

The Fight Continues

Chapter One

Todd Mercer looked up at the gray stone building he was about to enter, not for the first time, but for the first time through the front door. They had taken him in the back door twice ... in handcuffs. Of course, both times had been attacks by the previous Sheriff, then the Chief Deputy because they considered Todd to be a threat to their control over the county.

Now, Todd was going through the front door on his first day as sheriff and they couldn't pull that kind of illegal stuff on him anymore.

Wow! He still couldn't wrap his mind around that fact. He'd just moved to Ford Valley, Arizona, five months ago and now he was the Ford County Sheriff.

He slowly made his way up the seven steps (he counted them) to the glass double doors.

He heard a vehicle approach from down main street. It was a pickup, not a patrol vehicle. As it turned in at the gate to the compound, the gate opened.

That was when Todd recognized the driver, Woody Barton, who smiled and waved at Todd. Woody had been a tremendous help in getting Todd elected sheriff in the special election after the former sheriff, Hank Ford, had been murdered.

Even though Chief Deputy and Acting Sheriff Justin Ford had pushed Woody into quitting, one of Todd's first official acts as sheriff was going to be to hire Woody back.

As Todd stood there watching, two of the county's Explorer patrol cars followed Woody into the compound. They must have been on the night shift.

Okay Mercer. It's time to get in there and see what kind of mess Justin Ford has waiting for you.

Justin had been appointed acting sheriff after his cousin Hank Ford had been killed. But now that the election was over, Justin would automatically

revert to his former status as Chief Deputy, that is if he stayed on after losing the election to Todd.

As Todd opened the door and stepped inside the front waiting room, he was glad to see another friendly face. Sergeant Sally Walker was sitting at the desk behind the bulletproof glass. She smiled and waved at him, then he heard the buzzer that opened the door for him to enter the Ford County Sheriff's Office.

Hey. That sure did sound official.

Once inside the long hallway, Todd just stood there looking around. Sally's desk was to his left and behind her was the front office where two clerks or secretaries sat at their desks.

Anyone coming in through the door he had just come through would see nothing of the rest of the SO. Todd knew that beyond the front office was only the sheriff's secretary's office on the right a little way down the hall. There was nothing but closed doors the rest of the way.

The only way for visitors to get into the sheriff's private office was through the secretary's office. And from what Todd had heard, no one got past Wanda Ford Jenkins to see the sheriff unless she allowed them to.

Todd wondered if down the road, they might be able to put another door in the wall down the hall. Maybe.

A sound to his left brought his attention back that way. Sergeant Sally Walker stepped away from her desk and stuck out her hand to Todd, which he quickly shook.

"Welcome Sheriff." She grinned. "It sure is good to finally be able to call you that."

She leaned close and whispered. "We need to talk before you go in there." She motioned with her head toward the sheriff's secretary's office down the hall.

"Okay. Is there someone you can grab to take over the desk?"

She nodded and went past her desk into the front office and came back with a young woman who Todd thought of as average in all ways. She was average height and weight, with light brown hair and brown eyes. She did have a pleasant smile, though.

“Sheriff Mercer, this is Fay Ingram and she’ll be manning the front desk for a while if that’s okay with you.”

Todd nodded. “That’s fine. I’m glad to meet you, Fay.”

She blushed and lowered her eyes as Todd shook her hand and she turned to take a seat at the desk Sally had recently vacated.

Without speaking, Sally motioned for Todd to follow her down the hall to the next door on the right. She opened it and led him into a large conference room. The only furniture was a long table with ten chairs around it.

Once Sally closed the door behind them, she pointed to a closed door on the wall to their far right.

“That’s the back entrance to the sheriff’s private office and your entrance into the conference room.”

They took seats at the near side of the table and Sally blew out a sigh.

“Well, where to start?” She laughed. “Do you remember Acting Sheriff Justin Ford saying once during the campaign that if you won, you might not have much of a sheriff’s office left?”

“Yes. I just figured he and a few others would be quitting.”

She shook her head. “No, as far as I know, no one has quit ... yet. But Justin, Lieutenant Larry Walker, the sergeant and two of the five deputies on the day shift all called in sick this morning.”

Todd whistled. “That means we’re short two deputies and a sergeant on patrol today.”

She nodded with a concerned look on her face.

He smiled. “Well, no problem. I just saw Woody Barton go in the back. So, you will be the sergeant and Woody and I will patrol for the other two deputies.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I am definitely going to love working for you. Five minutes in the door and you’ve already got me out of the office and back on patrol where I belong.”

“I’m sure you knew I wanted to get you away from that desk first thing.” He paused and looked her in the eye. “And as of this moment, you are back

as one of our detectives unofficially, of course, until my first thirty days are up.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Sheriff.”

He had a thought then. “Do I still have a secretary?”

Todd knew that the sheriff’s secretary was Wanda Ford Jenkins, the former sheriff’s older sister. And both Sally and Woody had warned him she could be difficult to work with if she even stayed on.

Sally frowned and shook her head as if in disbelief. “She’s here but I’m not sure how long she’ll be staying.”

Well, maybe he would still have a secretary, at least for today.

Todd turned toward the secretary’s office. “I guess I might as well get this over with. I need to find out what she’s going to do.”

Sally grimaced. “Good idea. I’m going back to the briefing room to get Woody and the other three deputies ready.”

She turned to leave but stopped and looked back at him. “I’m assuming that Woody is back to being a deputy again.”

He smiled. “You assumed correctly. As of right now, I officially hired him back with no break in his seniority.”

“Good.”

She left then and Todd followed her as far as the hallway. He wanted to greet his new secretary through the door from the hallway into her office. He didn’t want to appear as if he was sneaking up on her.

Once in the hallway, he covered the twenty feet to the open doorway into the secretary’s office with the caution of a big game hunter coming up on his prey. Or was he the prey?

He had never met Wanda Ford Jenkins before, but he had seen her at the forum they’d had last Saturday night where Todd and the other candidate for sheriff, Justin Ford, her cousin, had answered questions put to them from the community.

Todd’s backers claimed that Todd’s making Justin look bad that night had won him the election in a county where the Fords ran most everything.

Wanda Jenkins was sitting at her desk, which faced both doorways, the one from the hallway and the one into the sheriff's office.

Todd knew from seeing her up and around that she was of medium height, but she'd apparently been sitting behind a desk too long. She was as wide as her chair. Her dark blond hair touched her shoulders.

Wanda was talking on the phone when he came in, so rather than stand there like a wayward student in front of the principal, he went on into what was now going to be his office.

Todd couldn't believe his eyes. He was shocked, but as he thought about it, he probably shouldn't have been. The room was a mess. It looked like a large group of homeless people had camped out in there for a month. Paper was strewn all around the room, the desk was piled high with what looked like empty file folders and wadded up papers. To top it all off, there were no curtains on the two rather large windows to his right.

He couldn't help himself. He began laughing and, for a moment, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop.

He hadn't been sure how he was going to get his new secretary's attention, but his laughter must have done the trick. He turned to see her in the doorway between their offices with a puzzled look on her face.

He looked her in the eye and pointed at a chair that was in front of his desk. He quickly swiped the trash out of it first.

"Would you please have a seat, Mrs. Jenkins?"

Still with a shocked look on her face, she moved as if in a trance and perched on the edge of the chair.

Todd went around the desk and first had to remove the trash in his desk chair, then he swiped all the empty folders and papers off his desktop.

Finally, he sat down and leaned across the desk to look closely at his secretary.

She opened her mouth as if to speak, but Todd beat her to it.

"Mrs. Jenkins. I have two questions for you right now. Everything else can wait until later since I'm going to be on patrol on my first day as sheriff of Ford County."

She didn't move or make a sound, so he went on. "Are you going to stay on as my secretary or are you going to quit?"

She didn't answer right away, but Todd, being an experienced interviewer, was prepared to wait her out. After all, twenty-two years as a police officer, detective, sergeant, and then lieutenant in St. Louis had prepared him for this very moment.

Finally, she nodded. "Yes."

That was good. She didn't elaborate, and that was just fine with Todd. He thought he was seeing what he needed to see in her expression, especially her eyes.

"Okay. Second question. "Are you going to work with me or are you going to work against me?"

This time she took so long to answer, Todd prompted her just a little.

"As you know, the county statutes forbid a new sheriff from making any personnel changes with current staff for thirty days. So, if you are planning to stay on longer than that, you will cooperate with me and be the secretary that I need."

She continued her silence.

"Do I make myself clear Mrs. Jenkins."

She still didn't answer, but then Todd noticed tears forming and trickling down her cheeks.

Finally, she spoke. "I dearly loved my brother, even though he wasn't always the nicest person to be around. And it hurts me to see you sitting behind his desk."

Again, with all Todd's years of reading people, whether it be criminals, witnesses, or victims, he thought he saw something there that she probably hadn't wanted him to see. But what was it?

Then he saw it. She was trembling. What? From all he'd heard about her, she could turn the toughest deputy into a trembling little boy when she started in on him.

She was afraid. But the question was, what was she afraid of? Certainly not him.

“I’m sure you know Justin and Dudley want me to fight you, but they don’t know how badly I need this job.”

Todd moved in for the clincher. “Then does that mean you will be the secretary I need you to be?”

With tears still streaking down her face, she nodded. “Yes.”

Todd stood then. “Well, if there’s nothing else, I need to get out on patrol.”

She stood then, and he followed her back through her office. She returned to her desk and Todd went out into the hallway.

Sally was there waiting for him. She looked at him and frowned. “You don’t look like you just fought with the she-tiger.”

Todd shook his head and as they began making their way back to the rear of the building, he grinned at her. “I think she may not only stay but she might just cooperate with me.”

Sally stopped and stared at him. “You’re kidding?”

He shook his head. “Nope. She apparently needs this job and knows she couldn’t get an equivalent job anywhere else in Ford Valley.”

They stopped in the equipment room. She picked up two portable radios and handed him one. Then she took a box off the shelf, took an armored vest out of it, and handed it to him.

Sally turned to Todd. “Are you going to drive Hank’s smooth-top marked unit that has Sheriff on the rear quarter panels?”

Todd shook his head. “No, for two reasons and neither one of them has anything to do with Hank being killed in it.”

“They totally replaced the front seat and the cage.”

“That’s okay, but the first reason is that I have an Explorer for my POV, and I don’t want one for my patrol vehicle. Second, I want something I can go almost anywhere in, and it needs to be big enough to carry things.”

Sally laughed. “Then we have the perfect vehicle for you. It’s still marked, but it’s a smooth top and it doesn’t have Sheriff written on it anywhere.”

He smiled back at her. “Good. I want to blend in not only in the vehicle I drive but I don’t plan on wearing my uniform unless absolutely necessary.”

He could tell by her wide smile and bright eyes that she liked what he'd just said.

She pulled a set of keys off the pegboard and led the way to the door that opened into the compound behind the office.

Once they were outside, they both looked over at the spot reserved for the sheriff's vehicle. Hank's old car was sitting there, but all four tires were flat.

They walked around it, and Todd turned to Sally. "It looks like they just let the air out of the tires. I don't see any damage."

They both laughed, and Sally shook her head. "How juvenile. That's just like Justin Ford and my ex."

Todd had almost forgotten that Sally's ex-husband was one of the two SO lieutenants and Justin's buddy.

Todd laughed. "You should see what they did to my office. By the way, could you make sure Wanda gets someone in there to clean it up a little?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Also, could you get her to call whoever services our vehicles and get them to air the tires and check the car for any other damage?"

He thought for a moment. "And see if they can get the sheriff stickers off too."

She laughed again. "Will do, Sheriff."

* * *

Todd looked around the compound, then back at Sally. "Okay, Sally, where is this vehicle you think is so perfect for me?"

She pointed toward the far corner of the lot where a marked pickup sat."

They made their way over to the pickup, which looked to be new.

"Why isn't it being used?"

Sally laughed. "It just came in last week and they ordered it to be used for evidence collection and carrying anything else that wouldn't fit in a patrol car."

As he walked around the truck, Todd couldn't believe it. Not only was it a 4x4, but it had a camper shell on the bed with a door that locked. And the back seat was a cage for prisoners like most regular patrol vehicles.

He turned to Sally with a grin. "Sold. This is now my vehicle. But don't worry, we can still use it for the purposes they purchased it for."

Sally handed him the keys.

As they stood there looking at the pickup, Todd noticed Woody Barton limping across the lot toward them. Woody had suffered a broken leg and arm when he'd been run off the road last month on his personal motorcycle.

Woody was walking with a limp because of the short walking cast on his right leg. He also had a cast from wrist to elbow on his right arm. As Woody had said it was a good thing he was left-handed.

There was another deputy with Woody and Todd recognized him as the one who had been with Woody the morning the former sheriff had been shot right out in front of Todd's long driveway. Justin Ford had ordered the two deputies to handcuff Todd and take him in to the SO.

When they reached Todd and Sally, Woody called out, "Good morning, Sheriff Mercer. This is Ernie Fields."

Todd shook hands with the deputy who had a hesitant look on his face.

The poor guy almost stuttered. "I hope you won't hold it against me what I was ordered to do the morning Sheriff Ford was killed, Sir."

Todd looked into the young man's eyes and was sure he saw sincerity. That was good. He hoped there would be more like him.

"That's okay Deputy Fields. We're all going to start new this morning."

He could see the relief all over Fields' face.

Todd turned to Sally. "Are the other two deputies already out on patrol?"

"Yes, Sir. I sent Dave Connors and Wally Durham on out so there'd be someone out there."

"That's good, Sergeant. Then let's all join them out there on patrol."

Todd turned to Woody. "Since your right foot is in a cast, you're riding with me." He laughed. "I know I just saw you driving your personal truck using your left foot, but I doubt if the county would be all that happy if you do that in one of their vehicles."

They all laughed as Sally and Fields went to their vehicles. Todd unlocked the doors of the pickup with his fob and climbed in.

Once settled behind the steering wheel, Todd took a few minutes to familiarize himself with everything in there. The front had bucket seats with the instrument console in between them. There was a mount for the computer but no computer.

He turned to Woody, who had seen where he was looking. “Your computer should be in the equipment room, Sir. Do you want me to go get it?”

Todd shook his head. “No, I think I’ll have quite enough new stuff to learn for now. We can pick it up later. I’ll need to come back here in a couple of hours to see how things are going.”

With that, Todd started the engine and, out of habit, reached for the mic, then stopped and looked at Woody. “What’s my call-sign?”

Woody grinned and shook his head. “You’re not going to believe this but it’s ‘County 1.’”

Todd laughed. “That’s simple and easy to remember.”

Just as Todd was putting two and two together, Woody explained it to him.

“Since there are only two police agencies in the county, we have one dispatch office that handles both on the same frequency.”

Todd laughed. “Let me guess. The PD Chief is ‘City 1.’”

“You got it.”

Todd was thoroughly surprised. “Having one dispatch could be really great if it works.”

Woody nodded. “Oh, it works all right. It’s great to know that if none of our deputies are available when we need backup, that dispatch will automatically send someone from the PD if they’re available.”

Todd shook his head. “I can’t believe Hank and Dudley Ford came up with that idea.”

Woody laughed and shook his head. “They didn’t. It was in force long before those two became sheriff and chief.”

“Well, anyway, I like it.” Then he thought of something else. “What’s your call-sign?”

“County 124.”

Todd keyed the mic. “County 1 and County 124 leaving the 103 to patrol.”

“10-4 County 1, 0843.”

They drove out of town to the north because Todd wanted to see how far the county went up into the mountains past the lake he’d been to before.”

At ten o’clock, they were east of town on the state highway a few miles and Todd turned the truck back toward town.

Just then, Todd’s cellphone rang. He looked down and saw that it was Trudy Roberts calling. Trudy was the high school guidance counselor and a member of their committee to take the power away from the Fords.

It was rather ironic since Trudy was the daughter of Mayor Jasper Ford and the twin sister of Justin Ford. But she wasn’t like any of them. She wanted things to be done right in her hometown.

Todd pulled to the side of the road before answering the call.

When he did, he couldn’t hear Trudy at first. It sounded like she was in a zoo. There were loud shrieks and shouting so loud he could barely hear her, but when he did, he froze.

“Todd, you’ve got to come over here right away. I’m afraid Gillian’s going to hurt Olive.”

Olive, a short, thin woman, was the high school principal, and Gillian was a teacher there. But the history between the two women was rather volatile.

Olive had dated Justin Ford before he married Gillian, and Gillian seemed to hold that against Olive.

Trudy disconnected before Todd could answer, but he quickly radioed dispatch and told her he was going to the high school, but he didn’t say why. He let her think it was a routine stop on their patrol.

He didn’t ask for backup because of the personal nature of this call. He wanted to keep a lid on it if he could. He had Woody with him and together, they should be able to handle one average size woman.

They were only a couple of miles away on the same side of town as the high school. So, he didn't run code and was there quick enough. Again, he didn't want to attract attention to himself or whatever was going on at the high school.

On the way there, he told Woody what Trudy had told him on the phone.

Woody snorted. "That Gillian Ford is one of the hottest tempered women I've ever been around." He laughed. "In my book, she and Justin deserve each other."

When they arrived, he parked in the circle in front of the building. Since it was mid-morning, he shouldn't get in the way of any busses or parents dropping off or picking up students.

He rushed into the building, with Woody limping along behind him. He was pleased that he wasn't hearing what he'd heard on the phone. But as he approached the closed office door, he could hear it again, only it was muffled now.

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