped next to a tree. “It makes sense that it needs a place where it can store its victims, eat them over a long period of time,” he said, obviously giving voice to a train of thought he’d been following.

Darkness flashed over Dean’s face. “With them paralyzed, it wouldn’t necessarily need to be a place where no one would hear screams. They wouldn’t be able to scream.”

“It wouldn’t have to worry about the smell, either, because it keeps them alive,” Sam added.

“Until it stuffs all the unused organs into a body and has it march out of the lair, at any rate.” Bobby winced. “So what does that leave us?”

“A mine, maybe,” Sam suggested. “But the lair doesn’t have to be underground.”

“A cabin, like the one I came across. But I didn’t see any evidence of it keeping victims there, just its eggs.”

“So it’s got a separate place where it caches its food. It’s secretive, so someplace reclusive where interested passersby won’t investigate.” Bobby lifted his woolen cap, rubbed his head, and replaced it.

“I still think a mine’s our best bet,” Sam insisted. “They’re mostly closed now and have ‘no trespassing’ signs posted all over the entrance.”

“I’m leaning your way, Sam.”

Bobby pulled out his map. They clustered around it, finding the wendigo’s mine, the spot where the hunter’s buddies had found the blood pool, the area where Sam and Dean had first been attacked by the aswang, then the approximate location of the cabin where Dean had found the eggs.

“Grace said she was tracking those bear poachers near Silverado Ridge before they vanished,” Dean added. He pointed to it on the map.

Sam scanned for a nearby mine symbol. Sure enough, one stood in the middle of the activity.

“That’s our spot,” Bobby said.

Sam found their current location. “So, about a mile and a half due east.”

He reached into his pocket, pulling out the stingray whip.

They walked steadily, not saying anything to each other.

Dean seemed quiet. Sam knew it must have eaten him up, being so helpless while the aswang fed. He’d always had a thing about feeling useless. But Dean was strong. Even though he and Bobby worried Dean’s head wasn’t in the game, Sam was sure that in the end Dean would always fight, and would fight with everything in him.

They trudged through the snow, covering the mile and a half in little more than half an hour. Stopping in a dense cluster of trees, they spotted the mine entrance some hundred feet away, set into a face of rock. Rusty bars covered the entrance in an attempt to keep out curious explorers. A sign read, “Danger. Unsafe Mine. Stay Out. Stay Alive.” But the gate had long ago been compromised, the bars wrenched away along the bottom, leaving plenty of room to come and go.

Sam held the whip coiled in one hand, while Dean and Bobby gripped knives soaked in spices. Taking off their snowshoes, they left them by the entrance. Then they stepped through the bars, ducking under the rusty metal. Darkness

enveloped them as they entered the old mine. A rank gust of methane assaulted Sam's senses.

"No bullets," Bobby warned them unnecessarily.

Switching on headlamps, they studied the dirt on the mine floor. A mess of recent footprints disturbed the soil there, some bare, some booted. Bobby pointed out a set of bare feet with claws that lay on top of the others. Sam nodded and they followed them.

Aside from the beams of their headlamps, darkness closed in on them as they turned the first corner. Blood had seeped into the floor in places, red and fresh.

Dean sniffed the air. "I can smell the same sizzling meat smell I did in the lodge. He's in here."

They followed the footprints, turning several corners and then descending down a long shaft. The smell of methane grew stronger. An ancient electrical line ran along the ceiling, rusted hooks holding the cables in place by the supporting beams.

At the end of the long tunnel, three forks branched off. Bobby investigated each one, then chose the middle way. It dipped farther underground, taking them deeper and deeper into the mine. Fresh blood continued to dot the soil. Dirt stirred up as they walked, drifting in motes in the glow of their headlamps. The tunnel led them to a wide space where the mine walls had been worked in antiquity. An old mine car stood there, some pieces of ore still sitting in it.

Bobby held up a fist to signal for them to stop. He searched the floor, finding the set of bare feet again and motioning them forward.

Sam strained to hear any sound at all. Sometimes a gust of foul wind blew through the mine, but other than that ghostly rush of air, it was silent.

They walked through a narrow opening into another tunnel which angled off to the right, dipping still lower. The scent of methane was now so strong that Sam felt like he was

walking in a sewer. He gripped the whip handle, trying to strain the smell through his teeth. It didn't work.

At the next junction they continued right, following the tracks. A long, low wail echoed eerily down the mine tunnel. Instantly, the three froze, listening. It came again.

"That him?" Sam whispered to Dean.

Dean listened, then furrowed his brow. "Hard to say."

"Well, it's someone," Bobby said. "Let's go."

They followed the sound, keeping track of the blood and footprints. They led in the same direction.

Sam could hear water trickling from one of the tunnels. The sound bounced erratically off the walls, throwing off which direction it lay in. The low moan echoed again, drifting down the tunnels, sounding like it was coming from several directions at once.

Bobby stuck to the physical trail, leading them down another corridor, angling downward again. The water sound grew louder, a stream cascading over rocks.

They reached a narrow opening in the rock, small and unsupported by beams. Bobby stuck his head through, shining the light around. Then he bent down and stepped through. When Sam followed, the sound of water instantly grew louder.

Sam's headlamp revealed a spring rushing down one of the walls, forming a rivulet of water that bounced along a stony channel out of sight. It wasn't much water; the mine distorted the noise, making it sound like a rushing torrent.

As Dean pressed through the smaller hole, Bobby froze, bringing up his fist again to signal a halt. Sam followed his gaze. At the extent of their headlamps, propped up in the gloom, sat two men, feet near the rivulet of water. They wore fatigues and hiking boots with hunter caps.

Sam gripped the weapon. The men didn't move or look up.

Dean put a hand on Sam's arm. "Their jackets have been ripped open."

Sam turned his head. “Meaning?”

“Aswang food.”

Slowly the three moved closer, Sam aware now that the creature could be there in the shadows.

Dean reached the men first. He touched the necks of both, then turned to Sam and Bobby. “Dead.”

He tilted one body forward, revealing a bare back with multiple puncture wounds sealed with gleaming saliva.

Bobby winced. “Just like the guy we brought back to the hospital. Looks like it didn’t leave them with much. Maybe the gall bladder.”

Sam took in their clothing. Each had rifles still strapped to their shoulders. They’d been paralyzed, in all likelihood. He went through their pockets, finding some papers and a well-used map with handwritten markings all over it. He held it up for the others.

“Check this out.” The map had bear symbols on it, dotted in different areas. One bear had a red X through it. “I’ll bet they were the two poachers Grace was looking for.”

“Looks like their organ harvesting didn’t work out quite the way they expected,” Bobby said drily.

They stood up, leaving the men where they sat. Bobby searched for more signs of the tracks.

Something stirred close by, an exhalation of breath that startled Sam. He turned, seeing a flash of movement streak by the two bodies. It moved behind them, cutting them off.

“There!” Sam yelled. He uncoiled the whip.

A silhouette vanished through the tunnel they’d come from and Sam leapt over the little rivulet, giving chase. In the bouncing beam of his headlamp, he saw the shadow of wings on the far wall as something moved in front of him. He cast the whip out in that direction, but it landed in dirt. He ran forward, seeing the shadow move as he rounded corners. It was right in front of him.

He threw the whip out again, and this time felt it catch. The whip tugged sharply, almost ripping out of Sam's hand. He wound it around his chest and then his shoulder, tying it into a knot as best he could. Then he gripped the handle with both hands. The pressure on the other end tugged him forward, and he almost fell over.

He heard Dean shout behind him, "You got him?"

Sam opened his mouth to answer and was tugged face down in the dirt. He tasted the bittersweet of soil and then his whole body jerked forward, dragged along the mine floor.

He caught a glimpse of Dean and Bobby behind him, their headlamps darting wildly over the mine walls as they ran.

Another tremendous jerk sent him flying through the air, slamming into a wall as the aswang rounded a corner ahead of him. Sam slid to the ground just as another great heave lifted him up. His legs kicked out as he slammed down again onto the ground. Then he was airborne, zipping through the tunnels they'd come down, careening into the walls every time the aswang met another junction and turned.

"Dean!" he shouted, not sure he could hold on.

They couldn't lose Jason now. He squeezed his eyes shut against the rain of dust and concentrated on feeling his hands grip the whip handle. The tightly coiled whip bit savagely into his shoulder. He tried to keep track of how many turns they'd made.

Daylight burst over him. He was facing backward, and saw the mine entrance appear below him. They exited with such speed that his breath caught. His legs spiraled in the air and he tried to twist to see the aswang. He could hear its wings flapping laboriously, feel the gusts of air from it. Below him the mine entrance grew tiny.

The aswang circled, heading for a mass of granite boulders that protruded from the base of an outcropping. Sam held tight to the whip, stealing a glance upward. The aswang surged up and down in the air, leathery wings working to support both of their weights, its snout twisted with the effort.

It flew up, moving higher and higher, and below him Sam saw the meadow in front of the mine spinning. He could now barely make out the mine entrance, just a dot of darkness against the grey of the granite rock wall.

With a gust of air, the aswang dove past Sam, and for a brief moment, Sam was weightless, hanging there in the sunshine. Then the whip jerked down on him, the breath rushing from his chest at the sudden constriction. The aswang folded its wings and dropped.

Suddenly, its wings came out, lifting upward, and Sam arced under it, swinging out on the extent of the whip. It hovered in mid-air, letting the whip continue its arc toward the mess of treacherous stone, and Sam saw the aswang's plan. He sped toward the granite outcropping.

Sam held his feet out, bracing for the inevitable impact. He considered attempting to untie the whip, but couldn't let Jason fly away with their only means of destroying the aswang.

One jagged edge slammed into the side of his head and his teeth clacked together. Bright points of light swam around him as his shoulder struck simultaneously, followed by his knee. His weight on the whip felt instantly heavier as he went slack, trying to stay conscious. He caught the briefest glimpse of Bobby and Dean below him, emerging from the mine, staring around for him. Then Dean saw him, pointing upward.

Sam's hands slipped from the whip handle, but the knot around his torso and shoulder held. His feet scrabbled on the rocks, trying to find purchase. He managed to lift his heavy head and looked up to see the aswang hovering above him, enraged coppery eyes staring down.

It darted upward again, flying straight for the clouds. The whip jerked around Sam's chest and shoulder and he flew straight up. The aswang was going to slam him against the rocks again, and Sam knew it wouldn't stop until he was dead.

SIXTY-FOUR



Sam spiraled through the air, trying to right himself by kicking his legs and arms out, but it was fruitless. He dangled at the mercy of the aswang.

It arced ever skyward, then suddenly dove past Sam again. He knew that in a second the whip would cinch tightly around his chest and shoulder and held on as best he could. He could hear Bobby and Dean shouting below, but couldn't make out what they were saying. Then he was careening downward again, swinging out for that sharp pile of jagged rock.

He heard gunfire, the crack of Bobby's .30-30.

The whip jerked against Sam and his body whirled around, slamming his back into the granite boulders. A sharp edge jabbed into his thigh, another into his ribs. The air rushed out of his lungs and he gasped for a breath while trying to catch a glimpse of the scene below.

Bobby ran with his rifle pointed upward. Then he fired again.

Movement on the rocks below Sam caught his attention. Dean jumped up toward him, taking the rocks three at a time. As Sam swung away from the pile of granite, he leapt, grabbing hold of the whip just above Sam's head.

His added weight sent them plummeting downward. Dazed from the knock on the head, Sam felt the impact a second after it actually happened. Then he was flat on his back on the ground, staring up at the sky and the hovering creature, its huge wings flapping.

Dean moved hand over hand along the whip, yanking the aswang downward as it strained to fly higher. Sam struggled to his feet, joining Dean. Together they wrenched the whip downward, making slow progress.

The aswang twisted on the end of the whip, then brought its hands down to scratch where the barb lay embedded in its flesh.

“We can’t let it get free,” Dean said.

Bobby ran up, jumped and grabbed a higher section of the whip. The three of them pulled it lower and lower, while it tore at its own flesh.

Sam could see the aswang’s hands smoldering every time it touched the whip. The spices were working. The insectile face twisted in pain.

They were down twenty feet, then ten, and then Bobby reached up and grabbed one of the clawed feet. He seized the other one, yanking it to the ground. Sam ran over, catching hold of the aswang’s arms. He put all his strength into holding it down. It bucked beneath them, alarmingly strong, but weakened.

Dean grabbed the barb and dragged it downward through the flesh, tearing through its stomach. The barb ripped open its torso and Sam could see the aswang’s beating heart.

Dean yanked the barb upward and it caught around the rib cage, then he twisted it. The serrated tip pierced the aswang’s heart. It burst open, black fluid spewing over all of them. The creature fluttered on the ground, body going into spasms. Then its heart caught fire, flames engulfing the entire chest cavity.

They leapt back as searing heat swept over the body. With a dull *whump* it ignited, completely engulfed in flames. It sizzled, globules of spitting fat spraying outward. The body flailed, feet kicking out, wings flapping, and then it suddenly went limp. The fire burned to incandescent brightness, instantly turning the body to a heap of ash.

SIXTY-FIVE



Dean collapsed on a pile of rocks outside the mine. “Man, I want a burger... Two burgers. With bacon. And extra cheese.” He wiped black aswang gunk from his face and rubbed his hands on his pants.

Sam sat down in the snow nearby. Bobby stood, checking his wrist, pushing his sleeve up to examine the swelling. It hadn’t gotten any better.

Dean frowned. “It’s not over yet.”

Sam looked at where the aswang had vaporized. “What?”

“Eggs,” Dean reminded them.

Bobby nodded. “Eggs.” He pulled his sleeve back in place. “Where did you hide them?”

Dean thought back to angling away from the cabin, finding the boulder with the crevice. It felt like a long time ago. “If we can reach that cabin, I can retrace my steps. I think we need the stingray barb to destroy them. Nothing I did hurt them at all, not even the spices.”

Sam reached over and grabbed the whip, then coiled it up and put it in his pocket.

Bobby glanced around the snowy forest. Now that the sun gleamed down on the white powder, it was dazzlingly bright. He fished into his pocket and pulled out his snow goggles, fastening them in place. “Let’s go.”

They drank some water and walked to where they’d left their snowshoes by the mine entrance. Checking the map, they determined where the cabin was and started out. Dean couldn’t believe how much easier it was to navigate when they could actually see the rock formations around them. Bobby used his compass and expertly directed them toward the cabin. Now

that the avalanche had released the tension, hiking the shorter way was once again an option.

Dean had been so relieved to see Bobby and Sam again at the lodge, but now that they were all together, they didn't say much. They walked in relative silence, each consumed in his own thoughts. All of them had taken a beating on this one. Dean tuned out all the aches and pains that wracked his body. After years of practice, he'd made an art of it.

As they crossed a meadow and entered a cluster of trees, Dean finally spoke. "Heard you guys fought some vampires at Point Reyes."

"Decapitations galore," Bobby said.

"Fought some more on a cliff top on the way here," Sam added. His tone was light, but Dean could see it had been rough.

Dean told them about Jimmy, how Jason had sold him out to the vampires in exchange for them killing Sam and Bobby. He was another casualty of the hunter life. Dean felt bad about what had happened to him. He more than anyone understood what it was like to be turned into a vampire, and the guy had still saved Dean's bacon, not to mention Grace and Steven.

After two hours of hiking, they reached the cabin. Dean checked under the sink, to be sure he hadn't missed any eggs, and that the aswang hadn't laid any more.

"Hey, Bobby," he called from the kitchen.

Bobby entered the cabin, looking around. "Yeah?"

Sam joined them.

"Do you think there was more than one clutch of eggs?"

Bobby shook his head. "According to the Spanish missionary, an aswang has one shot to lay eggs in its lifetime, and they have to eat more than usual to be able to do it."

Sam lifted his eyebrows in realization. "That's why so many hikers vanished in such a short period of time out here, why the aswang had managed to stay off hunter radar until now."

Dean frowned, disgusted. “It had to gorge on human organs to get itself pregnant? I may not eat a burger tonight after all.”

“Usually only one or two of the eggs hatch,” Bobby continued. “And often they die afterward, when they’re young.”

“So those eggs were its last chance,” Sam said.

Dean moved past them, leaving the cabin. “Then let’s fry the suckers.”

He retraced his steps to the little creek, looking for familiar landmarks. Now that he could actually see more than thirty feet into the forest, things looked different. He followed the stream, looking for the large jumble of boulders.

At last, gleaming with snow in the sunlight, they came into view.

“There!” Dean said.

They moved to the largest of the two boulders, and Dean found the crevice where he’d stashed the eggs. He borrowed Bobby’s headlamp and shone it inside. He saw the patch of soil where he’d buried the makeshift sack.

“I’m going in.”

He slid into the narrow space, squeezing his way along the cold granite. Once again, the tightness of the place made breathing difficult. When he had shimmied all the way in, he kicked his feet at the clump of dirt covering the eggs. A hint of the carpet appeared and he used the toe of his boot to hook underneath the cord binding the top. Then he lifted it up, saying another silent prayer that the things weren’t about to hatch. His grasping fingers took the carpet from his foot and he started to shimmy out. A gust of fresh air blew through the tiny space, sending up a spiral of dirt. He continued on, finally reaching the entrance, and climbed out, throwing the carpet of eggs onto the snow.

“All right. Let’s do this,” Bobby said, untying the cord.

The carpet fell open to reveal all the leathery grey eggs. None had hatched.

Sam pulled the whip out. Holding the barb, he pierced one of the eggs. Vile grey mucous spilled out. The egg rolled, pulsating, then the shell burst into flames. Dean kicked it away from the others. It simmered and spat, sparks flying outward. A billow of black smoke consumed it and, with a muffled *whump*, the egg turned to ash.

Sam pierced the other eggs, one by one, destroying them all.

When only ash covered the carpet, the three hunters stood around it, gazing down thoughtfully.

“Well, that’s that,” Bobby said finally.

“What’s next?” Sam asked.

Bobby looked thoughtful. “There’s still that possible rakshasa eating folks near Springdale, Utah.”

Dean smiled. “Your favorite, Sammy. Maybe it’ll be posing as a clown again.”

“I still can’t believe you made me stay at the Three Ring Motel.”

Dean looked to Bobby. “So we’re going to gank the sucker?” His stomach growled. “After we eat, I mean.”

Bobby nodded. “After we eat.”

“I get to drive,” Dean said to Sam, thinking of his beloved Impala waiting at the trailhead.

Sam smiled. “Be my guest.”

They gathered their belongings and made their way back through the now-sunlit forest.

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About the Author



Alice Henderson is a writer of fiction, comics, and video game material. Her horror novel *Voracious* pits a lone hiker against a shapeshifting creature. She has written *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* novels, and her *Buffy* novel *Portal Through Time* won the Scribe Award for Best Novel. Her work has appeared in Dark Horse's *Creepy* comic. While working at LucasArts, she wrote video game material for several *Star Wars* titles. She holds a master's degree in folklore and mythology and her graduate research focused on monsters such as Bigfoot and El Chupacabra. Please visit her at www.alicehenderson.com.

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Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty.](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[Twenty-Four](#)

[Twenty-Five](#)

Twenty-Six

Twenty-Seven

Twenty-Eight

Twenty-Nine

Thirty.

Thirty-One

Thirty-Two

Thirty-Three

Thirty-Four

Thirty-Five

Thirty-Six

Thirty-Seven

Thirty-Eight

Thirty-Nine

Forty.

Forty-One

Forty-Two

Forty-Three

Forty-Four

Forty-Five

Forty-Six

Forty-Seven

Forty-Eight

Forty-Nine

Fifty.