

## ***Final Justice!***

### **Chapter One**

Trudy Roberts sat at her desk, pondering her life as it was right then.

She looked around the office that had been hers ever since she'd become the Ford Valley High School guidance counselor ten years ago. It had changed very little over the years. There were just a few more photos and a couple more diplomas gracing her walls.

But right then, her mind was on last Friday night. Had she dreamed it or had Fritz Morgan, the realtor, and the new mayor, proposed to her? And she had turned him down. How embarrassing, especially for him!

She should have seen it coming, but she'd been enjoying what she'd thought was just casual dating. Apparently, it was more than that to Fritz. Oops!

She twisted some of her shoulder-length blond hair as she thought about her answer. Fritz had really been nice about it though. He even said he wasn't surprised.

As a result, they'd agreed to stop dating but continue to be friends. She sure hoped they could do that.

Ha! That was easier said than done. She had only seen Fritz from a distance in church yesterday. He sat in a different section from where she sat with their friends. She didn't blame him since he probably didn't want to have to answer questions about him and her.

Thankfully, no one said a word to either one of them. They probably thought she and Fritz had a fight.

She smiled when she remembered how Fritz's little five-year-old son, Cody, kept giving her looks from across the wide sanctuary. It was probably difficult for him to understand why they weren't sitting next to Trudy.

Hopefully, they'd soon be comfortable around each other again.

Just then, her best friend and principal, Olive Perkins, popped her bright red head into Trudy's open doorway. She and Olive had been best friends

since they both started teaching at the high school almost twenty years ago. Olive had the fair, freckled complexion to go along with her hair.

Olive had a grin on her face and shook her head. "That's just about what I expected to see."

Trudy gave her a puzzled look.

Olive came in and pulled a chair closer to Trudy.

Both Trudy and Olive kept their desks facing the wall with the open area toward the door. They believed that not having a desk between them and their visitors showed they cared about them.

"Okay, girl, give."

Trudy shook her head. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to give, Olive."

Olive laughed. "Trudy Roberts, you know very well what I mean. You've been moping around here all morning. And I want to know why?"

Trudy thought about trying to stall Olive some more, but the look in her friend's eye changed her mind.

"I haven't talked to you since you left here Friday afternoon. What happened to you since then?"

Trudy blew out a sigh. "Okay, Olive. Fritz proposed to me last Friday night."

"What?"

Trudy looked closely into Olive's eyes. Was that disappointment she saw there? Why?

Trudy held up a hand when Olive opened her mouth. "I turned him down."

"You did! But I thought..."

Trudy frowned. "So did I, but I realized I don't love Fritz. At least not that way."

Olive opened her mouth to speak, but Trudy held up a hand again. "I really like him and admire him a lot, but that isn't enough."

Olive glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Hold that thought, Trudy. It's lunchtime, so let's go down to Nancy's Diner for lunch. We can talk there with no interruptions."

Trudy nodded. "Sure. Let's go."

They took Trudy's much larger car as they usually did when they went anywhere together. She was eight inches taller than Olive. Therefore, Olive's little Mini Cooper convertible just wasn't comfortable for Trudy.

Ten minutes later, they were in a booth at the diner.

Trudy knew Olive wanted her to tell more, but there was really no more to tell.

Olive placed her palms on the table, leaned toward Trudy, and glared at her. "Tell me why it took you six months to know he wasn't the right one for you? And that you waited until he got up enough nerve to ask you to marry him?"

Trudy nodded. "Yes, Olive, I'm afraid that's it exactly."

Olive leaned back and crossed her arms with a thoughtful look on her face.

"Okay Trudy, I want to tell you a story now."

Trudy nodded.

"Remember on election night when we were all celebrating our victories, especially Fritz beating your dad for mayor?"

Trudy laughed softly. "How could I forget? My dad hasn't spoken to me since I told him I voted for Fritz."

They both laughed, a little too loud. They looked around, but no one seemed to have noticed. The usual lunchtime noise in the diner covered their laughter.

Olive nodded and continued, "After Warren announced that he and Sally Walker were getting married, I must have given Todd a look that made him think I wanted that, too."

Trudy leaned forward to keep Olive from having to talk loud enough to be overheard. They sure didn't want anyone to overhear this conversation.

"Todd looked a little uncomfortable, then he said, 'Maybe someday, not too far down the road.'"

Trudy leaned back hard against her seat with mixed emotions flying around in her mind all at once.

This time, Olive held up a hand. "But now I think Todd and I have come to an understanding."

Trudy was hoping Olive was about to say what she really wanted to hear. Trudy was attracted to Todd Mercer when he'd come to town over a year ago and that attraction had only grown since.

Trudy thought she'd kept her feelings for Todd to herself, but apparently Olive had noticed. Trudy suddenly wondered if anyone else had.

However there had been no sign that anyone else knew. But what if Todd knew?

Oh my!

\* \* \*

Sheriff Todd Mercer had spent the morning working his way through the pile of weekend reports, and he was finally finished. It was a good thing too, since he was getting mighty tired of them. There had been dozens of them. Every time he got buried in paperwork, he remembered one of the reasons why he had retired from the St. Louis PD.

As a homicide detective lieutenant, he'd had lots of paperwork. But now, as sheriff of Ford County, Arizona, he was sure he had twice as much.

He looked at the clock and was surprised to see that it was one o'clock. Where had lunch gone? That was when he realized he was hungry.

Just as he was starting to think about what to do about lunch, his cell phone rang. It was Fritz, his long-time best friend.

"Hey Buddy. I missed lunch and I'm hungry. How about you?"

Todd laughed. Fritz seldom spent time with greetings, and he was always hungry.

"I don't know how it happened, Fritz, but I skipped lunch, too."

"Great. I'm coming right over with a pizza."

With that, Fritz disconnected, and Todd laughed. That was Fritz all right, always on the move.

Okay! What was that all about? Todd knew Fritz better than anyone. After all, they'd been best friends for twenty-five years, ever since they'd been in the Army together. So, Todd knew that Fritz had an ulterior motive for coming over this way. He usually did.

Fifteen minutes later, as Fritz came in through Todd's office door with a pizza box in his hands, Todd realized he was glad to have this time to talk with Fritz. They hadn't talked for almost a week.

Fritz had bright red hair and was a couple of inches taller than Todd's six two.

As was usually the case, Todd was all set to ask Fritz why he was so fired up to talk when Fritz beat him to it.

"I need to talk to you, but you can't say anything to anybody. Okay? Especially Trudy and Olive."

Todd laughed. "Sure, you know better than to ask, but why the melodrama?"

Fritz shook his head. "No, it's nothing like that. At least I don't think it is."

Todd nodded. "Okay, so what is it?"

Fritz clamped his teeth together, then frowned. "Well, it's not just one thing."

Todd didn't want to prompt Fritz again, so he waited him out.

"Well, I've been hearing rumors that the Fords are going to keep me from being sworn in as mayor tomorrow."

Todd and Fritz had been working with some others to take control of the county away from the Ford family, especially Sherman and Jasper. The two brothers were the latest in the long line of Fords who had run the county for almost a hundred years.

After they each took a slice of pizza, Todd asked the blessing, and they started eating.

Todd swallowed his first bite, then looked at Fritz. "Okay, Fritz. I know you too well. You didn't just want to have lunch together. And we expected something from the Fords about your election. So, what else is on your mind?"

Fritz squirmed a little in his seat and that set off alarms in Todd's mind. Fritz was always in control of every situation. What could have made him so upset or worried that he would act like this?

"Well, there's only one way to do this. I need to just throw it out there and let you make fun of me and get it over with."

Whoa! What was this? Todd immediately knew that was Fritz's way of telling him he'd better not make fun of what was coming, no matter what Fritz was going to tell him.

Todd waited and, knowing Fritz, he knew it wouldn't take long for Fritz to spill it.

"Okay. Here it is. Last Friday night, Trudy and I had a date."

When he paused, Todd knew there had to be more, so he nodded at Fritz, who got the message.

"Well, dang blast it, I asked her to marry me."

Todd felt like someone had sucker punched him in the stomach. Several thoughts and emotions flooded him all at once. Trudy? Marrying Fritz? No!

Fritz shook his head. "She turned me down."

With that, Fritz leaned back and closed his eyes as if waiting for Todd to laugh, and it was all Todd could do to keep from it. It wasn't so much what Fritz had said, but the way he'd said it.

Fritz opened his eyes. "You're not laughing."

"No. Fritz. I don't think that's something I should laugh about. Did she say why?"

Fritz frowned and looked away. "That's just it. She did and frankly, I had to agree with her."

Now Todd was really confused.

"Yeah. She said we don't love each other the way two people getting married should."

Before Todd could think of anything to say to that, Fritz waved his hand in the air and continued. "The craziest thing about it is that as soon as she said it, I realized I was only going through the motions since we'd dated for so long."

Todd felt an emotion building deep inside, and it kept growing as he thought about what Fritz had just said meant to him.

Todd had been attracted to Trudy Roberts, the high school guidance counselor since last year when he'd gone into the high school to enroll his daughter Carrie. And he'd been disappointed when Fritz had stated that he wanted to date Trudy.

So, being the good friend he was, Todd had backed off and let Fritz date her.

Now, what did this mean for him? He was still dating Olive and after his bonehead comment to her at the election celebration last month, he couldn't stop dating her.

Fritz rambled on for a few minutes, and it was all Todd could do to keep his thoughts to himself and his mind on what Fritz was saying.

Finally, they finished the pizza in silence.

Just as Fritz was getting out of his chair, Todd held out a hand to stop him.

When Fritz sank back down, Todd cleared his throat. How should he ask this? Should he even be asking it? Well, he decided to just throw it out there and see what happened.

"Are you two going to continue dating?"

Fritz laughed and shook his head. "Nah! We decided we can continue being friends but not date anymore."

With that, Fritz left, and Todd sat there for an hour, just trying to think through how what Fritz had just dropped on him could change things in his life.

First, did Olive expect him to propose to her?

Did he want to propose to Olive? That was an easy one. Sure, he liked Olive, but he didn't want to marry her.

But what about Trudy? Yes, what about Trudy? What were his true feelings for her?

Okay, he had a lot of thinking to do now.

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Finally, Trudy realized that her old friend was waiting for her to prompt her. "Okay, Olive, what understanding?"

Olive grinned. "Todd and I don't love each other, and we've basically been dating each other, so we'd have something to do." She seemed to think for a moment. "But we do enjoy each other's company, which I'm sure you and Fritz do as well."

Trudy nodded. "That's true, but there just wasn't anything else there, at least not for me."

Olive grew serious. “Now. I’m sure you know that Todd Mercer has been attracted to you since that first day last year when he brought Carrie to school to register her.”

Trudy hadn’t expected that revelation, but before she could react, Olive kept going.

“And also, I know you better than anyone, especially your family, and I’m sure you’re just as attracted to Todd as he is to you.”

Trudy knew she could hide nothing from Olive, who could read her like a book.

Olive shook her head. “There’s no need to deny it, Trudy. Remember, I know you.”

Trudy laughed. “And I know you just as well. And right now, I know you’re plotting something. What is it?”

Olive grinned, and her freckles seemed to pop out even more than usual. “I am having Todd over to my house for dinner tonight and I’m going to get things straight between us once and for all.”

Trudy felt jubilant over that revelation but held herself back because she didn’t want Olive to know how much she wanted to be the one dating Todd instead of Olive.

They soon left the diner and went back to the school.

Shortly after Trudy got settled at her desk, her cell phone rang.

She was surprised and pleased to see her mother’s name on the display. Even though they talked several times a week and Trudy went to Phoenix to see her at least once a month, she was thrilled to hear her mother’s voice.

“Hi Mom. What’s up?”

“I finally decided, and I wanted to let you know immediately.”

“What have you decided Mom?”

Trudy knew her mom had been thinking about moving back to Ford Valley, but she hadn’t mentioned it the last couple of times they’d talked on the phone.

“Well, which major decision do you think I’ve been trying to make for a few months? I’m selling my practice and my house here in Phoenix, and I’m moving to Ford Valley where my children and grandchildren are.”

Trudy was thrilled, but still cautious. “But Mom, you have taken into consideration that every Ford here will try to run you off again, right?”

She snickered at that. “Yes, dear, I have, but after having a phone conversation with the new sheriff there, he assures me he and his office will do everything possible to protect me. He also said that Dudley Ford won’t be the police chief after this week because your new mayor is going to replace him with a man who recently retired from DPS.”

“Whoa Mom. You’ve been rather busy, haven’t you?”

“I sure have, and you know how I always research everything I do before I do it. Well, I’ve been quite busy since we talked last week.”

Trudy had to tell her mom exactly how she felt. “Oh, Mom. I’m so excited that we’ll be living so close to each other, but I’m scared to death that Sherman will have some of his people hurt you.”

Her mom giggled, and that was a sure sign that she was excited. “Well, since I’m a doctor, I should be able to patch myself up.”

“Mom! That’s not something to joke about. We’re sure Sherman has ordered at least one murder over the years, if not more.”

“Yes, dear, I know that, but I’ve just got to get there and find some way to have a relationship with my son and my grandchildren like I have with you.”

“Okay, Mom, but what are you going to do once you get here?”

“Oh, I’ve already gotten that taken care of ... almost. I’ve talked with a Dr. Norton. I’m sure you know him. He’s also the coroner there.”

“Yes, Mom, I know him.”

“Well, he has an opening in his clinic. There’s just space for two doctors, and he wants another GP because he’s not being able to keep up with the number of patients he has now that his former partner moved to California.”

“Well, that’s great Mom. I’ll be praying for your transition from Phoenix to here.” She groaned. “And I’ll be praying for you even harder once you actually get here.”

“Thank you dear. I’m so glad you’re a Christian. Now, if we could just work on that brother of yours.”

“Ha. Mom, you don’t know Justin anymore.”

“Well, he can’t be any worse than his father.”

“Oh yes, I think he is. I can at least talk to Dad, and he’ll listen to me ... sometimes. But Justin will never listen to anything I say.”

There was a pause, then her mom continued. “Well, anyway, I’ve decided I’m going to do it so, that’s final. Look out Justin and if Jasper gets in my way, he’s going to find out I’m not the naïve little nineteen-year-old I was when we married.”

She giggled again. “They’ll both find out that this little kitten grew some claws.”

Trudy laughed. “Well, Mom, you can stay with me as long as you need to.”

“Thank you, Trudy. I’m so looking forward to being with you all the time.”

With that, they disconnected, and Trudy sat there staring at the wall. She snickered. She decided right then that she was going to have to work on both her brother and her father to get them to treat her mom right.

She was disappointed that Olive was gone for the day. She wanted to tell her the good news. But She gathered the things together she needed to take home with her and headed out to her car.

When she drove into her garage, she just sat there, trying to fully grasp all that was about to happen. Was she and her mom both ready for the fight she knew was coming? She sure hoped so.

She finally closed the garage door and went into her small house. Yes, it was small, with only two bedrooms and no family room. She didn’t need more. Her TV and stereo were both in the living room, along with her overstuffed recliner.

Then she remembered that she had her office in the spare room, but she had a love seat in there that converts into a double bed. It slept well, so she knew her mom would do fine there.

She was so excited now that she’d almost forgotten about all she and Olive had talked about. But would Todd want to date her now? She sure hoped so.

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