

**The Righteous Woman:** 1.11 – Scarecrow

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## **BURKITSVILLE, INDIANA**

### **ONE YEAR AGO**

Funny how things could turn around. Three hours ago, this trip had been a disaster – lost, annoyed with one another, running out of gas. Then, like an oasis, this adorable little town filled with such nice people. Holly smiled again at the Jorgesons as they left the cute little café, stuffed to the gills with meatloaf and potatoes and goodwill.

Stacey Jorgeson pushed a box into Holly's hands as her husband shook with Vince. "One of our apple pies." She smiled and patted Holly's wrist. "On the house."

"Oh my god, thank you so much!"

"You're welcome," Stacey said, her smile turning fond and a bit – wistful?

"We've got to take the wrong exit more often," said Holly. "I don't think I've ever visited a nicer place."

"Yeah, what's the catch?" Vince joked.

Stacey's nephew Emmett laughed a little too loudly and then blushed when Vince shook his hand. "Cool tat!" he blurted, staring at Vince's forearm.

"Thanks," said Vince.

Harley shook with Holly. "So, Leskey out of town, and then –"

"Right on Orchard Road," Holly said. "Thanks again, for everything."

"You bet." Harley put an arm around his wife's shoulders. They even waved as Holly and Vince drove away.

"Okay, I seriously did not think people actually came that nice," said Holly.

"I know right? Hey, crack open that pie."

“How can you possibly be hungry? There, Leskey.” Holly pointed at the sign.

Vince turned the car. “Maybe we should move here. “

“This pie,” said Holly, “is fucking delicious.”

“Are you eating it with your hands? Are you eating pie bare-handed?”

“You make it sound so dirty,” said Holly, and then licked her fingers. Slowly.

“You think you’re being funny,” said Vince, “but that is, in fact, giving me a boner.”

“Orchard Road!” said Holly.

“Crap!” Vince spun the wheel and they slid onto the road in a spray of gravel. The car rocked, the back tires skidded, and then Vince goosed the gas and straightened them out again.

“Okay, now I have a boner,” said Holly. “Driver man.”

“Wanna pull over and make out?” Vince grinned at her.

“Um,” Holly looked out the window at the rows of trees, quiet and foreboding in the failing light. “Maybe not right here?”

“Jeez,” said Vince, peering out the windshield. “Yeah, this isn’t creepy at all.”

That was, of course, when the car wheezed, clunked ominously, and then went silent.

“Are you kidding me?” said Holly. She shoved the pie, somewhat mangled, back into the box.

“Well, shit,” said Vince. He pulled out his cell and let out a little disbelieving laugh. “Cell’s dead, too.”

“What?” Holly scrounged out her own, tried twice to wake it up. “How is that even possible?”

Vince got out of the car, squinting down the slope into the trees. “Come on, looks like a house down there.”

“Uh, no,” said Holly. “I am not going down there. Let’s walk back to town.”

“We’re almost half an hour out, do you know how long that is by foot? We need help.”

“Fine,” she said, got out, shut the car door.

The orchard was bigger than it looked, the distant bulk of the house farther away than it had appeared. Holly stuck close to Vince, twisting her hands in her sleeves. When the scarecrow loomed up out of the gloom, she just about wet herself.

The thing hung on a pole, shadowed and droopy and horribly solid looking.

“Check it out,” said Vince. “If I only had a brain!” he sang off key, capering a little.

“We wouldn’t be lost,” said Holly, knowing it was unfair.

“Thanks,” said Vince. “This is seriously the freakiest scarecrow I have ever seen.”

“Euch,” Holly agreed. “It looks all – leathery. I am getting seriously creeped out, can we just go?” She glanced back as they walked on, an act of bravado.

The scarecrow’s head had moved, following them as they walked away.

“Jesus, Holly, quit with the pinching,” said Vince.

“Can we just hurry, please,” she said, and hardly recognized her own voice.

“Holly?” Vince asked, this time concerned.

“Don’t, just, let’s ...” she dragged him on, down the path. Somewhere behind, leaves rustled. “Did you –“

“Yes,” said Vince, strangled. “Hello? Who’s there?”

“Oh god, just, come on,” Holly begged.

They sped up, trotting and then running, their breath in gasps. The rustling drove them on, one side and then another, until she felt herded, a panicked sheep fleeing from the wolf. She stumbled, recovered, reached out for Vince.

He wasn’t there.

“Vince!” she screamed. “Vince!” She spun around, and then again, and was lost, just like that, had no idea what direction she’d been running in. “Vince!” She blundered between two rows of trees, broke out into an open space, looked up.

The scarecrow’s post jutted out of the ground in front of her, empty. Her breath sobbed in and out of her lungs. She stepped back, tripped over something yielding and fell to the damp earth. The smell of copper flooded her nose, pale, ripped flesh pressed against her legs, her side. Her scream rang off the trees, and she scrambled away from Vince’s staring, empty eyes.

When the scarecrow stepped out of the shadows and lifted the scythe, it was almost a relief.

## ***THE RIGHTEOUS WOMAN***

Sam turned over again, restless in the motel sheets, half-sick with regret and worry and anger. In the other bed, Dee snored away, the little, raspy, almost polite snorts she always made when she was on painkillers. Love gripped his heart, drove its painful fingers into his chest. It was stupid, the way she made him feel so enraged and at the same time secure. Jesus, he was almost a foot taller than her, outweighed her by seventy pounds, but it didn't seem to matter. Dee was safety, always had been. If only it wasn't so smothering.

God, the things he'd said to her. And maybe, okay, those things were inside him. But they weren't everything. They weren't the most important things. Dee always saw everything in black and white, truth and lies, monsters and people. Love and hate. She never understood the way everything tangled up inside Sam, everything shades of grey, everything complicated and –

Dee's phone rang. She didn't stir.

"Dee," said Sam. He didn't want to answer, to talk to yet another one of Dee's – Dad's – contacts, telling them they hadn't heard anything.

The phone rang again and Dee made a little hunching movement that meant she was deliberately not waking up.

Sam sighed and picked up the phone. Unknown number. "Yeah?"

"Sam? Is that you?"

Sam sat straight up. "Dad?" His heart clenched, his hands went cold. "Are you hurt?"

A huff of almost-laughter. "I'm fine."

"We've been looking for you everywhere," said Sam, trying to keep his voice under control. "We didn't know where you were, if you were okay."

"I'm fine," John repeated. "What about you? Dee? You alright?"

"We're fine." Sam looked over at Dee. She was propping herself up on one arm, groggy and squinting. "Dad, where are you?"

"I can't tell you that, kiddo. Sorry."

*Bullshit*, Sam didn't say. "What? Why not?"

"What's he saying?" Dee asked, dragging herself upright.

"I know this is hard for you," said John. "You're just going to have to trust me on this one."

"You're after it, aren't you?" Sam asked. His heart knocked against his ribs. "The thing that killed – that killed Mom."

"It's a demon, Sam," said John, and for the first time, Sam heard something under the tight control of his father's voice. Grief and rage. And excitement.

"A demon?"

"What? Demon?" Dee swung her legs out of bed and turned on the light.

"You know for sure?" Sam gripped the phone too hard, heard the plastic creak.

"I do." John took a breath. "Sam – Sammy. I know about, I heard about your girlfriend. I'm so sorry. I would have done anything to spare you that."

Sam clenched his jaw until his jaw ached. "Do you know where it is?"

"Yeah." John inhaled. "I think I'm finally closing in on it."

Sam threw off the covers and stood. "Let us help."

"You can't." Implacable. "You can't be any part of it."

"Why not?" Sam clenched his free hand into a fist. "Dad –"

"Gimme the phone," said Dee, getting up. Her hair was a tangle, her eyes still slightly glazed from the Tylenol 3's.

"Sammy, that's why I'm calling," said John. "You and your sister, you got to stop looking for me. Now listen, I need you to take down some names –"

"Names, what names, Dad. Talk to me, tell me what's going on." Dee stuck out her hand in a 'gimme' motion, but Sam waved her off.

"We don't have time for this. They are everywhere, Sam, this is bigger than – even this, right now, us talking, it isn't safe."

"No," said Sam, shaking his head. "Alright? No way."

"Give me the phone, Sam." Dee, eyes clear now.

"I'm giving you an order, you hear me? You stop following me, and you do your job. You understand me?"

Dee ducked under Sam's warding arm and snatched the phone neatly out of his hand. "Dad, it's me. Where are ... yes, sir. Yessir. Yeah, I got a pen. Go ahead."

Sam turned his back as Deanna began to scribble frantically and started to fling his things into his bag.

"Yes, sir." A pause. "Sorry, Dad. But you didn't ... yeah. Yes." Her voice sharpened, went all cool and competent. "Yes, sir."

Some final order. *Take care of your brother.* Sam would have bet money on it.

Deanna looked sidelong at her brother where he was slouched behind the wheel of the Impala like the world's largest pouty six year old. Sam wasn't done being pissy, obviously. Which was pretty rich, given that he'd tried his goddamn best to kill her just two days ago, but hey, water under the bridge, right? *Work the case*, Deanna told herself. *Work the case, and let Sammy work himself out.*

As if he'd read her mind, Sam shoved himself marginally more upright. "Couples," he said. "Missing couples, right?"

"Yep. All from different states. Took a cross country, went poof somewhere on the way."

"People go missing all the time," said Sam. "How does Dad even know —"

"Indiana," said Deanna. "All of them passed through the same corner of the state, all of them in the second week of April. One year after another."

"This is the second week of April," said Sam.

"Yep."

"And Dad's sending us out to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Seriously," said Deanna, paging through the info she'd written down, "the amount of time it took to put this pattern together. You're a whiz at this research gig, Sam, but Dad is a fucking *master*."

Sam made some kind of a noise and she looked over in time to see his mouth tighten before he was braking, abrupt enough to make her wince for Baby's breakpads. He pulled off, sending up clouds of dust from the gravel shoulder, and brought them to a stop.

“What are you doing?” Deanna asked, with what she thought was admirable patience.

“We’re not going to Indiana,” said Sam.

“We’re not?”

Sam faced her. “We’re going to California. Dad called from a payphone in Sacramento.”

“Sam,” said Deanna, tired and frustrated and pissed.

“Dee,” Sam said back at her, and it was all she could do not to punch him. “This thing, it killed mom, and Jess, and if Dad is closing in, we have to be there. We have to help.”

“He doesn’t want our help!”

“I don’t care!” Sam raked his hair back, his stupid fucking floppy hair that he wouldn’t let her cut. “We don’t always have to do what he says,” he said, almost despairingly.

“He’s not asking us to eat our broccoli, Sam,” she said, shaking the papers at him. “What he has us doing, it saves lives. It’s important!”

“I get that. I do! But I am talking one week here. To get answers, Dee.” He leaned in toward her, and she really, one hundred percent did not like the look on his face, kind of blind and hungry and driven. “To get revenge.”

“Alright,” she said. “Look. I know how you feel.”

Sam’s head snapped back. “Do you?”

“What’s that supposed to –”

“How old were you when Mom died? Four?” The breath went out of Deanna as if she’d been punched, but he rolled on, uncaring. “Jess died six months ago. How the hell would you know how I feel?”

He slammed out of the car, and Deanna went after him, fear suddenly gripping her belly.

“Dad said it wasn’t safe,” she said, “For any of us. He obviously knows something we don’t. Jesus, Sam, don’t you think I want to be there, to help? But Dad said –”

“I don’t understand the blind faith you have in the man,” said Sam. “You don’t question, not ever.”

"It's called being a good daughter," she snapped.

Sam flung open the trunk and hauled out his duffle. He was leaving. Again.

"You're a selfish bastard, you know that?" she said. "You just do whatever you want, don't give a shit about the people around you."

Sam looked at her and for a second she thought she saw wounded surprise in his eyes, before his whole face closed up like a box. "That's what you really think?"

"Just working on the evidence, here," she said. "It's starting to really make a pattern."

"Fine," he said. "This selfish bastard is going to California."

"You aren't serious," said Deanna, though she knew goddamn well he was.

He hauled his bag onto his shoulder and walked away.

"It's the middle of the night!" Deanna protested. "Fuck, Sam!" She watched him walk on, straight and tall and determined. "I'm getting back in the car," she shouted after him. "I *will* leave you!"

He stopped and for a moment she felt a tiny flicker of hope. Then he turned around, and his face was calm. "That's what I want you to do," he said.

She looked at him, and he looked at her, and then she nodded, once. "Goodbye, Sam." She shut the trunk, got into the car, and drove away.

When she looked at the rearview, he'd already turned again, and was walking away.

Burkitsville, Indiana, was an amazingly pretty town, surrounded by rolling, just-turning-green fields of dark, rich earth and filled with happy people and laughing children. It made Deanna suspicious as hell.

She pulled up to the gas station, opened her mouth to say something about Stepford to Sam, and then remembered that shotgun was deserted and long, tall, and girly was trekking it to California. She got out of the car, eyed the pumps, and then focused on the cute little café next door. If Dad's missing lovebirds had come through here, they almost certainly stopped in. The place looked like a billboard for American Nostalgia.



Other than the dude sitting in the chair out front, who was giving her a squinty once-over. She sauntered over, pulling out her best casual-friendly smile.

"Let me guess," she said, jerking her chin at the sign over the door that read 'Scotty's Café,' "Scotty."

"Yep," said Scotty.

"Hi. I'm Chrissie Hynde."

"What, like from the Pretenders?" The squint got squintier, if that was possible.

"Uh, wow. Good. Classic rock fan," she said, thrown off her stride.

"What can I do for you, Miss Hynde?" asked Scotty, sounded about as eager to help as he was to stop squinting, which, really, it was getting offputting.

"Uh, well, I was wondering if you'd seen these people." She pulled out the missing person flyers and showed him the grainy, black and white faces of Holly and Vince Parker.

"Nope," said Scotty, giving them a cursory glance.

"They're friends of mine, went missing about a year ago. They passed through somewhere around here, and I've already asked around in Scottsberg and Salem –"

"Sorry," Scotty cut her off. "We don't get many strangers around here."

"Right," said Deanna. "Thanks for your help." She could feel her smile getting toothier. Right about now would have been when Sam would have taken her by the elbow, said something friendly and disarming and endearing. Instead, she opened her mouth and said, "You got a smile that just lights up the place, anyone ever tell you that?"

Scotty's eyes practically disappeared into his face with the intensity of his squinty prowess.

"See you around," said Deanna and stumped back out to the Impala. Where else?

*Jorgesen's General Store*, read the sign just up the road. It was worth a shot.

Sam walked through the night, and the furnace of rage in his chest got no cooler. He was doing the right thing. He was. If Dee was too blind to see it, that was her

problem. John wasn't infallible, he wasn't a god, there were plenty of times he'd gotten hurt, badly, on jobs, going up against things that were a hell of a lot less dangerous than demons. And Sam deserved to be in on this. For Jess. He *understood* now. And John was still trying to keep him out. It wasn't fair, and it wasn't right. He hadn't left school, left his *life*, to run around the country doing the odd jobs his father was too busy for. To be John's errand boy again.

"I won't," he said to the pre-dawn air.

The sun had risen by the time his road connected with a larger highway. He tramped up to the asphalt, looking south, wondering if he should make a sign. He had his youth going for him, but it was going to be tough to get rides, a single dude his size. He glanced north, looking for traffic, and saw her.

Small, short blonde hair, sitting crosslegged on her bag with her back to him. Earbuds in, head rocking slightly to whatever music she was playing.

"Hey," he said. No response. "Hey," he tried again, louder. Nothing. Ok. What was the least creepy course of action, here? Stand and wait til she noticed him? No. He sighed, reached out, and gingerly tapped her shoulder.

She leapt up like a startled cat, snatching the earbuds out and whirling to face him. She was cute, with clever, tilted brown eyes, a pointed chin, a soft, mobile mouth. "You scared the hell outta me," she said, her breath catching in an almost-laugh.

"Sorry, just thought you might, uh, need some help," he said.

She looked at him for a moment, wary. "No, I'm good, thanks."

"Uh, where you headed?" Sam asked, trying on his 'friendly and harmless' smile.

"No offense," she said, both amused and slightly mocking, "but no way I'm telling you."

"Why not?" he asked, taken aback.

"You could be some kind of freak," she said, her head tilting. "I mean, you *are* hitchhiking."

It startled a laugh out of him and she grinned, wide and mischievous and suddenly he liked her.

Her eyes flickered past him to the road just as he heard the honk. A van pulled up to them and stopped, the passenger side window rolling down. "Need a ride?" asked the completely sketchy middle aged dude behind the wheel.

"Yeah," they answered at the same time.

"Just her," said the dude, eyeing Sam. "I ain't taking you."

She snatched up her gear without pause.

"You trust shady van guy, but not me?" Sam asked as she brushed past him and hopped into the van.

She smiled at him again, cocky and challenging and, okay, really cute.

"Definitely," she said.

The van pulled away, spraying a bit of gravel, leaving Sam frustrated and slightly ticked off and, he had to admit, intrigued.

The general store was tidy and clean and like something out of a slightly updated Norman Rockwell painting, right down to the comfortably prosperous looking couple who ran the place. Harley and Stacey, Nordic and pleasant and totally unhelpful.

"You sure they didn't stop for gas or snacks or anything?" Deanna asked.

Harley passed the pictures to Stacey, who shook her head. "They're friends of yours?"

"That's right. Missing for about a year."

There was a scuffling and then a young man, no older than Sam, came down the back steps, carrying a stack of boxes. He glanced over Stacey's shoulder. Deanna almost missed the slight hitch she made, the barest, aborted attempt to shield the pictures.

"Did he have a tattoo?" the kid asked.

"Yeah," said Deanna.

"Remember?" the kid said to Stacey. "They were just married."

"Right," said Harley. "Right. They did stop for gas. Weren't here for more than ten minutes."

"Anything else you remember?" asked Deanna.

"I told them how to get back to the interstate," said Harley.

"Point me the same way?" Deanna smiled.

"If this is the fastest way back to the interstate, I'm giving up cheeseburgers for a month," Deanna muttered, peering through the windshield. The orchard was spooky as hell, and the hairs on the back of her neck were prickling like crazy. She was nearly sure that this was the place –

Frantic beeping from the backseat drew her attention. She pulled the Impala to a stop, fished the EMF reader out of her bag, and then looked down the slope into the trees. "Alright then."

The orchard was worse once she was actually walking through it. The trees were all crooked, their leaves whispering under the gloomy sky. The EMF got more and more freaked out, until she was standing in a small clearing, looking up at the creepiest scarecrow she'd ever seen in her life.

"Dude," she told it. "You *fugly*."

She fetched a ladder from where it leaned against a nearby tree, set it against the crossbar of the scarecrow's post, and climbed up. Close to, the thing smelled like dead leaves and apples and leather, pleasant enough if it weren't for the whiff of rot underneath. The head was a burlap sack, stained and folded and stitched to hint at a face. The shadows beneath the brim of the hat were deeper than they should have been. The EMF was a continuous high drone of sound, and Deanna turned it off. Old, ragged clothing, actual boots on the thing's feet. Heavy gloves. A sickle tied to one of them. Yeah, that wasn't ominous at all. Nothing about this was saying "ghost" to her. This was something else.

She was about to climb down again when she saw a hint of ink under the torn folds of a sleeve. She gingerly lifted the fabric aside, and saw that the arms were sewn of leather patches, worked together like a quilt. And on the patch just above the glove, there was a tattoo. She hauled out Vince's sheet again, compared the two.

It was a match.

"Nice tat," she told the scarecrow.

The wind souged through the trees, fluttered the thing's clothing. Apples and leather and leaves.

Deanna climbed down and walked briskly back to Baby, pretending that her skin wasn't crawling. She needed to know more. And she knew where to start asking.

"You're back," said the kid. He smiled at her, friendly and open, and set down the bucket of soapy water by the gas pumps.

"Never left," said Deanna, climbing out of the Impala and glancing around. No Jorgesons, no Scotty. Perfect.

"Still asking around after your friends?"

"Hey, wanna give me a fill up?" Deanna asked.

"Sure." When he had the gas flowing, he offered her a hand. "I'm Emmett."

"Deanna," she said, shaking over Baby's trunk. "So you grew up here?"

"Moved when I was thirteen," he said. "My parents died in a car crash, my aunt and uncle took me in."

"They're nice people." She leaned on Baby's flank, watching him.

"Everybody is nice here," said Emmett.

"So, what, it's the perfect little town?"

"Well, you know, it's the boonies," he said with affection. "But I love it. I mean, the towns around us, people are losing their jobs, their homes. But not here. It's like we're blessed, you know?"

"Yeah," said Deanna, thoughtfully. "Blessed. Good word. Hey," she said, "you been out to the orchard on the way outta town? Seen that —"

"Scarecrow?" Emmett asked, disengaging the pump. "Yeah. Only thing about Burkitsville I don't like. Creepy."

"Whose is it?"

Emmett shrugged. "It's always just been there, you know? Twenty-eight bucks."

Deanna pulled out her cell along with her wallet, and spent a moment staring at it while Emmett made change for her. Her thumb hovered over Sam's number. So what if

he'd been the dick. It didn't feel right, leaving things the way they'd left them on that road in the middle of the night.

"Two dollars," said Emmett, handing her the bills.

She glanced up at him and then angled her head to see past his shoulder.

"Whose van is that?" Deanna asked, tilting her chin at the red van that sat outside the garage.

"Oh, some other out of towners," said Emmett. "Had car trouble."

Deanna knew, even before she asked. "A couple, right? Young?"

"Yeah." Emmett looked at her, startled. "How'd you know?"

Bus depots were all the same. Slightly too cold, dirty, not enough seats, smelling of weariness and depression and body odor. Sam leaned on the ticket counter and tried not to lose his temper.

"Sorry," said the clerk, who clearly wasn't. "The Sacramento bus doesn't run again until tomorrow at 5:05 PM."

"There's got to be another way to get there faster," said Sam.

"Well, there is," said clerk. "Buy a car."

Sam breathed deliberately through his nose, turned away, and dug out his phone, scrolling through to Dee's number. She'd been an asshole, but she was out there, working some job by herself, probably getting all pissy about it, too. Dee never did well on her own. Not that she wasn't capable, god knew, but she always got squirrely in her own company.

"Hey," said a familiar voice.

He looked down and to the side, and there she was. The blonde from the side of the road, none the worse for her van trip.

"Hey," he said back, surprised. He stuck the phone in his pocket and wandered over.

"You again," she said, grinning.

"What happened to your ride?"

She shrugged, casual. "You were right. That guy was shady. All hands. I cut him loose." Her grin turned toothy.

"Right," he said, and glanced again at the schedule boards as if they might have changed in the last five minutes.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Just trying to get to California," he said. "The world seems determined to stop me."

"No way," she said, getting up. "Me too. You know the bus isn't til tomorrow."

"Yeah, that's the problem."

"What's in Cali that's so important?" she asked.

"Just," he shook his head. "Something that I've been looking for. For a long time."

"Well." She kicked the toe of his boot with one of hers. "I'm sure it can wait one more day, right?"

Sam released a breath and felt his shoulders drop a bit, a tiny fraction of strain going out of them.

She stuck a hand out. "I'm Meg."

"Sam," he said, and shook. Her fingers were tiny but strong in his, her grip firm, and when she smiled at him again, her eyes warm and direct, he returned it.

When she walked into Scotty's Café, Deanna was treated to something almost as creepy as the freaky-deak scarecrow. Scotty was smiling.

At the couple, to be precise, setting down two plates of what looked like truly amazing apple pie. "We're famous for our apples," he said, grinning and nodding.

"Oh, no, it – please," said the girl, smiling back.

"On the house," he insisted, straightened, and stopped dead at the sight of Deanna.

"Hey, Scotty," she said, smiling as obnoxiously as possible. "Can I get a cup of coffee, black? And that pie looks great." She slid into the table opposite the couple.

"How you doing?"

They sent a pair of friendly nods her way.

"Just passing through?"

"Road trip," said the guy.

"Me, too," said Deanna.

Scotty came up and refilled the couple's glasses. The rich, fruity smell of cider wafted in the air. "I'm sure these folks just want to eat in peace," he said to Deanna through his teeth.

"Just a little friendly conversation," said Deanna, with probably more 'fuck you' in her tone than was wise. "I'll take that coffee whenever."

Scotty stalked away.

"What brings you to town?" Deanna asked, leaning toward the couple.

"We just stopped for gas," said the girl, not meeting Deanna's eyes.

"The guy at the gas station saved our lives," said the guy.

"That right?" Deanna asked, redirecting her attention to him.

"One of our brake lines was leaking," he said. "We had no idea. He's fixing it for us."

"Nice people here," said Deanna. "Aren't they?"

"Yeah."

"How long til you're up and running?"

"Sundown," said the guy.

"For a break line?" Deanna scoffed a little. "I could do in an hour, get you out of here before dinner time. I wouldn't even charge."

"You know cars?" asked the guy.

"I think we'll let the mechanic fix it," said the girl, sitting forward and putting a hand on the guy's arm. "Thanks."

He glanced at his girlfriend, down at her hand and then settled back in his seat.

"Sure," said Deanna, cursing herself. "It's just. Wouldn't you rather get out of here before dark?"

"What?" asked the girl.

"Don't wanna get stuck on the roads in the middle of the night," said Deanna.

"You know?"



“No,” the girl said flatly. “I don’t.”

“It’s just that –” Deanna tried, desperately.

“Look,” the girl cut her off. “We’re trying to eat, okay?”

“Right,” said Deanna, admitting defeat. “Yeah.” Well, she’d fucked that up ten ways to Sunday. Sam would have blinked earnestly at them and had them eating out of the palm of his hand in about two minutes flat.

The door jingled, and in walked a man in a khaki cotton jacket that might as well have had ‘sheriff’ tattooed on his forehead. Scotty came out of the back, looking vindictive.

“Thanks for coming, Adam,” Scotty said and the both of them looked at Deanna.

“A word, miss?” said Sheriff Adam.

Deanna shook her head. “Yeah,” she said. “Alright. I know how this song goes.”

He put the lights on to escort her out, guaranteeing that every damn person in Perfectsville turned their heads to watch her drive off. Super. When he turned around, outside the town limits, she narrowed her eyes and took the first little piece of shit road she saw. She’d tried this the nice, subtle, Sam way. Time for Plan Deanna.

Meg was funny, and sharp as an edge of glass, and tough, in a way that reminded Sam a little of Deanna, although Meg was skinny and light, with delicate little wrists, and Dee probably could have broken her over her knee like a brittle stick and wow, it was amazing how six months of hunting had turned all his thoughts so violent again.

*Get to Cali and get done*, he told himself. *You don’t have to be this person.*

He swigged some of his third beer. They’d been sitting in the crappy commissary of the bus station for the past two hours, eating crappy food and drinking crappy beer, and talking inconsequential shit. Meg was a Doors fan, she liked nachos, she was an old hand at hitching. “Oh, I always find a ride,” she said smugly.

“I only ever did it the once before,” said Sam. “I was going off to college and I wanted to save the bus fare.”

“Yeah? How many rides did you get?”

“Two,” said Sam. “I gave up in Utah and bought the bus ticket.”

She laughed. “I’d give you tips but somehow I think that you’re better off on the bus.”

“So what’s in California for you?” Sam asked. “You on vacation or something?”

“Yeah, right,” she said. “It’s all Cristal by the poolside. No, I’m just – traveling.” Her smile fades a little. “I just had to get away from my family for a while.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, and didn’t push further.

She looked down at her beer. “I love them, you know? But they think they know – they wanted what was best for me. And they didn’t care if it was what I wanted. I know they’re disappointed in me, but I’m not the person they thought I was. I didn’t want to be that person. They made all these plans and in the end the only way I could say no was to walk away.” She took her fingers away from where they were shredding her beer label and glanced at Sam. Whatever she saw in his face made her flush a little and look away again. “Sorry. The things you tell people you hardly know.”

“No, no, I,” Sam fumbled for words. “I totally get it. The sister I was road-tripping with? Kind of the same deal.”

“And that’s why you’re pulling an all nighter in a bus depot in Kentucky,” she said.

“Pretty much.”

“Well.” She raised her beer bottle at him. “Here’s to us. The food is shit and the beds are nonexistent, but at least we’re living our own lives. And no one else’s.”

Sam grinned and tapped the neck of his beer against hers. “Cheers to that.”

Fucking orchards. Fucking agriculture and hiking for miles and getting blisters to save a couple of stupid, ignorant civvies. Not to mention the probable homicidal patchwork monster that was even now likely whetting a blade against the bones of its previous victims.

She crashed through another line of trees and saw the road. About half a mile down, the moonlight glinted off the windshield of a car, pulled to the side of the road, the hood up. She reached the car and looked from one side to the other. Which way would they have gone?

Somewhere close by, a woman screamed. Deanna broke into a run, jacking a round into her shotgun, following the panicked yelling.

“Steve! Oh god!”

“Run!”

Deanna skidded into a clearing, looked up at the deserted pole where the scarecrow had hung. “I hate being right,” she said, just as the couple from the café came stumbling through the trees on the other side. They saw her, and her gun, and pulled up abruptly.

“Get to your car,” she barked, watching the trees behind them.

“What – you –” said the girl and Deanna took three steps, leveled the shotgun past her head and fired.

The scarecrow barely broke stride.

“Go! Go!”

They took off running again. Deanna put another shell in the thing, with no better result, and then followed.

They were completely hopeless, confused and turned around and unable to pull a straight line. Deanna abandoned rear guard and cut in front of Steve. “This way!” She bit off the ‘you fucking moron.’ In five minutes she had them at the car again.

“What was that!” the girl gasped, shrieky and vibrating with the adrenaline overload.

“Don’t ask,” said Deanna, scanning the tree line. No movement. “Here.” She shoved the shotty into Steve’s unwilling hands. “Don’t drop it.” She stuck her head under the hood of the car, mini maglight gripped in her teeth. Christ. All they’d done was detach the radiator hose.

“You’re good,” she said, slamming the lid and wiping her hands on her jeans. “I’ll take that,” she said, smoothly lifting the gun away and Steve turned toward her.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked.

“Remember my answer to the first question? Get in your car and get the hell away from here.”

Steve nodded once, jerkily, and herded the girl into the car.

Deanna watched them pull away, relief settling over her. “Chalk one up for the good guys,” she muttered to herself. She eyed the orchard, contemplated the distance by road back to where she’d left the Impala, and sighed. *You fucking dummy, why didn’t you catch a ride with the grateful survivors?*

She reloaded the shotgun, slung it over one shoulder, and started walking. After a minute, she started to whistle.

He couldn’t sleep. Meg had been out for an hour now, curled up comfortably on her bags, a scarf draped over her eyes to keep the light out. Sam kept seeing the Impala driving away, seeing Dee’s face all pinched with pain and anger. Mostly pain, if he was being honest. He flipped open his phone again, stared at the screen. Maybe he should –

It rang in his hand, the screen lighting up with the word DEE. He nearly dropped it hitting the little green phone icon.

“Hello? Hi?”

Dee’s low chuckle in his ear, familiar and aggravating and dear. “Hey, Sammy.”

“Hey,” he said. “How’s the case going?”

“Oh, you know.” There was the hum of the Impala’s engine in the background, and he imagined her leaning back in the seat, one wrist slung over the top of the steering wheel, smirking to herself. “Saving people. Haven’t gotten to the killing things part yet, though.”

“What’s the thing?”

“A fucking scarecrow, you believe this shit? Spends its days hanging off a pole in an apple orchard. Nights, it takes off after people with a sickle.”

“It climbs down on its own?”

“Burkitsville, Indiana, man. I’m telling you. Fun town.”

“So there was a couple? And you saved them.”

“Yeah.” For a moment her voice goes a bit sharp. “I can cope without you, you know.”

“Dude,” said Sam, because that was so not –

“Anyway,” said Dee. “It isn’t a spirit. Salt rounds did fuck-all. I’m thinking pagan something or other.”

“Yeah, the yearly ritual aspect,” said Sam, his brain whirring into life. “Always a man and a woman. You said it was in an orchard?”

“Yeah, and you should see the way the locals treated this couple. Fed ‘em til they were bursting, harping on about ‘local grown’ and ‘have some pie.’ Fattening them up like a Thanksgiving turkey.”

“The last meal given to a sacrifice,” said Sam. “Dee, I think you’re looking at a pagan god.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. The god possesses the scarecrow, takes the victims and makes everything hunky-dory for another year. This town, you should see it. It’s unwholesome, how wholesome it is.”

“Blood makes the crops grow,” said Sam.

“How I do miss the way you have with words, Sam,” said Dee.

“Any idea which god you might be dealing with?” said Sam.

“Nope, not yet. Burkitsville is full of Jorgesons and Eklunds, that’s got to be significant. I’ve got an appointment with a professor at a local college here, apparently he’s a whiz with the local history and such.” Her voice went teasing. “You know, since I don’t have my trusty geek boy at my side for research anymore.”

Sam huffed a laugh. “Is that a hint? You can ask, you know. If you need my help.”

“No, no, I’m not hinting anything.” Silence for a moment, then Dee sucked in air. “Actually, uh ... I want you to know. I mean. Don’t think that –“

“Yeah,” said Sam, leaning his head back against the wall. “I’m sorry too.”

“Sam,” said Dee, as though the words were being dragged out of her with chains. “You were right. You gotta do your own thing. Make your choices.”

“Dee,” said Sam and swallowed. “For real?”

“Yeah. You’ve always known what you want. And you go after it. You stand up to Dad, you always have. Hell, I wish I—anyway. I admire that about you.” She took a deep breath. “I’m proud of you, Sammy. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, Dee, I – yeah.” He shut his eyes, swallowed again, hard.

“Don’t fucking cry on me, you giant girl,” said Dee. Her voice sounded a bit hoarse.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll take care of yourself,” said Dee.

“I will.”

“Yeah, you will. Or I’ll kick your ass. Call me when you find Dad.”

“Yeah, okay. Be careful. Let me know how things go with your pagan god.”

“It sounds so sexy when you put it that way.”

“Dee, Jesus.”

Her laugh, raucous and carefree. “You love it. I’ll talk to you.”

“K. Bye, Dee.”

Sam hung up and sat still, looking at the phone.

Meg lifted her head, pulling the scarf down. “Who was that?”

“My sister,” said Sam.

“What’d she have to say?”

Sam flipped the phone shut, took a breath. “‘Goodbye.’”

Deanna opened her eyes in darkness. Her head hurt. A tiny wriggle informed her that her hands and feet were unbound, she lay on a dirt floor, she had no significant injuries other than her throbbing head, and that she was completely clothes and totally stripped of weapons.

“Son of a bitch,” she muttered.

The last thing she remembered was coming out of the college, pushing her key into the Impala’s lock. Then – nothing. She felt at the lump behind her ear. Pretty clear what had happened, really. Hit on the head, bundled into the backseat, driven away. She’d done it herself, a time or two. It was downright embarrassing to have it happen to her, especially at the hands of a bunch of small town civvies who spent their days eating pie.

Well, and sacrificing people, couldn’t forget that one. Which, hey, made it a really good idea to get the hell out of here.

She pushed herself upright, wincing. The smell of earth and mold and the faintest hint of apples made her prison a root cellar, likely. Which meant there were stairs and a door. She found a wall and felt along it, carefully, ignoring the skitter of spiders across her fingers, the unpleasant damp of the wall. Her boot bumped something wooden. She put her foot on the first step and then froze, listening. The crunch of footsteps, the murmur of voices.

“... in the cellar, but it ain’t gonna work with just her!” Scotty.

“There’s no more time. Tonight is the last night. The trees on the west hill are already failing. All the blooms have the blight, and it’s spreading. He’s angry.”

He. The Vanir. Norse gods of protection and prosperity. The professor had been really helpful, right up until the point where she had started jotting down all the stuff about the sacred tree and muttering about burning under her breath. Cleavage only went so far when it came to mitigating apparent crazy.

“But he’s our nephew!” Harley Jorgeson. “Our flesh and blood.”

Someone made a very familiar noise. Shouting, muffled by a gag. Suddenly Deanna knew exactly what was going on out there.

“It’s our responsibility to protect the town,” said Scotty. “You got to understand.”

“I do, better than any of you,” said Harley, bitter. “I’m the one that gives them the directions. I’m the one that sends them down to the orchard, year after year.”

“Harley, please,” Stacey.

“Strangers is one thing, they’re chosen by fate, always a pair of ‘em, always just at the right time. But this is murder. Are we going to close our doors, pretend we don’t hear the screams? When it’s one of our own?”

“We’ll do our duty.” The sheriff, unmistakably. “Even if it is harder this time. Even if we would rather look the other way.”

A scuffle of feet, a cut-off protest from Harley, and then the cellar door was flung open, letting in a broad swath of dim, late afternoon sun. Deanna leapt back as a body came tumbling down, gagged and bound at the wrists.

“Make your peace,” said the sheriff, “if you have any to make.”

The door slammed shut again, taking away the light.

The person on the floor let out a muffled, breathless sob.

“Hi,” she said softly, feeling her way over to him. “Emmett, right? It’s Deanna, we met yesterday, remember? I’m going to take the gag off.”

He lifted his head to help her, dragging in a breath when she pulled the rag of cloth away. He sat silent as she worked the knots at his wrists loose, other than a couple of hitching sobs he was obviously, even in the dark, desperately ashamed of.

Deanna got him untied and patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. What the hell did you say to someone whose own family had apparently consented to their horrific, ritualized death?

“I don’t understand,” said Emmett in a thin, strained voice.

“What part?” Deanna asked, climbing carefully up the steep steps and putting her shoulder against the cellar doors.

“They’ve been – killing those people. The couples. Your friends.”

“Yep,” she grunted, pushing with her back and legs, feeling the absolute lack of give.

“Every year. Oh my god. Every year. And Scotty. How – why?”

“Cuz some asshole Nordic deity said to,” Deanna said, feeling her way around the edge of the door. No bolts, no hinges, the whole thing was set in a flange so tightly fitted she couldn’t even get her fingernails in.

“They’re going to kill us,” said Emmett, faintly. “Aren’t they.”

“Sacrifice,” said Deanna. “Which is, I don’t know, classier, I guess.” She rammed the door with her shoulder, everything she had behind the blow. It didn’t budge an inch. “Well, shit.” She sat on a step, rubbing her shoulder, which hurt like a bitch now. “You really didn’t have a clue about any of this. The scarecrow, the deaths. Where did you think that ‘blessing’ came from?”

“I can’t believe this,” said Emmett.

Deanna sighed. “Well, you better start believing, because I’m going to need your help if I’m going to get us out of this.” God, she wished Sam were here, instead of this sad, sniveling –

“Okay,” said Emmett, and then again, stronger. “Okay.”

“Good,” said Deanna. “Stay with me, yeah? We can gank the scarecrow, but not directly. Is there a tree in town, a special tree?”



“The first tree, maybe?” Emmett shifted. “It’s this really old – the first immigrants brought it over, half the trees in the orchard are cuttings from it.”

“It’s in the orchard?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know where, exactly.”

“Probably not too far from the scarecrow,” Deanna said. “Okay, when they open the door, I want you to –”

Above her, the door flew open.

Dee didn’t call all day. Technically, she hadn’t said that she would, but she hadn’t said that she wouldn’t, either. And if she’d seen that professor mid morning, that would have given her plenty of time to get back to Burkitsville, gank a creepy scarecrow-shaped pagan god vessel and then crack a brew and call her younger brother to brag about how easy it had been. By one, Sam gave in and called her.

She didn’t pick up.

She also did not pick up his second call at three, nor the three calls he made between three and four thirty.

“Dee,” he said to her voice mail at 4:48, as the bus to Sacramento wheezed its way to a stop in Bay Four. “Pick up, man. I’m gonna – my bus is here, and I – look. I ...”

“Sam,” said Meg, elbowing him. “Get your stuff.”

He looked at her, the phone still stuck to his ear.

“Come on,” said Meg. “The bus is here.”

There was an abrupt buzz as the voicemail timer ran out and he was disconnected. He lowered the phone, stared at it a moment, and then flipped it shut. “You better catch it, then.” He hoisted his bag. “I gotta go.”

“Go?” Meg looked shocked. “Go where?”

“Burkitsville,” said Sam.

“Sam, wait.”

“I’ve been trying her for four hours, she’s not picking up.”

“So she turned her phone off, or the battery’s dead.” Meg caught his sleeve as he turned away. “Sam!”

"She's in trouble," said Sam. "I think – I think I shouldn't have left."

"No," said Meg. "Sam, no. If she's in trouble, that's her deal. You don't even know if there is anything wrong. She could be doing this just to make you worry."

"She's not like that!" Sam pulled his arm away.

"Sam," said Meg. "You don't have to go."

"Yeah," he said. "I do."

"Why?" There were tears standing in her eyes.

"She's my family," said Sam, and walked away.

She turned, legs bunching under her to leap out of the cellar, and found herself staring into the business end of a rifle.

"Okay," she said and raised her hands, slowly. "Pretty sure your god isn't going to be happy if you ventilate me prematurely."

"I'll shoot you somewhere nonlethal, then," said the sheriff. "Come on out of there."

She came out. They were in the orchard, of course. A house loomed up behind her, empty windows like blind eyes. Scotty was there, also armed, and the Jorgesons. The ringleaders. The priests, as it were. She wondered how many in the town knew, and how many were as blissfully ignorant as Emmett had been.

Emmett stumbled on the stairs as he came up out of the cellar, and his uncle caught him under the arm.

"It's time," said Stacey.

"So," Deanna said conversationally, "how many people you killed, sheriff? Was that in the vows when you took office? 'To protect, serve, and murder innocent people so you can have really amazing cider?'"

"We don't kill them," said the sheriff. "Start walking."

Deanna started walking. She kept on talking, too. "Maybe you don't swing the sickle. But you cover it up after, don't you? How many cars you hidden? Clothes you buried? Hmm? You can't see the blood, but it's there."

"Shut up," said the sheriff, cold and flat. "Or I really will shoot you."

Deanna held her tongue, her mind going a mile a minute. There was no real cover in the orchard, the trees too far apart. She couldn't leave Emmett. Fuck.

Too soon, the scarecrow loomed up in front of them. A small crowd of the townsfolk waited there. Ropes looped the trunks of two trees. Deanna dug in her heels and the sheriff hit her with the butt of his gun, right on the goose egg from the last time. The world whited out and when she could focus again, she was sitting with her back against a tree, wrists being efficiently bound above her head.

"Motherfuckers!" She lashed out with a boot and caught the dude on her left in the knee. His howl of pain was pretty gratifying, if ultimately useless. She yanked at her hands and cursed. They knew their business, these tree-worshipping whackjobs.

"Uncle Harley," said Emmett. "Please." He stared at his aunt and uncle, not even fighting as he was bound.

"I'm so sorry, Em," said Harley. "I wish it wasn't you."

"Try to understand," said Stacey. "There's no one else."

"I'm your family!" Emmett said.

"That's what sacrifice means, sweetheart." Stacey cupped his face with her palm. "Giving up for the greater good. We love you. We're grateful."

Emmett wrenched his head away.

"Lady, you are sick," said Deanna. "I hope your apple pie is fucking worth it."

Stacey backed away. "The good of the many outweighs the good of the few."

"Blood makes the crops grow green," the rest of the said in unison.

Goosebumps leapt up Deanna's arms and legs.

"Uncle," said Emmett, pleading.

Harley turned his back. The lot of them walked away, leaving Deanna with a cold ass, rapidly numbing fingers, and no fucking idea what to do.

"Don't panic," she told Emmett. "Alright? I got a plan."

"Good," said Emmett. "That's good. What is it?"

"I'm working on it," she said, and yanked at her wrists again.

The sun went down, slowly, leeching away the remaining heat as it fell behind the trees and then below the horizon. The townsfolk had tied them facing away from the

scarecrow, either in mercy or cruelty, she couldn't decide which. If she craned her head far enough, she could see the end of the thing's arm. She was getting a serious crick in her neck from doing it every five minutes.

Deanna studiously wiggled and flexed her hands, trying to keep the circulation pumping. They'd stripped her of every weapon, down to the little knife she kept in her left boot. She still had her rings, for all the good they would do her. Pagan gods didn't give a fuck about silver or iron, as best as she could remember.

"So, this plan," said Emmett finally. His voice was broken with shivers.

"I'm working on it!" Deanna was sure that there was a razor blade in the heel of her right boot. The problem was going to be getting to it. She dragged one heel against the other awkwardly.

"Deanna."

"Emmett, seriously, I'm trying to concentrate."

"Deanna, I think it just moved."

"What?" She stretched to the right, digging her chin into her shoulder, rolling her eyes. The shadows had fallen thick and dark across the orchard and the moon hadn't risen yet. "I can't see any –shit!"

Something rustled in the trees ahead and Deanna whipped her head back around almost fast enough to give herself whiplash.

"Oh my god," Emmett said, and started yanking at his ropes in a way that was going to shred his wrists.

A shadow, tall and hulking, moved between two apple trees.

"Hey!" said Deanna. "Over here." She'd kick the fucking thing to death if she had to. "Right here, long, leathery and fuck-ugly. Me first!"

"Jesus, Dee," said the scarecrow. "You used to kiss our mom with that mouth?" And then it stepped closer and became Sam.

"Sam," said Deanna, aware that her voice was a little unsteady. "Holy shit. Sam, you are beautiful. I am so happy to see you."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," said Sam. His hands went to the rope, there was the thick rip of parting fibres, and then she was free. "I'm holding this over you forever."

"How did you get here?" She scrambled to her feet.

"I uh. Stole a car," he said. "Hi," he said to Emmett, cutting him free.

"Sammy," said Deanna. "I'm so proud of you. Ready to burn a tree? Keep an eye on the scarecrow, the Stepford Pagans said moonrise."

"What scarecrow?" Sam turned to face her, and she realized she could see him, dimly.

They turned as one to look. The pole was empty.

"New plan," said Deanna. "We get the hell out and come back tomorrow morning. I'm not going toe to toe with Leather Face on his own turf."

"You aren't going anywhere." Harley stood at the treeline, shotgun in hand.

"Wanted to watch this time, huh?" Deanna cast around for a weapon. "Don't suppose you brought a bag, Sam?"

"Uh, yeah," said Sam. "It's right about where he's standing."

"That's really great, Sam. Stellar."

"Let us go," said Emmett. "Please, just let us go."

"I came to get you, Em," said Harley. "We got our couple now."

"He's my brother!" said Deanna.

"The Vanir won't care," said Harley.

"Harley!" the sheriff came crashing up. Deanna whirled, saw the rest of the townsfolk closing in. "Harley, you got to let go," the sheriff went on. "They've been blessed. It's done. It's too late."

"We don't have to," said Harley, "it doesn't have to be him, Adam!"

"Harley," Stacey said. "You're just muddying the waters."

"I can't, Stacey," said Harley. "I'd rather die." A shadow flickered behind him and his expression went suddenly confused.

The point of the sickle gleamed cold and bright in the light of the moon where it stood out of his chest.

Stacey screamed. The scarecrow wrenched the sickle free and slid away into the shadow of the trees. Sam tackled Emmett to the ground and Deanna dove forward as the shotgun fell out of Harley's slackening hands. People fled in all directions, some screaming.

Deanna came to her feet, shotty in hand, tracking the treeline where the thing had vanished. "We gotta go, Sam!"

"Your fault!" Stacey came at her, a goddamned cleaver in one hand, where had that come from?

Deanna lifted the gun, squeezed down, and heard the empty click. "Oh fuck you, Harley," she said.

The smell of apples and leather and dead leaves stirred past her and she dropped as fast as she could, rolled desperately, heard the whiffle of displaced air and then a thick, meaty, *chunk* sound. There was only one thing that made a sound like that, in Deanna's experience. She came back to her feet, the shotgun reversed and cocked like a baseball bat, and saw, yep, Stacey's body sagging one way and her head tumbling the other.

The scarecrow stood over the bodies, shoulders slumped forward, head cocked to one side.

"Dee," said Sam. "Back away."

"The fuck," Deanna began.

"It has what it wants," said Sam.

The thing bent, slowly, and took hold of Harley's ankle. The head swiveled toward Deanna.

"Okay," said Deanna. "Right. Good."

"Pretty sure we don't want to watch this, Dee," said Sam.

Emmett made a faint, choked sound.

They backed away until the trees began to hide the clearing. Then they ran.

The tree was massive, old, and grey. When Sam kicked at the layers of dead leaves at its base, there were bones trapped in the twisting of its roots, half-buried as though the tree was dragging them into the earth. Emmett insisted on being the one to toss the torch. The flames licked up the gasoline-soaked trunk, and somewhere deep in the orchard something let out a single, mournful cry.

"I don't think the apples are going to be quite as sweet this year," said Dee, in what she probably thought was a conversational voice.

"Good," said Emmett.

Sam watched him sidelong, the way he stared grimly at the flames, the way his hands clenched at his sides and thought the odds were pretty good that Emmett was going to end up with a trunkful of salt rounds and iron crowbars and dead man's blood.

Later, as they watched him drive away in his aunt and uncle's truck, heading who knows where, Sam leaned against the Impala and crossed his arms. "Think he'll be alright?"

"Honestly?" Dee rolled her shoulders. "Who the fuck knows. He didn't snivel, I'll give him that much."

"And the rest of the town, they just get away with it." Sam squinted up the road at the 'Welcome to Burkitsville!' sign. It looked duller, somehow.

"They'll get theirs," said Dee. "No more gorgeous weather and record crops. No more famous apple pie. Roll through here this time next year, you'll see a ghost town." She smiled. It wasn't particularly happy. "Let's get the fuck out of here, what do you say?"

"Yeah," said Sam, opening the car door.

"So," said Deanna, dropping into the driver's seat. "Can I drop you somewhere?"

"Naw," said Sam, casual. "I think you're stuck with me."

Dee ducked her head a moment, trying to hide a smile. "What changed your mind?"

"Nothing. I still want to find Dad. And you're still a pain in the ass."

Dee snorted.

"But – " Sam looked out the windshield. "Jess and Mom. They're gone. Dad's God knows where, doesn't want – anyway. You and me. We're all that's left. So if we're going to do this, we're going to do it together."

Dee blinked at him. "Sam." She reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "That was beautiful."

"Oh, fuck you," he said, swatting at her.

"No, really," she said. "C'mon. Hold me. This is a moment."

"You should be kissing my ass," he said, laughing. "Tied to a tree. The look on your face."

"I had a plan," she said, outraged. "I was just about to execute my plan."

"Something was about to get executed, all right."

"Bitch."

"Jerk."

Dee flipped him the bird, started the car, and burned rubber.

Sam grinned all the way to the interstate.

Somewhere else, on a dark highway that didn't lead to California, in a rusted out half-ton rattling along at 70 MPH, a short, blonde girl with clever, tilted brown eyes and a pointed chin smiled at the driver.

"How about you pull over, big guy?" she said.

The driver, a lean guy in his mid forties, grinned at her. "That works."

A gravel road presented itself, and he let the truck slide along a good mile or so before he brought it to a halt. When he reached across the seat for her, she slapped his hands away playfully.

"Oh, baby, no," she crooned, while he shook the sting out. "You're gonna let me do all the work."

"Yeah, okay," he said. He popped the top button of his jeans and eased them open.

She leaned over, searched around in her bag a moment, and pulled out a small silver bowl.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"I gotta make a quick call," she said.



"I got a cell phone," he said, lifting his hips to dig in his pocket.

"It isn't that kind of call, baby," she said, and dropped the bowl in his lap. Her right hand flashed out beneath his chin, quick as a striking snake.

"What?" he said. Red spilled down his front. "Hey, did you turn the heat ... on?" He turned puzzled eyes toward her as she lifted the bowl up and snugged it against his collarbones.

"Thanks for the ride," she said, and bopped his nose with the tip of the knife.

His eyes slid shut and he slumped forward.

She took back the bowl and set it on her lap. With careful delicacy, she dipped just the tip of her left index into the blood and stirred it counter clockwise three times. "*Tire quiero patem me a di.*" When she lifted her finger away, the blood continued to rotate, gathering speed, drawing into a whirlpool up the sides of the bowl. In the center, a dim silver light grew. Her expression was rapt.

"It's as you ordered," she said. The light pulsed. "But I don't understand. I had Sam. I had him! Hell, I could have taken them both. Why let them go?" The light pulsed. She flinched a little. "Yes. Yes, of course." The light flared slowly, painting the inside of the truck cab with sickly silver light, with sharp-edged shadows. She straightened, looked eager. "Yes, I can do that." The light began to fade. "Yes, Father."

The light died away, the blood sloshed to a halt, already thickening. She lifted her bloody fingertip to her mouth and sucked it slowly clean.

"Got work to do," she said to the dead man in the driver's seat. "Think you can lend me your truck?"

Her smile was a white slice in the darkness.