

He slowed as he approached the one lane road but still took the corner too fast, dirt flying as the late model Ford Bronco skidded down the lane. Fifty yards farther, he spotted a vintage fifty-six Chevy convertible parked under a pine tree. The Fowler woman stood beside the car, one hand shading her eyes.

“Crap,” he muttered, “It had to be her.”

He slid to a stop and marched past her without a glance, ignoring the dust cloud he generated. “Where’s the body?”

“Over there,” she pointed off to the right with one hand, waving the other in front of her face to ward off the powdery onslaught, “behind the holly bush.”

He moved in the direction indicated, scanning the area carefully for anything out of the ordinary. A favorite make out spot for local teens, he steeled himself against what he might find on the other side of that holly bush. Bare feet extended beyond the edge, toe nails painted a bright red that somehow seemed indecent under the circumstances. He held his breath when he rounded the bush to get his first look at the body, hoping against hope he didn’t know her.

He froze mid-step.

It was her. The woman from the dream last night.

*What the hell?*

No mistake about it. Every detail was present. The gash on her forehead, the dried blood in the corner of her mouth, and crusted in her nose. He stared for several heartbeats, unable to process the fact she was the woman in the dream. He clamped his jaw tight, and focused on the job.

She lay on her back, unseeing eyes focused upward, legs straight, arms flat against her body like a soldier at attention. He stepped closer, careful not to disturb anything, looking for something to help identify her, and maybe the killer.

Nothing. No shoes, no clothes, nothing. He squatted down beside her, gritting his teeth as he surveyed the brutal scene. He was no stranger to death, but that didn't make it any easier. And this one had been painful and prolonged. He saw it in the bruises, cuts and scrapes covering her body.

*Could I have stopped this? Was the voice right?*

He shook his head. No. He could not have prevented this horrific crime. He forced his mind back to the moment, and continued his perusal of the area.

The killer was good. He left zilch behind except a once beautiful woman used and discarded like yesterday's news. With one last look around, he stood and strode back to where Sam waited.

*"You're the sheriff?"*

Under different circumstances, her shocked exclamation would have been funny, but not today.

Coop looked past her to the cars streaming down the one-lane road, led by Billy Ray Thomas, one of his jailers, who brought his car to stop behind Coop's, jumped out, and walked toward him.

"Keep those people behind my truck, Billy Ray." He glared at the growing crowd. "If anyone gives you any shit, I'll throw 'em in jail."

Coop bowed his head slightly toward Sam. "Sheriff Cooper Delaney, Dr. Fowler."

At her surprised look, he offered, “Miss Eva told me.” He removed his aviator glasses. “I hope I didn’t disturb you this morning. I wouldn’t have barged in so disheveled had I known she had guests. Frankly, can’t recall the last time one of them got up before ten.”

A couple of blinks preceded her reply. “Oh, okay, um, okay.”

He replaced his shades and started Cop 101. “What do you know about this?”

She jerked her gaze to him, brow creasing. “She’s dead.”

“How did you find the body?”

“Beginners luck.”

He jerked his head around and pinned her with his best don’t-jack-with-me-I’m-a-cop look.

She stared right back.

“Nature called,” she said at last, “This looked like a good place to answer. Went over there, found her, called you, end of story.”

Coop barely managed to hide his surprise as he took her right arm, leading her toward the Bronco.

“Where are you taking me?”

He stopped when he reached the vehicle and opened the door. “Get in. Don’t talk to anyone until I get back.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so. Dammit, Billy Ray,” shouted Coop, “Keep these people behind my truck.”

“Come on, folks, you heard the sheriff, move back.”

“Aw, come on, Coop,” came a voice in the crowd, “we just wanna see what’s happening.”

“Yeah,” whined another, “I ain’t never seen a dead body. Not like this.”

“Shorty, if your fat ass isn’t behind my truck in ten seconds,” roared Coop, “you’ll spend the rest of the weekend in jail. That goes for the rest of you, too. Now move it!” Turning back to Sam, he lowered his voice. “Get in. Please.”

She pulled her arm free and stepped toward the door, tripping over a root in the process. Her head just missed the corner as Coop caught her against him, causing her to mutter a startled squeal.

Immediately, Jack jumped from the car and raced for the sheriff, teeth bared, his growl deep and menacing. “No, Jack! Stay,” shouted Sam, still encased in his arms as she turned toward the dog.

Jack slowed, but inched toward them, his size alone enough to intimidate, but coupled with that low rumble, it was terrifying.

Her voice calm and soft, she told Coop, “No sudden moves. Let me go.”

He slowly released her and waited.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, “he’s very protective.”

Turning to the dog now a mere two feet away from his leg, she reached down. “Good boy, Jack, good boy.” She rubbed his ears and stroked his head. “I appreciate your concern, sweetie, but, really it isn’t necessary.”

Jack didn’t appear to agree, and crept forward.

She rose and stood beside Coop, slipping her arm through his.

“What the hell are you doing?”

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “Say something to him and be nice. He’s not as dumb as some dogs...and most men.”