

The Fight Begins

Chapter One

Todd Mercer looked around at the rolling tree-covered hills of Southwest Missouri as he drove down Interstate 44. He and his daughter Carrie were heading for their new life in Ford Valley, Arizona. And Carrie was not happy at all.

Well, he couldn't blame her. She was sixteen years old, and her mother had died two months ago in a car crash. That was enough to cause any teenager to be angry. For her, it was bad enough that she had to live with Todd, but the worst part was that he now lived in Arizona and was taking her with him to live out there.

But Todd was also apprehensive about going back to Ford Valley and especially taking his daughter with him to live there.

Just as he was getting ready to leave to go back to St. Louis, he'd found a note in his mailbox that warned him not to come back or face the consequences. What consequences and why would someone not want him in Ford Valley?

Well, he hadn't had a chance to run it by anyone there in Ford Valley since he'd left for St. Louis early the next morning.

On top of those worries, Carrie hadn't spoken to him except to answer questions she knew she had to answer. But even then, it was usually only one-word responses.

Oh well. Todd was praying that Carrie would somehow grow to enjoy living with him and living in Arizona. He knew his parents were praying for them as well.

Todd had been almost depressed the last three years since his wife, Diane, divorced him and married a doctor. That had been bad enough, but Diane and her parents had turned Carrie against him by telling her all kinds of lies about him.

He hoped and prayed that he could somehow get the truth through to her without destroying her image of her mother.

Well, things were settled now. At least as far as Todd was concerned. It had taken him two long, hard-fought months to win permanent custody of Carrie away from Diane's parents. It hadn't been easy since Diane's dad was a fancy corporate lawyer who charged more per hour than Todd made in a month with his police retirement.

Todd had expected Carrie to be somewhat uncooperative on their trip, but he hadn't been prepared for the total silence she had treated him with for the first two hours of their drive. He had to get her to talk somehow.

"Just so you know Carrie. I'm planning to drive as far as Oklahoma City today and then to Roswell, New Mexico tomorrow. We'll go from there to Ford Valley, Arizona."

"Great!" She was quiet for a moment, then she seemed to remember something. "I still don't know why you wouldn't let Grandma and Grandpa Hardesty buy my car in St. Louis where there was a much better selection."

Todd was already tired. Now, he decided that her silence was much better than this. They'd already gone over it, and he'd thought Carrie was, if not good with it, at least understood why it was better to wait.

"Carrie, there are two big reasons we're doing it this way. First, you've only had your license a few months and to take off on a fifteen-hundred-mile trip by yourself in a new car would be really hard."

He paused to form his next response. "And second, you've already picked out your car and it will be at the dealership in Ford Valley soon."

"Yeah, but I looked forward to driving by myself and playing my own music on the way out there."

She stuck her ear buds back in her ears and began listening to her music again.

Todd knew he couldn't say anything else since she had apparently tuned him out. But he couldn't help trying one more time.

"And just think, getting use to your new car, driving it around Ford Valley will be a lot easier than driving it in St. Louis traffic."

"Whatever."

He ignored the sarcasm that one word was wrapped in. "I thought we could stop every day for a light lunch, then have a nice dinner when we stop

for the night. Then the next morning, we'll have a nice breakfast before we hit the road again."

She finally looked at him and he hoped that was a concession on her part. But when he glanced over and saw the dirty look, she was giving him, he reconsidered.

"Just how far is it to that dinky little town you're dragging me to totally against my will?"

Well, that definitely was not a concession in any way shape or form. What now? He knew he had to keep his head and for sure not lose his temper, which he was fairly certain she wanted him to do.

"It's a little over fifteen hundred miles to our new house in Ford Valley."

"Why couldn't we fly instead?"

He struggled to keep from laughing. "Two reasons, Carrie. First, we needed to get my car back out there and we also needed to pull that trailer back there with all your things in it."

She sighed dramatically. "Whatever."

He had a feeling he was going to get tired of hearing that one-word answer for everything. But thankfully, there was silence in the car again for another hour before Carrie, who had her head back as if asleep, suddenly leaned forward.

"I need to stop."

Todd looked down at his gas gage and saw that he still had half a tank. He'd wanted to time their stops better, but from the look Carrie was giving him right then, he decided his plans would have to be adjusted.

So, he turned off at the next exit and pulled up to a gas station with a convenience store. Almost before he'd put the car in park, Carrie was out of the car and racing inside, apparently to find the restroom. At least that was where he hoped she was going.

Now, he had a dilemma. Did he trust her not to run off on him? The answer came to him quickly. So, he pulled the car up beside the convenience store and parked. He went inside and found the restrooms quickly enough. He then moved in that direction and pretended to be looking at some magazines until the restroom door opened and Carrie stepped out.

She took one look at him and cried out. “You don’t trust me, do you?”

Busted. What could he say? Well, as a police officer and then detective for twenty-two years, he knew that honesty was the best thing in a situation like this.

So, he looked down at her with a smile on his face. “Can I?”

She glared at him for a long moment, then stomped out of the store. So, Todd followed her and was just able to unlock the door with his key fob before she grabbed the door handle.

Okay, that went well. But he didn’t think he made it any worse. Ha! Who was he kidding? There was no way it could get any worse, could it?

Soon they were back on the road and before long they were pulling into their motel in Oklahoma City.

Todd hadn’t been around Carrie much at all since the divorce three years ago and he was now getting a crash course on her current behavior. He had to remind himself that she was no longer the sweet, loving twelve-year-old she’d been before the divorce. No. Now she was a sixteen-year-old girl who thought she was a woman, and ought to be treated that way. He had absolutely no clue how to deal with her.

He decided that from this point on, he’d just try what he had to do when he was a police recruit going through the police academy. Speak when spoken to. Hopefully that would make the trip go better for both.

* * *

The next morning, they dressed in silence, ate breakfast in silence, and continued their journey in silence. Todd was getting more than a little irritated with his daughter.

He tried to think of their new home out in Ford Valley, Arizona. He’d been there for a month before his ex-wife, Diane, had been killed in a car collision and he’d gone back to get custody of his daughter.

It had taken a lot longer than he’d figured since Diane’s parents fought him for custody, but he’d won in the end. The judge had said a child belonged with her father.

That was when Todd decided to practice the technique that he'd developed over the years dealing with someone he had no control over who was very angry with him.

He'd learned how to channel his mind onto a different topic, but still maintained enough focus on the person or problem at hand.

Ah, that helped him considerably and allowed him to make it through their second day of driving. Carrie had kept to herself most of the day, but he'd made the mistake of letting her find a radio station. But he was successful at keeping the volume low enough that he could barely tolerate it.

Thankfully, the radio stations changed as they drove farther west. It had at least kept the tension between them down to a manageable level. That was only until toward the end of their drive though.

"Are we ever going to get there? We're in Arizona now, aren't we? How much farther can it possibly be? Are we going all the way to California?"

Todd tried to smile at his unhappy daughter. He'd planned the trip with lots of stops to rest and eat three good meals a day, with the goal of making five hundred miles each day.

He had hoped that would make the trip less tiring for Carrie. But that hadn't helped a bit. In fact, it seemed to have made it worse, especially for him.

Now, all he wanted to do was to get to their new home in Ford Valley and hope she liked it.

Ha. Who was he kidding? She wasn't going to like anything about it because she didn't want to like it. Even though they were now in Arizona, they still had four more hours to go to get to their new home. But he knew Carrie did not want to hear that. She hadn't liked the two-lane road they had taken across New Mexico. Therefore, he dreaded the last leg of their trip from Tucson to Ford Valley, which would be another hundred miles of even narrower two-lane roads.

Carrie had been dozing, but when she opened her eyes and looked out the window, she exclaimed, "Look at all those weird trees. They don't have any leaves on them."

Todd suppressed a laugh. He certainly didn't want to set his daughter off again.

"They aren't trees, Carrie. They're cacti and that particular kind is called a saguaro. You'll see lots of them the rest of the way to Ford Valley and all around there too."

He thought for a moment. "In fact, we have half a dozen on our land out there."

She made no comment about that. Instead, she turned her head away from him and leaned back against the headrest, pretending to go to sleep. About the only time Todd had any peace on this trip was when she was sleeping.

Sure, Todd knew it was rough on Carrie to be dragged away from the only home she'd ever known, away from her school and all her friends back in St. Louis. But he'd already moved out here almost three months ago in January. Of course, he'd had no idea that he'd soon have custody of Carrie. So, now he and Carrie were on their way to a new life together in Arizona.

Todd had known it was going to be an uphill battle for his daughter ever to be comfortable with him now, after all the lies Diane and her parents had told Carrie about him. It had gotten to where she had refused to spend any time with him. That had been part of the reason he'd moved to Arizona.

He had hated being so close to his only daughter and not being able to see her. It had literally torn him up.

He'd gone out to Ford Valley in December to visit his old Army buddy that he'd kept in touch with over the years. He'd liked it there so much that Fritz, a realtor in the town, had talked him into staying and even sold him a nice house on a four-acre lot just at the western edge of town.

Now, they were going to Ford Valley, and it was going to be almost as new to him as it was to Carrie. He'd just been in his new house a few weeks when Diane had died. The house wasn't even totally furnished yet. He'd only had an apartment back in St. Louis, so he'd sold what he had back there and came out to Arizona to get the things he needed there.

Carrie really was asleep this time. He could hear her soft snores, which she claimed she never did. But the problem was that even if all she did was complain or argue with him when she wasn't sleeping, she had at least kept

him awake. He caught himself getting sleepy and glanced down at his gas gauge. If he got gas now, he'd have enough to make it the rest of the way to Ford Valley. But mainly, he needed to wake up. Too bad that would also wake up Carrie so she could start complaining again.

Once they were back on the road with some snacks to carry them the rest of the way to their new home, Carrie simply munched on her chips and ignored him with her head turned away, as if looking out her window. Okay, that was better than complaining, wasn't it?

Three hours later, they were approaching Ford Valley on the state highway. They came in on the east side of town, and their new home was on the west side. So, they had to travel across town to get there.

"Oh gross! This town is so dinky. My high school back home was this big."

She looked at him with a big frown on her face. "Just how little is this place?"

Todd was afraid to answer since she wasn't far off. Her former high school had two thousand students.

"There are five thousand people in the town and another two thousand scattered around the county."

"Ha! I knew it. What kind of hick town are you dragging me to anyway?"

She was quiet for a moment, then came the next question that Todd had been expecting.

"Just how small is the high school?"

Having expected this question, Todd had asked Fritz once when they were on the phone while Todd was still back in St. Louis.

"About seven hundred."

"You're kidding? That would mean my class is probably less than two hundred. My P.E. class back home was almost that big."

She huffed and turned her head toward her window again and remained silent as they began passing some of the homes and businesses of Ford Valley.

By then, the only thing Todd wanted to do was get home and crash. The last three days had really taken a toll on him.

Just then, Todd looked in his mirror and saw a police car coming up behind them quickly with its roof lights on. He pulled over to let the car pass but was surprised when it pulled in behind him. So, all Todd could do was to stop the car and put it in park.

* * *

Todd knew the drill so very well. But he'd never been on this end of it before. When the officer approached his window, Todd was ready with his license, registration, and insurance.

He was surprised yet again when he saw a man who had to weigh at least two-fifty and didn't carry it well. Even though he was around six feet tall, the man still had a huge belly. Todd figured that was a total lack of exercise. He'd be surprised if the guy could run a hundred yards.

Once Todd rolled the window down, the man almost growled. "What you doing in my county, Missouri boy? You lost?"

He laughed at what he must have thought was a joke. Todd realized the guy was wearing a Sheriff's Office uniform. Then he looked a little closer and saw four stars on each side of the guy's uniform collar. Uh oh. Fritz had warned him about Sheriff Hank Ford. He'd said the guy was a bully who loved to use his badge to push people around.

Now what? He knew he hadn't been speeding or anything else to warrant being pulled over. Then he remembered the note he'd found in his mailbox the night before he went back to St. Louis.

The guy had called him Missouri boy.

"I just bought a place here in Ford Valley and my daughter and I are now coming here to live."

The big man tipped his cowboy hat back a little so he could glare down at Todd.

"Oh yeah. I heard about you. You're that city cop friend of Fritz Morgan's." The sheriff stepped back a step and leaned down, placing both hands on the window, getting within inches of Todd's face, glaring at him. "So, this is what a fancy St. Louis police lieutenant looks like, huh?"

He laughed and straightened up. “Well, let me tell you, boy. I ain’t impressed. No sir, not a’ tall.”

Todd was still holding his papers but dropped his hand to his side since the sheriff hadn’t asked for them yet.

Ford leaned back down and stuck his face in the window a bit closer this time, causing his cowboy hat to hit the top of the window and tilt back even farther on his head. Todd simply leaned away some more.

“I’m only going to tell you this once boy, I don’t want to be hearing that we don’t do things out here like they do back in St. Louie. I ain’t kicked no fancy lieutenant’s butt lately. So, you can consider yourself warned twice now. ”

He leaned back to his full height, and Todd hoped this little intimidation game was about over.

The sheriff looked the length of Todd’s Explorer. “The next time I see this here vehicle, it had better have Arizona plates on it and you’d better have an Arizona driver license too. Or you’ll be looking at a hefty fine.”

With that, the bully stomped back to his vehicle, which Todd now noticed was a marked Explorer.

Todd waited for the sheriff to peel out and pass them before he pulled back onto the road.

“Wow! That guy sure is a bully. Why didn’t you tell him off?”

“That’s exactly what he wanted me to do, Carrie. He would probably have thrown me in jail. We’ve both got to remember that I’m not a police officer anymore.” He snorted. “But I doubt if that would have meant anything to him, anyway. You heard him mocking me and calling me a fancy cop.”

But Todd knew this wasn’t just a harassment stop by the fat sheriff. No. He’d said it was Todd’s second warning. But about what? He couldn’t wait to talk to Fritz about this incident and tell him about the note too. Maybe Fritz would know what the warning was about.

After that, Todd continued driving through the little town of Ford Valley with no further incident or conversation. But Todd could barely keep his

temper in check. Someone needed to show that bully, as Carrie had called him, how to treat people.

Sure, Todd had known men like Ford back at his old PD, but they rarely messed with him, especially after he made sergeant or especially lieutenant. But he didn't have a badge anymore, and he had a feeling this would only be the first of many times he heard from the good sheriff.

Once they were in the center of Ford Valley, Todd looked up ahead and saw the grocery store. Then he realized that even though Fritz was bringing pizza later, there wasn't anything else in the house to eat. He'd given all the perishable food he had to Fritz when he left for St. Louis in a hurry two months ago.

"We made better time from Tucson than I thought we would, and Fritz said to give him a half hour on the pizza. So, I think I'll stop at the grocery store and get some things to get us through the weekend. Then on Monday after school, we can do a more thorough shopping."

As usual, his daughter keyed in on only one word of all he'd just said.

"Did you say *the* grocery store? Is that dinky little thing the only grocery store in this dinky little town?"

He grinned back at her as he got out of the car and was surprised that she got out, too.

"I'm afraid so. This little town has just about everything you need but usually no more than one of each kind of store."

Todd was surprised that she was going in with him. Then, on top of that, she went down every aisle with him and placed things in the basket quite often. Since most of the items she placed in the basket were staples, he was even more surprised.

"Do you cook Carrie?"

"I'm not cooking for you."

Todd was still reeling from the vehemence she'd placed on those words when she went on.

"Grandma Hardesty told me you'd be making me cook and clean house for you like a slave."

It didn't surprise him that the spiteful old woman would say something like that. But it still hurt.

Todd stopped pushing the cart and stared at his daughter. His daughter? What had happened to the sweet little girl she had been before the divorce? Well, he knew the answer to that one without even thinking. Diane and her parents had happened to Carrie, that's what.

"Wait a minute here, Carrie. I've put up with your silences, your constant complaining and your nasty remarks for the last three days and I'm getting a little tired of it."

She seemed almost shocked at first, then clamped her jaw and glared back at him. He knew he had the advantage, but only for a moment, and he also knew he'd lose it if he didn't finish what he needed to say quickly.

He held up his hand with his index finger, pointing toward the ceiling. "First of all, Carrie, I love you more than anything in this world and I would never mistreat you in any way."

She seemed almost to lean back from the force of his words. But he knew he had to keep going.

"I will never make you do anything you don't want to do unless what you want to do is dangerous or unhealthy for some reason."

He took a steadying breath and forged on. "I have learned how to cook and clean fairly well in the past three years, since you and your mother left me. Therefore, I can do perfectly fine without your help, so I don't expect you to help in any way."

She started to speak, but he held up his hand to stop her. "But if you want to help, I certainly won't turn down the offer."

With that, he began pushing the cart again and placing items in it. It was a long moment before Carrie appeared at his side again, although at a distance. Thankfully, she didn't say another word.

Soon, they finished and headed for the checkout, of which there was only one and there were five carts ahead of them. He smiled to himself. He guessed he needed to get himself acquainted with Dinkyville, as Carrie was now calling Ford Valley.

"Why don't they open up another checkout?"

He smiled down at his naïve daughter once more. “Look around Carrie. There is only one.”

“Oh. Dinkyville for sure.”

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