

CHAPTER ONE

The coyote raised her head, sniffing the heated desert air. Her shrunken stomach cramped as the odor of rotting flesh filled her nostrils. Blinking her dark eyes against the sharp rays of the setting sun, she set off through the dense sagebrush trotting towards the promise of food.

She knew she was close now; the cloying scent of death was thick as she crouched against the pinion tree. She could hear the buzz of flies humming methodically in the otherwise stillness of evening. Hunger made her feverish and she nervously licked the saliva dripping from her muzzle, but something felt wrong. She lowered herself down to her belly and wiggled forward tentatively pushing her snout from underneath the weathered twigs. She could see the kill lying on the red dusty ground in front of her, whimpering in frustration as she suddenly pulled back. She could see a black devouring danger roiling towards her from just beyond the carcass.

With a sharp yelp of terror she tore off at a dead run, her back hunched over and tail tucked deeply between her legs. She pushed herself through cactus and shrubs her fur and flesh were torn and cut. Heaving for air as the darkness threatened to overtake her, she made a desperate leap across a dry creek bed. Landing awkwardly on the other side she stumbled and fell, rolling and bouncing down a sharp ravine and slamming with a wrenching snap onto a large boulder. The enveloping darkness matched the darkening blanket of the desert sky. Across the ravine the human carcass lay with dark empty holes where eyes had once caressed the heavens.

Levi can't help but groan under the pillow while trying to ignore the ringing of his phone. Without opening his eyes he fumbles for the brass chain attached to the lamp above his bed. Giving up, he drops his feet to the floor, his dog's sharp yelp greeting him in the dark. Levi

gropes along the wall carefully to avoid stubbing his toes. With a slow glance around the room, which looked like a ransacked crime scene, he locates his phone on top of the dresser.

“Hello?” His voice husky from sleep.

“Sorry to bother you Levi, its Nancy.” Her voice hesitating.

“Ya Nan, what’s going on?” Levi responds trying not to sound as tired as he felt.

She answers quickly, “Well, hon, I wouldn’t think of waking you but we just received a call from some fella saying he found a dead body.”

“Did it the sound like the same caller as before Nancy?”

“Sure did. He said he just came off the mesa where he claims to have found a dead female body then hung up. It’s just like the other four” she paused, her voice shaking, Levi waits while she collects herself. It’s tough on everyone involved. Small towns and serial killers don’t mix. It gets real personal real fast.

“Sorry Levi, I just had to catch my breath. The location he gave is in the Manti La Sal just west of Elks Knoll.”

“I know the area Nan. I’ll head up with Scout and take a look around. It sounds like it’s the area where we found Alice Eagle.” If he were to take a guess he figures this body will be pretty close to 6 miles away from the last, it seemed to be one of many patterns. He stops to collect his thoughts.

“When and if I find the scene, I’ll radio for a copter to remove the body after I’ve collected evidence. Can you give Charlie from the Cortez office a call to cover for me while I’m gone? It’s pretty rough country, and it could take me a while to get in and find her.”

“Sure thing. Take care of yourself out there Levi. We will wait for you to contact us.”

Levi set the phone in its cradle and shuffling out of his room to the kitchen. He sure as hell wasn't going anywhere without a cup of coffee. He glances at the faded yellow clock hanging crookedly on the kitchen wall, 4:30 am. *Christ, he yawns, it's too damn early for this.*

He plucks the red tin of Folgers off the plywood shelf and fills up coffee pot with water. In the quiet of the pre-dawn, he thinks about how comforting small rituals like making morning coffee are. His brows furrow as his thoughts wandered back over the last year. After the first girl was found, everyone thought that it was some random murder, horrific as it was. But the second and the third made it clear that this was the action of a sick individual and they wouldn't be stopping anytime soon. But he still didn't know why anyone would do such a thing. All the bodies had been laid out in the same manner and position. Each had their arms disjointed and pulled above their heads making a circle, like a halo and they were all disemboweled. Levi didn't know if were dead before they were gutted or after. He hopes after.

Just thinking about the girls made him angry, angry about the whole dammed thing. He shakes his head to try to clear the images from his mind but the details won't let go. The girls are all from the Southern Ute Res. The youngest is fourteen and the oldest eighteen. The coroner's reports are slow in coming, but that kind of response isn't unusual for crimes on the reservation or against Natives. The fact that the victims are Southern Ute women shouldn't make any difference to law enforcement but Levi knows it does. The statistics of crimes committed against Native women prove it. He can't imagine their fear and pain and his heart aches for their families.

The coffee pot hisses and sputters, he grabs the handle and splashed the steaming liquid into his beat up Conoco mug. There are too many damn things that bothered him about how they were murdered. All the bodies were left in areas of wilderness without access for vehicles, yet

there hasn't been any sign of horses traveling through or campsites in the surrounding vicinity. And with all of the blood and entrails, you would think it would drive the local scavengers crazy, yet the bodies remain unmolested by wild animals. Normally, by the time someone got to a body, there wouldn't be anything left of a corpse but a few scattered bones. Levi bends down absently scratching Scout's ears. Fearless as the blue healer was, Scout wouldn't go anywhere near the girls from the crime scenes. He sits about 20 yards out and whines until the copter leaves with the body bag.

Levi pulls on his wranglers a white under-shirt and covers that with the standard dun colored uniform. The heaviness of his sheriff's badge always startles him. He never thought he would be a cop. Raised on a ranch in Durango, Levi had a natural talent for riding bulls and was well on his way through the rodeo circuit when a particularly rank bull caught him on a right hitch that tossed Levi against the arena gate. Not happy just to throw him, the bull decided to do a dance on Levi's head. His recovery was slow and painful and came to realize that bull riding wasn't his thing anymore. That was when his buddy Charlie mentioned that the small town of Lebanon needed a sheriff. So here he was, holster, guns, badge and all. But damn it, he didn't count on some crazy son of a bitch to take up carving on a bunch of Ute girls.

The pungent smell of horse greets Levi as he opens the barn door. He has already loaded the trailer with saddle bags, bedroll and water and was ready to head out to the La Sals. After getting Hank loaded in the trailer it didn't take long before he was turning onto highway 491 to Monticello. He figured riding through the rough terrain, it would take him the better part of a week to get in, do the investigation and get out. That should be sufficient time for his request to go through for an FBI agent to be assigned to his case. He wasn't getting very far on his own and had no ego left to bruise. Besides, he didn't want more girls to die if he could help it.

The sunrise stretches its crimson rays across the plateaus and mesas. Always in awe of the savage beauty and rawness of the high mountain deserts, his vision lingered on the stunted scrub oaks clinging to the salt crusted sandstone rocks. Standing out against the barren landscape they create nooks for wildflowers to take root and shoot sparks of color against the red and brown canvas. There was a chill this morning, but he drove with the window down anyway. The wind kept him awake and the smell of sage, sand and pinion were better than almost anything he could think of. Glancing in his rear view mirror he caught his reflection and gave a shrug. *Pale*, he thought for the light copper color of his eyes.

Turning off highway 491 on to North Creek Road, Levi drops his truck into low gear so Hank won't be injured on the steep washboard roads, and he begins the ascent. He would get to the Elk Ridge trailhead in about an hour, giving there weren't any delays like flat tires or washouts. Levi turns the stereo on and flips the cassette in and Neil Young's *harvest Moon* eases out of the battered speakers. Levi's mind blissfully snags the lyrics and ends the jarring turns of thoughts, giving his mind a much needed break.

He parks the trailer in a small turnout kicking the door closed with a thud. The trailhead to Elk Knoll is located at the bottom of the Wasatch Plateau. The thinly forested area is tinder dry and Levi could hear the buzzing of insects as they pushed through the thick yellow pine pollen looking for random high desert flowers. There was a sharp evergreen scent as Hank backed out of the trailer crushing the pine needles under his hooves. If the circumstances for his ride into the wilderness were different, Levi would be looking forward to being out here for a week or so with just his horse and dog for company. With the late morning sun warming his shoulders, he finishes tying the last saddle bag to the hand tooled saddle. The heat was rising and Levi pushes his state-issued Copper Creek Stetson off his sweating brow. He pauses for a

moment, hand resting on his gun belt, reluctant to mount, double checking that he has extra ammunition for the Remington 870 shotgun and his Glock 22 hand gun. Unable to put off the inevitable, Levi pulls a leg over Hank and whistles a sharp note to Scout who leaps up to jog ahead on the trail they would follow for the next 20 or so miles.

Morning soon turned to late afternoon before Levi, Hank and Scout took a break next to a dry creek bed. According to the directions given by the “caller”, Levi figured that they had a ways to go before getting to the body. *Maybe tomorrow we will be at the sight*, Levi thought to himself. He tossed a corner of his bologna and cheese sandwich to Scout who greedily jumped up to snap it out of the air. Scout resumed his vigilant guard against any bits of lunch hitting the ground. Levi smiled and tossed the last bit of crust out for him.

Leaning his back against a tree trunk he was happy to stretch out for a bit after being in the saddle all morning. Scout turned his snout up and sniffed the air, with a whine he got up and trotted up the creek. Thinking he probably smelled a groundhog or rabbit Levi let his eyes gently close. Startled by the fierce growling coming from the direction Scout took, Levi jumped up to find the dog.

He was searching the area ahead when he saw an Indian man squatting down in the middle of the bed. The man’s head is bent forward; long strings of ebony hair covering his face. Several feathers fashioned to the crown of his head fanned out like the tail of the hawk. His torso is bare and his loins are covered in a buckskin skirt beaded with black, red and white figures of cactus flowers and snakes. Moccasins with the same design cover his feet. Levi hasn’t seen any Natives in the four corners dressed in this manner before. The man sat with his left hand outstretched over the decomposing body of a dead coyote. His mouth issues a string of deep rumbling chants while a small black rattle held in his right hand snaps at the end of each stanza.

Levi doesn't understand the words, they weren't Ute or Navajo, but it sounds familiar. Scanning the edges of the ravine, he didn't see Scout anywhere--making him nervous, but then again, he found it nearly impossible to concentrate on anything but the man's chanting.

Feeling his body begin to tingle and go numb, nausea built in his guts as the buzzing from the chant edge into his skull, making him feel trapped and crazed. Levi falls to the ground, clenches his stomach as pain lashes against his head, screaming he tries to crawl away from the sound. Slowly, his tormentor begins to lift his head. Levi knows beyond a doubt that he does not want to see the face the long black hair was covering. Desperate to run he can do nothing but sit paralyzed with irrational fear. The Indian's face rises up as his hair parts. Levi throws back his head and opens his mouth to scream with such violence he slams it against the bark of the tree.

His eyes water as the nausea recedes. Blinking rapidly he sees Hank grazing a few yards on the downstream side of the arroyo. Not far from where he sat down for a rest. Scout was curled up under the shade of boulder. *A dream! Sweet mother of Mary, it was just a dream!* Levi's hands shook reaching out for his Stetson lying on the ground next to him. Refusing to give up the lunch that threatens to spill from his guts, he shakily gets to his feet breathing deeply through his nose. Brushing as much of the vision away as possible, he heads over to Hank and picks up the reigns. Unstrapping his canister from the saddle bag, he washes the panic from his mouth wishing he had something stronger.

With a sharp whistle to Scout, Levi mounts and angles out of the creek bed. Glancing up, eyes squinting against the sun's glare, he notices thunderheads growing to the south.

We'll need to find some shelter if those storms head this way.

Levi's thoughts seemed as tremulous as the clouds gathering in the late afternoon sky. He can't shake the image of the Indian he saw in his dream. It felt so familiar, like he should know the

man, and know the story behind his feelings of fear. Turning Hank slightly east, they pushed out of the creek bed and followed an old deer trail, making the passage through the dense underbrush and scrub oak that hugged the steep ridge they were traversing easier. Scout lops ahead, his tongue dangling as he stops now and again to investigate rabbit scat and coyote marks. Crickets sing out as the cooling breeze from the incoming thunderstorms rolls across the desert sky. Levi can smell the sweetness of the rain even as lightning raced ahead and splits the darkening sky with its hot white forks. He slides a little deeper in the saddle while Hank crow hops in nervousness and counts the seconds between lightning and the deep rumble of thunder. *Five seconds*, now he would wait for another peal of lightning. If he can gauge how fast the storm is moving, he can figure out if he needs to find shelter before reaching the Keet Seel Cave.

The Keet Seel Cave is where he wants to camp for a few reasons. It is well protected and both the dog and horse will fit in the cavern. The Hopi called the cave Tokonavi, place of the black rock. Once a volcano, the cave was inhabited by glassy black obsidian rocks. For Levi, it is like stepping into another world. The cave offers Levi the peace he often finds in whiskey bottles, but without regret in the morning.

Another spike of lightning lit up the roiling sky. Levi counts to four on this one. The storm is moving relatively slow. It would be tight, but if he pushes hard, they can make it. Spurring Hank to pick up the pace, Levi sets his hat lower on his head to keep it from blowing away in the swirls of wind that push against them. About 200 feet away the heavy clouds release their payload. Drops of rain pelt the trio as they race for dry comfort. Lightning cracks and snaps like a living beast above them hastening their efforts. Diving in, thunder and rain drove a frenzied crescendo outside the cave. Levi felt as if he had entered another world, releasing the subtle stresses he carried in his shoulders and neck. After dismounting Levi removes Hank's

saddle and rubs him down with a soft cloth. Hank, shaking out his mane, nickers softly in pleasure. Only Scout seems immune to the tranquil setting. The dog sits at the entrance and whining softly. Settling Hank's feedbag, Levi move next to the dog and pats his head. Looking up with watery brown eyes, the dog licks Levi's hand in apology.

"It's alright Scout" he mutters, "we all get a bit out of sorts once in a while."

Levi looks out at the darkening night. A shiver of unease pushes away his sense of comfort. As he gazes into the sodden twilight he thinks he can see the figure of a man glide behind a small stand of scrub oak. For a minute or so he waits, tense, while his eyes scan the area. Scout pushes against his hand drawing Levi's attention back to the job of ear scratching. With a deep breath and one last pat, Levi turns away to start sorting his gear.

"A fire and some warm food will help settle us down", he say's to no one in particular. Behind Levi, Scout lays his head between his paws and continues his guard. Unnoticed by the three going about their business in the cave, a figure, hazy and undefined, detaches itself from the shadow of a large pinion. Undefined face piers through the drenching rain at the cave, a soft chanting issue from its mouth. The chant roils along the ground inching closer to the cavern's opening. The hissing slips past Scout unnoticed except for the momentary chill causes the hairs to rise for a moment then settle.

The fire light dances over Levi's face from the dying. The orange and yellow light is swallowed by the black obsidian entrenched in the granite and sandstone cavern. A gentle hum of insects and rain buzz softly about them as they slumber through the predawn hours. From the back of the cave coldness begins to seep forward. Levi turns over on his bedroll fitfully, his brows furrow and sweat in the coolness of the night. His head rolls back and forth as his mouth works in his distress.

Hank shifts his heavy hooves and flicks his eyes open sensing danger, his ears swivel to catch a sound what threatened. The large horse pulls back on his lead rope and shifts his haunches. Sharp and piercing, he screams and tugs hard on the lead to free himself. Scout leaps up and begins to barking, yet Levi sleeps on. The dog nips at Levi's legs and torso trying desperately to wake him up. Finally Scout grabs onto the denim of Levi's leg, he pulls, he slowly drags the unconscious body toward the cave's entrance.

Levi was aware of his dog and horse's fear. Struggling to wake up, he keeps sinking deeper into the vapor of his dreams. *He is wandering through dense forest over a carpet of lichen and pine needles which softly feather around his bare feet. He could hear a woman's singing in the distance and feel his belly tighten with anticipation at the thought of finding her. His hands, as he reaches out to push through the foliage are strong, smooth and supple. Sun dapples along the trail. Levi has the feeling that he has been here before. He knows every tree, smell and boulder in this landscape as surely as he knows himself. Her song grows louder the closer he gets, like chimes in the wind, dancing and teasing him. He can hear laughter and joy in the song she sings. In his mind he carries her image. Curvy and ripe like the forest deer, she has her hair unbound, rippling down her back like crows wings reflecting the brilliance of the sun. Her eyes are dancing like the half-moon in the night's sky. Her full heavy lips spread in a wondering smile, inviting laughter. He knows this woman, his own heart. No other thing lives as fully and brightly as her image. Quickening his pace with anticipation of her, he pushes forward following the music of her voice.*

Chapter 2

Sam flinches as the intercom on her desk belts out her name. She doesn't think she will

ever get use to the grating sound of Mrs. Finch's voice. The chief's executive assistant must smoke two packs of Pal Malls a day she thinks to herself. Sam is pretty sure the woman is about one pack away from the grave and it surprises every day she shows up to work.

Mrs. Finch croaks, "Ms. Montoya, Director Williams will like to see you in his office now." Samantha hesitates a moment. The director has never requested her for anything before. She has met with him briefly for a few minutes, like after she first arrived at the New York bureau, but other than that she hasn't been on his radar. Although she has been an agent for the FBI for seven years she has been assigned to desk duty and missing persons. She feels the stagnation of her career like a lodestone around her neck.

"I'll be along in just a moment, Ms. Finch." Sam responds. She thinks she hears a short bark of laughter before the intercom goes silent. Quickly, she reaches into the top drawer of her desk to grab her mirror and takes a quick assessment. Her slick ebony hair is cut in a dramatic A line with long sweeping bangs which swoop from her side part to tuck neatly behind her right ear. The simple gold hoops are classic but not too bold. The sharp line of her brow accentuates her almond shaped brown eyes which are framed by an abundance of thick black lashes. She has the broad forehead and high cheek bones of her Indian blood with her lips on the verge of being pouty which irritates her to no end. Snapping the compact closed, Sam stands and smooth's her navy suit. The pencil skirt just touches the top of her knees revealing an athletic figure. Sam works out hard first thing in the morning and generally jogs several miles after work. She doesn't consider herself a vain woman, on the contrary, she tries to make herself as plain as she can. It's hard enough being an Indian, let alone a woman FBI agent. It is galling to see her white counterparts enjoy fieldwork and difficult assignments while she sits at her desk filing reports. She suspects that her ethnicity impacts her career due to the snide comments she overhears. The

old rhetoric, that she was hired for diversity, not talent. So when she looks at her face in a mirror, she feels a familiar rush of anger. All the strikes are against her, female, Indian, and pouty lips.

Now the director wants to see her and she can't help but wonder why.

Director Williams sits behind his desk overrun with files. The phone is clenched between his ear and shoulder as he furiously shouts into the receiver.

"I don't give a crap what Peter's is doing; I want his ass back in New York yesterday!" Sam hesitates at the door as Williams impatiently waives at her in. Uncomfortable listening while the director continues his tirade, Sam looks around for a place to sit. The only option is to move several files from one of the two chairs in front of his desk. Not wanting to interrupt, she carefully places the pile on the floor and takes a seat. Trying to remain still so she doesn't appear nervous, she unconsciously tucks her right foot behind her left ankle and clasped her hands in her lap so she doesn't fidget while waiting. She remembers her father. He was a severe man when sober and damn mean when he wasn't. He couldn't abide her wiggling when she was a little girl. She learned at a very early age that holding still would save her a lot of pain.

Hanging up the phone, Director Williams sits back in his chair and looks at her form under his bush brows. His fingers drum the top of his desk, muted by the stack of papers. Sam looks at him steadily. The visual standoff reminds her of her of the time her brothers would go out to catch rattlesnakes. Each boy would squat unmoving, his eyes locked on the snakes in a primordial dance of wills. The serpents would wait for a chance to strike and the boys for the moment the snake committed to the strike. She almost smiled thinking of their triumphant grins as they walked into their small house proudly holding their flour sacks that wiggled and hissed out to their mother. They would puff out their scrawny chests in pride as they ate the delicious meal she made with their catches. Sam forces herself to focus on the present and patiently waits

for the director to strike.

“Ms. Montoya,” he begins slowly, picking up a file and thumbing through it even though she knew he has read everything in it. His half hazard perusal of the documents gives him away. She can see her name on the tab and has a good idea it contains her records. “I understand that you have been with the bureau for seven years now.” He looks up at her, peering over the rims of his wire framed glasses. She knows he doesn’t want an answer, so she just gives him a brief nod.

“Not many field assignments I see.”

Again, she nods. His condescending tone is almost more than she can take. She had requested assignment after assignment but they were always given to her colleagues. As he looks back through her file he pursed his lips making him look like a bloated toad. “I also see that you grew up on the Hopi Reservation in Keams Canyon?”

He looks at her with again, his blue eyes unblinking. *Rabbit, she thinks*, trying not to squirm under his gaze. Sam has spent the better part of her life trying to eradicate the reservation from her mind and body. Now this white man in his grey suit has the nerve to sit across from her and question her identity? She wishes she had the courage to spit in his face. Even without the more common years of abuse from her mother and father, she still carried the weight of the hateful words she was called by both white children and white teachers. Pain rumbles from her chest in a furious heat. Breathing slowly through her nose she focuses on slowing her heartbeat and keeping the cool mask of indifference plastered on her face.

“Yes sir, I did grow up in Arizona.” Her voice was strong and steady and she felt relief that years of discipline and training held. She wouldn’t let anyone know how much she hates, how much she hurts and how much she wishes she could go home again, proud and successful. But by who’s standards would she judge her success she wondered.

Sam didn't jog that evening, she ran. She feels furious and the beat of her feet hitting the pavement sounds like a drum. The sheer audacity of the director pushes her harder. She turns off the bike path and drops down into the greenbelt. She knows it's foolish to run on an isolated unlit path this late at night, but she doesn't care about that right now. She would almost welcome a mugging. She feels a desire to rip something apart in her anger and frustration. Sam tries to cool her mind by focusing on counting her pace. She loses herself in the shelter of the trees, moist and secret. She feels herself relax and begins to gain control over her emotions. The shadow of the canopy rushes past and the heat of her anger abates. Her mind is clear, her body strong. Turning up the embankment, she picks up the bike path once more and heads to Creston Street taking her back to the apartment. It's late and she needs to pack for her trip the following morning.

After her shower she shuffles through several reports she will need to read. The director handed her the dossier while explaining what her first big field assignment was. Flipping her head over and twisting the towel around her hair she recalls how hard it was to keep her hands from shaking as she took the file from the director. Given the conversation they'd had about her past, she opened the report with excitement mingled with distrust. Her apprehension wasn't misplaced. She saw the request for assistance was from Sheriff Stanton in Southern Colorado which can only mean one thing, her assignment is on tribal land and she got it because she's Native. It doesn't have anything to do with her ability but everything to do with the color of her skin.

The director gave Sam a tight hard smile, "You'll leave tomorrow Montoya. I can't imagine it will take long to close the case. How hard can it be to catch a killer in a place like that?"

"A place like that?" she thinks to herself as she leaves the building. If the director didn't have his head up his ass like most white men, he would realize that the area the murders were

committed is rugged. Getting the locals to help would be nearly impossible knowing the Indian communities like she did. They are rightfully suspicious of non-Indian law enforcement and are reluctant to volunteer anything to outside authority due to the duplicity in which the US government operates. She will be working with a local sheriff whom she already pictures as fat, sweaty and pompous. “*A place like that*” was like sending her to Siberia, she thinks as she jumps on the east bound train to Brooklyn.

Levi can't remember the last time he felt this old. Every bone in his body yells for a soft bed but he has business to wrap up before he can give himself over to that comfort. As he pushes through the glass doors of the police station he feels the cool caress of the air conditioner. Sweat and dirt from the La Sales seize up on his skin making him feel a bit puckered. He fantasized about a shower and can almost feel the hot water wash away the last six days on the trail.

“Levi! Boy are we glad to see you hon.” Nancy's high falsetto voice setting off instinctual alarms.

Nancy stands up quickly behind her reception desk, her plum sear sucker suit strains against the seams. Levi squints at her in concern and she seemed far too excited to see him. They had talked not more than 6 hours ago when he got back to the truck. Levi glances around for some indication of why she's acting so strange. He follows her wildly rolling eyes to the window of his office. He notices a young woman in a dark suit standing with her back to the door tapping her foot in rapid fire. Glancing at Nancy, he raises his brows in question. She shrugs her shoulders and holds up two chubby fingers. Levi assumes his guest has waited for a few hours or more and isn't pleased. *Well*, he thought, *neither is he*. There goes dropping off evidence and going

straight home. Angling his hip against the wooden gate swinging it forward and heads past Nancy's desk, he can see the lady is law enforcement. There was no disguising the suit she is wearing or the piece she has strapped against her ribs, the shoulder belt outlined against the snug black jacket. She turns as soon as he steps through the door. He catches her FBI badge as it swings softly against her chest.

“How do you do...agent?” He asks.

“Montoya, I'm agent Montoya, FBI.” Her response is curt.

“Ah, yes, well I would offer my hand agent Montoya but as you can see their occupied. I assume you've been waiting a while, for that I apologize. Do you mind walking with me while I drop this off in the evidence room?” Levi asks.

“Sure sheriff Stanton, lead the way.” Hating how ridged she sounds.

Sam sweeps her eyes over the box he has in his hands. She doesn't want to seem interested although she is. She notes right away how he Sheriff Stanton smells like her father. Horsey and perfumed with high desert sage. She is somehow caught off guard smelling it on a man in uniform. The pricks she works with either smelled like Old Spice or burgers and fries. She follows him down the concrete stairs to the basement.

“I assume agent Montoya that you've been sent to help me with this case. I appreciate the FBI sending a field agent out so quickly. It usually takes months to get help out here,” he smiles as she opens the door for him.

She tries not to read anything into his comment. She knows she's just being catty by assuming that the sheriff is remarking on her gender or her skin.

“It happens that I am available Sheriff Stanton.” She smiles back revealing white even teeth.

“Do you mind calling me Levi?” He asked as he landed the last stair and headed for the counter enclosed with chain link fencing and clip boards.

“This is a small town and since we will be working together it seems a bit formal to call me anything else.”

Levi sat the heavy cardboard box down on the counter as a young man stepped up to them.

“Hey Levi, looks like you collected a lot of evidence up there.”

The man pushed his thick round glasses back up the bridge of his nose. Sam noticed his thick black hair was tied back as he eyed her through the fencing.

“Ya, Cliff, I didn’t want to miss anything. When do you think you can get it sent to Denver?” Levi inquired as he started to unpack the vials, bags and jars of evidence all clearly labeled.

“I’ll make sure it gets on the UPS truck today sheriff.” Cliff’s eyes flickered between Sam and Levi clearly wanting to know who she was. Neither officer appeased his curiosity. They both knew that everyone in town would know she was here by now and in what capacity. Sam also noted how no one seemed to look at Levi with any less respect. Slightly surprised she stood to the side and watched the two of them carefully document each item in triplicate.

Levi turned his head to the side and gave her an apologetic yet slightly crooked smile.

“Do you mind if we grab some breakfast agent Montoya?”

“You can call me Sam, if you prefer.” She added.

Levi turned to her.

“I’ve been on the trail for a while and could use some food that doesn’t come out of a can.”

“Ha! You know Carly doesn’t cook anything from a can if she can help it.” Cliff offered

smiling at Sam. “Don’t turn down her pie, it goes fast.”

Levi gently grasped her elbow as he turned her from the counter. Sam wanted to draw it away but refused to be trite.

“I forget how small towns are Sheriff,” She said stiffly.

“Levi. You can call me Levi. Everyone around here does. But your right, small towns are like big families. No secrets.”

Levi opened the door for her as she slid through into the main reception area. Sam noticed a deputy booking what looked like a drunk. The man sat in the corner with his hands cuffed and resting on his knees. He was slumped forward, his neon orange cap slightly skewed on his head. She shuddered at the familiar form.

“It seems like there is at least one secret in this town Levi. Someone seems to be pretty good at killing girls.” Her voice was waspish and she hated the petty sound of it.

Levi smiled a bit, but Sam didn’t think it was humor that stretched his full lips, more like pain.

“You don’t waste time Sam. Let’s go get some food and I will bring you up to date.”

