

## **Chapter One**

Todd Mercer was tired. As he stood in front of his bathroom mirror after shaving, he looked at his eyes. They looked like he'd been awake most of the night which he had been.

There'd been another wreck out on the state highway last night with two fatalities. No one ever got used to pulling up on a scene where two vehicles collided while doing at least sixty-five miles per hour. It was never pretty.

He thought he'd seen a lot when he'd been with the St. Louis PD, but almost all the high-speed crashes like this were on the interstates around the city and the state highway patrol handled them almost exclusively.

Sure, DPS handled the investigations on any collision on the state highway, but out here in sparsely populated southwestern Arizona, they were few and scattered far apart. Not only that, but they didn't have any troopers on duty from eleven pm to seven am. And most of the collisions happened in that timeframe.

Therefore, Todd's deputies were always the first on the scene and, as sheriff, he had made it a personal policy to always go to those scenes if possible. He felt it helped build rapport with his deputies.

As they always did, his eyes went next to the red puckered scar on his left shoulder. That had been because of a bullet he'd caught even before he'd become sheriff of Ford County.

In just a few months, Todd had been shot at four times and hit once. Even his time at the big city PD didn't come close to matching that. He had learned the hard way that Ford County wasn't the friendliest place to live, especially if your name wasn't Ford. But he and his committee were going to change all that.

They got him elected sheriff after all, and even when he was running against a Ford.

Well, enough of that gloomy stuff. He needed to get dressed and head in to the SO. He knew he had a busy day ahead of him since it was Monday.

He always started his day at seven to review the reports from all three shifts over the weekend. Then he would meet with his two lieutenants, Sally Walker, and Gary Ford, at eight.

After that, he planned to do a little patrolling. That was another policy of his that he had begun his first day as sheriff. He'd won the special election to replace Sheriff Hank Ford, who had been murdered back in March.

Wow, it was the middle of August now and it seemed like a lot longer than five months since he'd brought his sixteen-year-old daughter Carrie out here to live with him. And it was less than two weeks later when Hank had been shot right out in front of Todd's property.

Oh well, enough of that reminiscing. He needed to get going and get to his office.

When he emerged from his bedroom and headed toward the kitchen, he was surprised to see Carrie sitting at the kitchen counter eating a bowl of cereal.

At the look of surprise that must have been on his face, Carrie laughed. "You forgot I'm going to Tucson with Grandma and Grandpa today. There're lots of things I need for school. Remember, it starts Wednesday."

He grinned at her. "Sorry, I did forget. But I remember now. It sure seems like this summer went by fast."

She giggled. "It sure did, and Grandma and Grandpa moving out here and buying a house with a pool sure helped."

He laughed with her and marveled at how his wonderful, sweet daughter was so pleasant to be around now. But that wasn't the case when he'd first brought her out here. She'd been mad at the world, and especially at him.

He knew his parents moving out here was the last thing that brought Carrie around. And he was thankful for that.

"Maybe, if you're good, I just might have a pool put in here."

When she brightened, he held up a hand. "But it doesn't pay to do it now. It'll probably be better to do it next April or May."

With that, Todd grabbed a quick breakfast, said goodbye to Carrie, and waved at his parents when they came to pick her up.

He was glad he had his parents there now, especially for things like this shopping trip. He could never seem to find the time for those things.

When Todd entered the SO from the compound through the back entrance, he made his way down the long hallway to his secretary's office. Even though he had a door directly into his private office, he always went through Wanda's office when he first arrived each weekday.

He greeted Wanda and hesitated a moment to make sure she had nothing for him before going on through the connecting door to his office.

Wanda Jenkins had proven to be a great secretary for Todd, even though she was the older sister of the former sheriff who had tried to run Todd out of town. She was so efficient that whenever he asked her for something, she usually already had it ready for him.

It was a good thing she'd stayed on and even helped him. He had enough trouble with another of her brothers, Dudley Ford, who was the police chief of Ford Valley. Dudley had taken up the slack when his older brother had been killed. Now, along with their cousin, Justin Ford, they were doing their best to make Todd's life miserable.

Todd spent the next hour going through all the reports from the weekend and was ready for his lieutenants when they came in for their daily briefing.

Todd took a good look at his two lieutenants, Sally Walker, and Gary Ford, as they came in through his new door that came straight into his office from the hallway.

Sally Walker had been a detective sergeant under the sheriff before Hank Ford was elected sheriff three years ago. But Hank didn't believe in women in law enforcement and had relegated Sally to being essentially the desk sergeant.

But Todd had changed all that on his first day in office. After the chief deputy and the other lieutenant quit because Todd was elected, he promoted Sally to lieutenant and returned her to detective status.

The ironic part of all that was that she was replacing her ex-husband, Larry Walker, in that position.

She was a very tall woman at five eleven and thin but muscular. He'd learned that she'd been quite the gymnast in her teen years and now coached the local high school gymnastics team. Her long blond hair was tied up in a ponytail as usual.

Gary Ford was an inch taller than Sally, with brown receding hair and wire-framed glasses over his brown eyes.

Todd was well pleased with his two lieutenants.

Just as they were getting ready to start their meeting at the round table in the far corner of Todd's rather large office, his desk phone rang.

He stepped over to his desk and answered the intercom. It was Wanda telling him the Assistant Pima County Attorney was on the line for him.

When he finished that call, he walked over to the table to rejoin his lieutenants in a daze.

They both gave him questioning looks and Sally spoke up. "What is it, Sheriff? Was it bad news?"

Todd sat down before he answered. "That was the Assistant Pima County Attorney who's trying Douglas' case."

Sally frowned. "Is his trial finally going to start?"

Todd shook his head. "It doesn't look like it."

She sighed. "I don't know why that joker's even taking this to trial. He confessed to shooting up your duty vehicle in front of several witnesses. What could he hope to achieve with a trial?"

Todd shook his head again. "That's not it this time, Sally."

He looked at Lieutenant Gary Ford. "Gary, I don't think you're going to like what Douglas is claiming now."

Gary shook his head. "If it's about one of my second cousins, nothing will surprise me or even upset me all that much."

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Todd hid a smile at Gary's reaction. His lieutenant had made no secret about the fact that he grew up on a ranch outside Bitter Creek, the only other

town in Ford County. Thus, Gary had been separated from all the things that the rest of the Fords were doing in Ford Valley.

But he hadn't been totally isolated from his second cousins. No, he'd had to go to school with them after sixth grade and had been picked on almost as much as the non-Fords had been.

So, Todd wasn't surprised at Gary's reaction. Of all the Fords in Ford County, he'd only run across two who wanted nothing to do with the corrupt city and county governments perpetrated by the rest of the Fords. Gary was one of them and Trudy Roberts was the other and she just happened to be the daughter of the Ford Valley Mayor Jasper Ford.

Finally, Todd looked back and forth at the two questioning looks he was getting.

"Okay. Here it is. Douglas is now claiming that his and Dudley's shooting of Baker didn't happen the way they told it back then."

They both started to speak at once and they were both saying the same thing.

He laughed. "Yeah. We didn't believe them back then, so this doesn't come as a surprise. But what does come as a surprise is that Douglas is claiming that Dudley shot Baker first and that Baker was unarmed."

Gary spoke up first this time. "But there was a gun near his hand, and it had been fired."

Todd nodded. "That's right, but Douglas said that Dudley had a gun with the serial number filed off for just such occasions. Then he merely put the gun in Baker's hand and fired it."

Sally hit the table with her fist. "That skunk. I sure didn't believe the story they told back then, but I really didn't expect it to have happened that way."

Sally and Gary were both talking at the same time again. Todd couldn't make out what either of them was saying.

He held up both hands this time. "Hang on, you two. The bad part is still coming."

That stopped them both, and they looked at him expectantly.

“The county attorney said there was not much any of us could do with Douglas’ confession since it would boil down to his word against Dudley’s.”

They started talking again, but he stopped them with a hand in the air again. “And since Douglas is already a confessed felon, no one would believe him, anyway.”

Gary snorted. “I believe him.”

“Me too.”

Todd laughed at their expressions when they’d said that.

“Okay, here’s how I think we should handle this new development.” He could tell he had their attention now. “I don’t think we should say anything to anybody about it and not comment on it either way if someone says something to us about it.”

The other two looked at each other and nodded, then turned back to him and, as usual, Sally spoke for them both.

She blew out a noisy sigh. “I hate to think about it, but I know you’re probably right. Without proof, we couldn’t do anything, anyway.”

She chuckled. “As you’re always saying, that’s not a battle we need to fight right now.”

“You’re right.”

Gary seemed about to say something. He leaned forward in his chair but then sat back, so Todd prompted him. “Go ahead Gary. You know you can say anything in one of these meetings and it won’t leave the room.”

Gary still seemed hesitant, but finally started. “Well, I think this gives us enough information to go forward with our goal of getting Dudley out as police chief.”

Todd waited to see if he would go on, but when Gary didn’t, he smiled at him. “That’s exactly what I was thinking, Gary. Now, we know just exactly how far Dudley Ford will go to keep all his little secrets from becoming public.”

Sally looked puzzled. “What do you mean, Sheriff?”

“Okay. Remember what I said a few months ago about what Warren, Fritz, and I thought after Hank was killed? Then Dudley and Douglas killed Baker, the man who supposedly killed Hank.”

She nodded, and he continued. “So, to me, this confirms the suspicion that Hank and Dudley were in on something illegal with Baker, and they began getting rid of each other.”

Gary snorted again. “Well, Sheriff, I won’t skirt around it. To me, it looks like Baker may have killed Hank before Hank or Dudley one could kill him.”

Sally almost leaped out of her chair. “Yes, then Dudley got rid of Baker before he could go after Dudley.”

Todd leaned back in his chair, enjoying the fact that they all three seemed to be on the same wavelength so much of the time. It was great.

“Okay. I agree with both of you. But right now, there’s not much we can do about it but watch both Dudley and his cousin and lieutenant Justin.”

Sally was looking at her fists on the table, then back up at Todd. “Isn’t there anything DPS can do about it?”

Todd shook his head. “Not unless I officially turn the investigation over to them and to do that, we’d have to open it again.” He shook his head. “That would draw too much attention to things we don’t want out there just yet.”

Sally grimaced. “Yeah, you’re probably right. It’s best if we just keep watching for something to come up.”

After that, his lieutenants left, and Todd looked over some reports Sally and Gary had left with him.

When he finished those, he decided to go to the bank. Carrie’s other grandparents had bought her a car back in March and the title had finally made its rounds from Missouri to Arizona and to them. So, he was going to place it in their safe-deposit box for safekeeping.

He was glad that the statewide bank had just opened a branch in Ford Valley. Before, there had only been one bank, and it was owned by the Fords.

When Todd pulled out of the compound and onto Main Street, heading west toward the bank, he chuckled. A PD car pulled in behind him and followed him from about fifty yards back, just far enough that Todd couldn't tell who was driving.

This had started his first day as sheriff. Sometimes it was Dudley or Justin Ford, but most of the time lately, it was one of their officers.

When he pulled into the bank parking lot, the PD car parked across the street at a pizza restaurant.

Once inside the bank, Todd had to wait about ten minutes since there were three people ahead of him. He laughed when he looked out the window and saw the PD car turn around and head toward downtown. He must have been taking too long for the guy.

Finally, Todd was in the vault with his box. After he placed the title in the box and closed it, he walked to the doorway where the bank employee had been standing while waiting for him to finish. She wasn't there.

He was about to step out of the room to look for her when he heard a man's loud voice shouting. "Everybody down on the floor and don't move."

Todd stepped back into the vault to keep from being seen. Then he heard the same voice yelling at the tellers to each dump their cash drawers into a bag and hand them to him.

Todd peeked out the open door and saw that there were two robbers. The one yelling was up by the tellers, and the other one was back by the door. They both had assault rifles they kept waving around.

Todd knew his Glock would be no match against two ARs unless he could surprise one and shoot faster than the other one.

He assessed the situation for damage control. The robber by the door had no bystanders anywhere near him, but the one by the tellers had several people on the floor behind him.

Should he wait for them to leave the bank, then follow them? No, that would definitely be his Glock against two ARs.

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Just as Todd looked at the gunman by the door, he saw a PD car pass by, probably his tail from before, coming back to follow him when he left the bank. How could he alert the officer out there without drawing attention to himself?

He quickly stepped back to the far corner of the vault and called 911. Keeping his voice as low as he could and still be heard, he told her what was going on and that there was a PD car outside now.

When he disconnected, he stepped back to the doorway. Good. Both gunmen were still facing the back of the bank. He made his decision then.

Finally, the gunman who'd been yelling at the tellers turned and started for the door just as the other one opened the door and stepped out. Todd ran from his position, keeping his field of fire clear behind the gunman still inside the bank.

“Police! Drop your weapon and hands on your head!”

The guy looked at Todd and swung his rifle to point it at Todd. He quickly made sure his field of fire was still clear and fired off two shots at the gunman, who immediately fell.

Then, as the other gunman turned to come back into the bank, the PD officer outside started yelling at him and the gunman turned and fired a burst at the officer who was on the other side of his car which was directly in front of the bank.

Todd ran to the down gunman. He looked at least unconscious, so Todd kicked the rifle away, then ran toward the door. The gunman outside and the officer were firing quite a few rounds at each other. Some of the officer's shots were hitting the glass in the door.

Todd turned toward the people inside the bank and yelled. “I'm Sheriff Mercer. Everyone stay on the floor until this is over.”

What could he do now? He couldn't shoot through the door to get the gunman, who was in a crouched position on the sidewalk in front of the door.

The officer outside went down like he'd been hit, and the gunman out there leaped to his feet and began running to the left. Todd ran out the door and yelled at him.

“Police! Stop and put your hands on your head!”

The robber turned and pointed his rifle at Todd, so he fired off two more shots and that guy went down. Todd ran over and kicked his weapon away, then checked on him. He was awake and yelling at Todd.

Just then, an ambulance came screeching to a stop behind the police car. They stayed in their vehicle until Todd yelled. “It’s all clear. I’ve got at least two wounded. Check the officer over there first.”

As Todd was rushing over to check on the officer, PD and SO cars began arriving, filling up the street in front of the bank.

Dudley and Justin Ford both came running too and arrived by the down officer at the same time Todd did.

While Justin was checking on the officer, Dudley began yelling at Todd about placing his officer in danger by acting so inappropriately and causing him to get shot.

Todd just shook his head and began walking toward his patrol vehicle, which was a marked 4x4 truck with a smooth top. Dudley followed him and kept yelling at him, but Todd ignored him until he made it to his truck and sat in the driver’s seat with the door still open.

Thankfully, Todd’s two lieutenants and Sergeant Woody Barton had arrived at the truck at the same time as Dudley.

Todd was proud of them all. They formed a semi-circle around Todd, effectively keeping Dudley away from him. But Dudley kept yelling at Todd, anyway.

“You’re in my jurisdiction now, Mercer. I want your weapon. Now!”

Just then, the bank manager approached them cautiously and Todd smiled at him while waving him on over.

Todd didn’t know the man very well since he was from Tucson and had moved to Ford Valley to be the manager at the new branch.

“Sheriff, I’m Edward Blackburn, the bank branch manager. I’ve already called the FBI. It’s part of our standard operating procedures. They’re coming from Tucson in a helicopter and should be here in thirty minutes.”

“Thank you, Mr. Blackburn. Are all your employees and customers, okay?”

“Yes, Sir, they are, thanks to your quick action.”

With that, Blackburn turned and went back toward the front door.

Dudley had been quiet while the bank manager had been talking, but now, he started again. “You may have saved those people inside, but you got one of my officers shot in the process.”

Todd laughed. “Come on Chief. You’re going to have to come up with a better one than that. Dispatch, which I called, apparently alerted your officer, and he was in the perfect position to control the situation. Instead of laying the blame on anyone, you should be praising your officer for following procedure perfectly.”

Dudley waved a hand in the air. “I’ll deal with you later, Mercer. I’ve got to go check on my officer.”

Todd couldn’t help himself. “Which is what you should have done the moment you arrived on the scene rather than harassing me.”

Todd couldn’t hear all that Dudley said as he walked away, but he was sure most of it was profanity.

Finally, Sally got right in Todd’s face. “Are you sure you’re all right, Sheriff?”

Todd laughed. “I’m sure, Sally. Neither of the gunmen got off a shot at me before I shot them.”

“What are you going to do now?”

He grinned at Sally. “I’m going to sit right here and try to relax until the Feds get here.” He laughed then. “I would imagine the fireworks will begin again when they tell Dudley they’re taking over the crime scene and the case.”

All three of the others laughed, and Sally got a serious look on her face quickly. “Don’t you think the three of us should stay here with you just in case Dudley tries something, anyway?”

Todd looked up at the three concerned faces. “Okay, Sally, you and Gary stay.” He turned to Sergeant Barton. “You need to find out where the FBI copter is planning to land and bring them back here.”

After Woody left, Todd, Gary, and Sally were virtually silent until Woody came back with the two FBI agents. They ignored Dudley, who tried

to stop them and talk to them. Instead, they came straight over to Todd's truck as Gary and Sally stepped aside.

Todd almost laughed. Back in St. Louis, he and his detectives had always joked about how most FBI agents fit a certain description. Well, these two fit it to a 'T'. They were both about six feet tall and around one-hundred-eighty pounds with brown hair and eyes. Of course, both haircuts were short. The only difference was that one was in his early forties and the other one in his early thirties.

The older one stepped up to Todd, who slid out of his truck to shake the man's hand.

"Sheriff Mercer, I presume?"

Todd nodded. "That's right."

"Good, I'm Special Agent Everett Grimes and this is Special Agent Ross Adams."

Todd shook the other agent's hand.

"I've heard good things about you from DPS, Sheriff. And I think it's about time this county started joining the rest of the state with proper law enforcement."

Todd smiled. "Well, Sir, we've only made a slight dent in things around here."

"Yes, but that's definitely a start."

He pointed at Todd's Glock now resting in its holster at his hip. "I assume that is the weapon you used here today, Sheriff."

"That's right."

Todd took his Glock out of its holster by the tip of the grip and handed it to the agent with the muzzle pointing down at the ground.

"Thank you, Sheriff. Is there somewhere close that you and I can talk where it's a little more private?"

"Sure. My office is about a mile away. Shall we go there?"

Grimes turned to his fellow agent. "Ross, you can start the investigation here while I'm gone."

Todd wasn't too surprised when Grimes then rounded his truck and climbed in the passenger side.

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