
Chapter 1

A neon beer sign hanging in the front window of the Gas N Gulp was buzzing, but Mae ignored the humming intrusion in the silent desert pre-dawn. Mae had been up all night minding the convenience store. She resented that she was stuck doing it, but Bobby Ridell had flaked out on her again, leaving her to work the graveyard shift along with her own day shift.

She glanced up from her magazine, tapping a long, bright red, white, blue and silver fingernail on the counter absently. The security cameras were down again, showing nothing but snow on the closed-circuit monitor. It was annoying. The store was one headache after another, but her father wouldn't sell it. The owner of Top Gas, the other station in Fire Gorge, had been trying to buy Gas N Gulp for years, but Walter Weston was having none of it. Gas N Gulp was part of his "empire" consisting of the gas station and a small used car lot on Main Street.

Mae could smell the film of coffee left in the pot burning and she made her way to the beverage bar and was making a fresh pot when a car pulled up outside the glass doors. The car was

beat up and old, a 1998 or 99 Chevy Malibu. It looked like more dent-filler than original metal.

The car doors flew open and two people rushed out, leaving the doors hanging wide. Mae took a step back from the coffee pot as the pair ran into the convenience store. The little bell above the glass doors tinkled wildly.

Both people were wearing latex masks and dark clothes. One was of slight stature, the other several inches taller. The tall one, Frankenstein, waved a gun around and headed for the cash register.

Mae raced over to the register and stood behind the counter, blocking the gun wielder from the till.

"Gimme the money!" Frankenstein shouted. The small one, Lucifer, stood behind and bobbed from one foot to the other. He was carrying a knife in one twitching fist.

"No," Mae said, as calmly as she could. Her heart was racing and adrenalin made everything seem to move in slow motion, giving her ample time to think things through.

He pointed the gun at her. "Don't be stupid, bitch. Gimme the money!" His voice was high-pitched and strident, angry.

Mae shook her head, and carefully, slowly reached under the cash register for the store revolver. She slid her hand around several times before she touched the old Smith and Wesson with her fingertips.

"Hurry up, Lloyd! We gotta get outta here before someone comes!"

Frankenstein was practically vibrating with fury as he turned toward his partner. "You said my name! I tole you, no names!" Now he was pointing the gun at Lucifer.

Quick as she could, Mae pulled out her gun and took aim at the tall robber.

"Look out, Lloyd!"

"Huh?" He turned back and saw the business end of Mae's

firearm pointed at him. He began to raise his gun, but May cocked the hammer with her free hand.

"Put your gun down, Lloyd," she told Frankenstein.

"My name ain't Lloyd!" He shifted his weight and Mae saw him moving his gun into firing position.

Time dilated. Lloyd's hand rose slowly, so slowly, but before he could train his weapon on her, Mae pulled her trigger.

The revolver recoiled in her hand and bent her wrist painfully. She bit her lip.

Lloyd staggered back, windmilling his arms, his gun flying out of his hand and sliding over the linoleum to rest under the snack chips display. Lucifer screamed, a high-pitched squeal of terror like nothing Mae had ever heard before.

Frankenstein hit the floor like a hod of bricks, one hand pulling down a candy rack as he went.

Time resumed its normal pace. Mae's face felt frozen, stiff with shock.

Lucifer ran to his partner and pressed an ear to his chest, coming away with blood on his mask. "You killed him! Oh God! He's dead!"

Mae trained her weapon on Lucifer, though her body felt like a wooden statue. Her arms were so heavy.

"Don't shoot me! Don't shoot!" Lucifer rose and extended his arms out to the sides, knife still held in one fist. His floppy dark sweatshirt sleeves pulled up and Mae saw big scars on his wrists.

"Drop your knife!"

The masked fellow turned and ran, sobbing, right past the car and into the first rays of the new day's sun.

Mae couldn't shoot a retreating criminal, and, anyway, she didn't think her aim was up to finding a moving target. She wasn't much of a marksman. Instead, she pointed her gun at Lloyd again. He was not moving, but he might still be alive. She wasn't going to risk her life on the word of a would-be thief. She

took one hand off her weapon and hit the speakerphone button on the business phone.

A minute later, the 911 operator told her that a police car and ambulance were being dispatched.

Mae stood there, shivering from toes to scalp, wondering if she was going to faint, as Lloyd's body lay motionless on the floor.

It was a well-lighted gas station, with a bright overhang protecting pumps and patrons from rare rainstorms and the burning desert sun. Large glass picture windows and a pair of glass doors enclosed the small convenience store. The blue and red strobes on top of the police vehicle added garish graffiti-like war paint to otherwise calm, clean surfaces.

Drake parked his cop car behind the old Chevy that stood, naked and open as a whore, near the store's entrance. Noise from the approaching ambulance overwhelmed the chirps of cicadas and crickets in the empty lots around the little plaza.

Knowing only that the robbery involved weapons, Drake drew his sidearm and slowly made his way toward the doors, catching glimpses into the interior as he passed window-sized posters of soft drinks and snack foods, rental DVDs and cigarettes. Finally, he was able to see through the doors and he spotted a woman with a gun pointed away from her, toward the floor some distance away.

Drake spared a glance toward her target and saw a body splayed out on the floor, unmoving. He watched the woman with the gun again. Her skin was pale and gray, her eyes open wide and staring at the person on the floor. There was a little runnel of blood marking her lip and chin. He recognized her as a woman he'd met at the welcome potluck the town had held for him when he first started as Police Chief of Fire Gorge a week

ago. Mae. Mae Weston. She'd seemed like a nice person, but then even homicidal maniacs had good days.

Drake took a deep breath and then flung open the store's front doors. "Police! Put the gun down and step away from the counter."

Her eyes—light violet eyes—flicked to him, back to the person on the floor, and then back to him.

He spoke more gently. "Put it down on the counter, Ms. Weston. Then step back."

Her look went back to the floor. "He might not be dead."

"I'll check once you put the gun down. Do it. Do it now."

She remained completely focused on her target. "You'll shoot him if he tries anything?"

He kept his voice calm, soothing. "I'll keep you safe. I don't want to tell you again."

Her nod was nearly imperceptible, but she followed his orders. The gun made a light thud on the cheap countertop, and she shuffled back until her butt hit the cigarette display racks behind the counter. The gun was now out of reach.

Shoulders sagging, Mae took a ragged breath.

Drake thought she might cry, but he put his urge to comfort her aside and approached the counter. He pulled a pen out of his pocket and used it to pick up the gun. He tucked it safely into the gum boxes nearby. It was well away from both Mae and her victim.

For safety's sake, he moved behind the counter and got out his handcuffs. She looked at him with wide, frightened eyes and he felt a qualm over what he had to do, but procedure called for her to be restrained, and the scene of the crime secured.

That done, he hurried over to the fellow on the floor. It was obvious that the man had been shot. He wasn't breathing. Drake removed the guy's mask. Indian. Probably Paiute from the reservation down the highway. Paiute, just like Drake himself. He held two fingers to the man's carotid artery and found nothing.

An ambulance pulled up outside and he gestured the EMT's into the store as he holstered his weapon.

"Found him like this."

They set up their equipment. "How long has he been down?"

"Unknown. I've been here maybe three minutes. He hasn't moved."

"Okay. We're on it."

As they poked and prodded, Drake walked away toward Mae.

"Ms. Weston."

She was staring at the activity on the floor.

"Chief...I can't remember your last name. I'm usually not so flustered. But when you shoot someone things get a little...off. I'm kind of woozy." There was a pause as she took a breath and Drake thought she might ramble on. Instead, she said, "I'm sorry."

"Stillwater. Drake Stillwater. Call me Drake."

She nodded slightly. "I shot him, Drake. Is Lloyd dead? He looks awfully still. Should a person be that still if he's not dead, do you suppose? I mean...what I meant to say was... Do you think he's dead?"

It wasn't a question he could answer; he was no medical technician. The man seemed awfully dead to him, though.

Drake thought he'd best quiet her before she said something incriminating. She seemed prone to chatter. "Hold on." He carefully notified her of her Miranda rights and got her agreement on each segment. He wanted to hear her side of the story before he made a decision on whether to formally arrest her or not, but she had a right not to incriminate herself.

"Am I under arrest?" She shook the handcuffs holding her hands behind her.

"Do you think you should be?"

"He's a robber. I shot him 'cause he was gonna kill me and take the money. If this was a TV show, I guess you'd arrest me

first and ask questions later. You don't hafta do that, of course. It's entirely up to you, but--"

"You called him Lloyd. You know this guy?"

"No. His partner said his name. He wasn't s'posed ta, but he did. Before I knew his name, he was just Frankenstein ta me. 'Cause of his mask, you know?"

"Look at me, Mae."

She reluctantly turned her head.

"That's better. Now, what happened?"

"I was making coffee when they came in. Frankenstein—I mean Lloyd—had a gun." Pointing, she said, "It's over there."

Drake looked toward the chips and grunted in the affirmative. He waited. "Go on."

"Lucifer had a knife. They—"

"Lucifer?"

"Yeah. The other robber. He had a devil mask on. It looked like Satan or Lucifer, not like one of those cute little devils with the little horns that you might dress up your kid for Halloween. I mean...what were we talking about?"

"What was this Lucifer like?"

"Short. Very skinny. Devil mask, like I said. Shrill voice. Scars on his wrists." She was getting a little color back. Her skin was alabaster, a perfect foil for her long red hair. Small curling strands clung to her forehead and cheeks where it looked like clammy sweat was drying. She was pretty as a Sunday in April, but hell could she talk.

"Scars. What kind of scars?"

"Jagged, ragged scars on his wrists, like maybe he was suicidal sometime or other. I've never met anyone who committed suicide. I mean, before they committed suicide. Of course, not after either. I mean--"

"I understand." Drake was making notes in his pocket notebook. He'd get a written witness statement from her later. So far, it sounded like a classic botched robbery. "They ran in. Next?"

"I came back ta the register, and Lloyd demanded the money." Her violet eyes focused on Drake's face for a moment. "We have maybe \$35 in there. There's a safe for the rest."

He nodded.

"So, I tole him no, and he threatened me with his gun. It was scary. I thought he was gonna shoot me. I tried ta be sneaky and reached under the register for the gun we keep there." She pointed. "That gun that you picked up." Drake grunted his understanding. She was building up steam, the words coming faster and faster. "And I found it. It was cold in my hand. I couldn't remember if it was loaded, but I thought it was. Then Lucifer hollered for Lloyd ta hurry up, and Lloyd yelled back that he shouldn't of said his name. He pointed the gun at Lucifer." She paused for a breath. "I thought he was gonna shoot his partner, but he didn't. He turned back ta me and I saw his finger move onta the trigger more. So I shot him."

"Just like that?"

"Well, I tole him ta put his gun down. He didn't. It was like everything was brighter, slower, and when I shot him and he fell down, things went back ta normal. I'm cold."

Drake was able to follow her abrupt change of focus. He looked around for a blanket or jacket but found none. "Just a minute."

It took him a couple of minutes, but the EMTs had thin blankets to spare. As he was returning, the lead EMT spoke. "He's dead, Chief. Nothing we can do. We'll call the coroner, but it'll take him an hour or so to get here."

Drake had hoped to catch two hours of sleep before starting his day shift. He'd been called out of bed by a deputy who needed backup at a rowdy party near this edge of town. His proximity to the Gas N Gulp was fortuitous. The town was small but had far-ranging outlying areas like this Gas N Gulp near the state highway. Those areas were still in his jurisdiction. He had two deputies, one on nights and one on days. The day officer was

going to have to do patrols, and that left Drake to deal with the more sensitive problem here. He was the principal investigator in most matters for Fire Gorge. Fortunately, hard crime was rare.

The EMT was waiting for a reply. "Thanks."

"He has to come from Las Vegas."

Drake nodded. "Yeah, I know. Can you give me an alcohol wipe?"

Seemingly random audible crackles from the EMT's radios made things feel more chaotic than they were.

Drake dropped a blanket over Mae's shoulders and opened the wipe. He gently patted the wet paper over the dried blood on her lip and chin and she shied away from the sting.

"Hold still a second." The wipe went into the trash. "Better?"

She snuggled into the blanket with a sigh and nodded.

"Okay. So you shot him. Then what?"

"He fell down and Lucifer shouted at me that Lloyd was dead. Then he begged me not ta shoot him too." Her eyes closed tightly for a moment. "He was only carrying a knife. I wouldn'ta shot him." Her gaze went to Drake." But of course I didn't tell him that. So when he ran away, I didn't try ta shoot him. I was shaking so bad, I woulda probably missed him anyway. He didn't take the car, just ran out. The sun wasn't up yet."

"Did you see which way he ran? Did you ever see his face?"

She shook her head.

"What was he wearing?"

"Pretty much same as Lloyd. Black jeans, black sweatshirt. Mask."

"Shoes?"

"I dunno. What's gonna happen ta me? Will I go ta jail?"

Drake patted her shoulder. "There'll be an investigation." He felt sorry for her. She was a little thing and yet had big courage. "You have to make a written statement at the police station."

"Tell it all over again?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

She sagged even more in the blanket. "I'm so tired."

Drake couldn't see any further reason to keep her cuffed, so he let her loose. "Come with me." He reached for her arm, but the blanket impeded him. Instead he pressed the small of her back and compelled her forward. As she preceded him, he couldn't help but admire the sway of her ample but curvy rear. Her legs in tight-fitting jeans were shapely, too. Drake readjusted his wide-brimmed hat and put on his professional demeanor again. Mixing business with pleasure wasn't a mistake he would make again.

The police car wasn't new, but it was well-maintained and roomier inside than Mae would have expected. The chief opened the front passenger door for her and gestured for her to get in.

He walked around and did something in the trunk for a minute, then returned to her with a clipboard holding a form. "Read it carefully and sign it if you agree."

Mae looked it over. It was brief. The form was a permission to search the premises for evidence. She had nothing to hide, so she agreed.

He took the form back. "Stay in the car while I deal with the crime scene."

"Okay. I can't really go anywhere while the store is unlocked anyway. Of course, it'll be perfectly safe with a policeman inside—with you inside—but still, it's my job and... Will it take long?"

He shrugged. "A while. You'll be alright here. Don't touch anything."

The sun hadn't risen high enough to roast her yet. "Yeah. Okay." She put her head back on the headrest. She was weary and cold. Drake shut the door and walked away without a word. He wasn't a particularly talkative guy.

Mae closed her eyes and dozed, awakening abruptly in response to a nightmare replay of the shooting. The sun was over the horizon now, casting the desert in shades of purple and brown. It occurred to her that she hadn't yet called her father to let him know about the attempted robbery.

Tears came to her eyes. They were an unwelcome surprise. It seemed like tears were out-of-place so long after the robbery. She wiped them away and shrugged off the blanket. Mae wasn't feeling quite like herself, but she needed to get her cell phone from the store.

Her legs felt a little wobbly as she exited the car, but she stomped her feet some and they firmed up. The beat-up Malibu was gone, probably towed away as she slept. The EMTs and ambulance had left as well. She strode into the store. Drake was taking pictures of the scene.

Her purse was on the counter with half the contents spilled out.

"Hey! What did you do ta my purse?"

The cop turned from photographing the gun under the chips display. "Searched it."

Anger brought more foolish tears to her eyes. What the hell was wrong with her? "I'm the victim here! Searching my purse is outta line."

He pinned her with his dark eyes. They were coal black, like his hair. "The incident might have been about illegal drugs. And you agreed to the search."

Mae snorted her irritation. His excuse made a certain amount of sense if you looked at it objectively. Mae didn't much feel like being objective. She stomped over to her purse and angrily put things back inside. "You didn't find anything did you? I coulda tole you you wouldn't."

He frowned at her, and she felt a surge of apprehension. Maybe she was digging herself into a deeper hole. When he turned back to his photographs, she released her breath. It was a

weird relief to not have the force of his irritation turned on her. But she was not going to apologize. She really was the victim, and he'd just have to deal with her that way.

She riffled through her purse, then did it again. "I need my phone. I hafta call my dad. This store is his and he needs ta know what happened." He made no response. "I'm talking ta you. I need my phone! Do you have it?"

"In a plastic bag in my evidence bag. I need to check your text messages and recent calls."

Fury shot through her like a flame from a match. "What the devil for? I'm not the criminal!" She pointed at the stiffening body on the floor. "He's the criminal!"

Drake put down his camera with great deliberation. "You shot him, woman. That's usually considered a crime."

"He was gonna shoot me! He was a robber!"

He nodded. "Maybe."

"Maybe? Maybe!" Her hands fisted and she took a step toward him. His forbidding look stopped her. He was a big guy, and his bronze face was implacable. "You son of a bitch. Gimme my phone!"

"No." He scratched his chin casually, though she could feel the tension in him, even from several feet away. How could he be so self-controlled? Why wasn't he yelling back?

"You big bully!"

"Go sit in the car."

"No!" She took a stance—she hoped it looked like a strong one—and crossed her arms over her chest. "Gimme my phone and maybe, maybe, I'll go back outside."

His voice was calm, but his words were clipped. "Go back to the car or there will be consequences."

"Consequences? You mean like you'll handcuff me again?" Actually, being restrained by him might be appealing under the right circumstances. She had a brief surge of interest in him as

an alpha male. It made her consider him in a new, disturbing way. She shooed those unwelcome thoughts right out.

"Last warning. Go sit in the car."

She squared her shoulders. "Gimme my phone first."

He closed the distance between them quickly and took her by the arm. She squealed and protested, pulled back against his grip, but it was iron hard. Not bruising her, but encircling her bicep with a hold that she could not break. "Lemme go!"

Without a word, he dragged her out the doors and to his car. He used his key to open the back door and shoved her into the caged compartment where the criminals rode. So that was the way it was gonna be. She was now to be treated as a criminal.

To her surprise, however, he slid in next to her and closed the door most of the way. Just as she was about to blister his ears with a new tirade, he grabbed her by the waist and hauled her over his lap.

"What are you doing!"

No answer. He yanked her jeans down, putting painful pressure on her hips. The jeans were tight. "Oh God," she screamed. "Don't rape me! I'm sorry!"

"I'm not going to rape you, woman. I'm going to spank your ass until you settle down." And with that, he commenced smacking her bottom.

It hurt, oh how it hurt! Each wallop stung worse than the last, and he didn't let up. This was no slap and tickle game like she'd played with past boyfriends. This was a genuine spanking, meant to teach a lesson, meant to punish. Each slap shattered her tender flesh like a sandpaper block. Friction fire spread over her butt and grew with harsh intensity.

The tears she'd tried to keep under control since the robbery attempt began to spill out. She squirmed and kicked on his lap. After a few minutes of punishment passed, and she thought she couldn't take even one more blow, he stopped. His callused hand

swept over her hot flesh, scorching hot where her rear was tender.

He rolled her over and held her on his lap, in his arms. She bawled and he held her there, her jeans still around her knees, her ass burning where it rubbed against his uniform. It was confusing to be comforted by the very man who'd taken her to task so forcibly. But curled up against his chest was the only place she could imagine being at that moment.

She felt his hand in her hair, smoothing, gathering, gripping gently. Mae could feel a wet spot growing on the front shoulder of his shirt as she sobbed against him. And, curiously, she felt wet between her legs. There was a kind of buzzing in her pussy, a signal of attraction to her punisher, despite her discomfort. As she focused on that for a moment, she also realized that he had a hard erection in his pants, pressed up against her hip. He wasn't immune to her as a woman. That was somehow reassuring.

Mae thought about him as a man, putting aside his authority for a moment. He was handsome, with black hair that brushed his collar; deep black eyes, like train tunnels leading to some mysterious place; broad shoulders and a narrow waist. His hands were large, work-roughened, bronze like the rest of him. He looked like he was a member of the local Paiute tribe, with their telltale prominent and proud nose, and chiseled cheekbones. They rarely came to town, but the few that Mae had met were good people. She wondered if he'd learned police skills there with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or somewhere else. He was enough older than her to have made headway in his career. And now he was Police Chief of Fire Gorge.

She tested him by squirming against his erection a bit. His shoulders tensed under her cheek. Yeah, he was definitely feeling the kind of excitement her pussy was whispering about insistently.

"I'm sorry for being difficult."

He grunted. "Now you are."

"No, I'm really sorry. Generally, I'm not a belligerent person, I mean, I usually don't snap at people or call them names. I'm upset about everything and I took it out on you."

His hand was gentle in her hair, though his verbal response was terse. "Next time, mind."

Next time? "Yes, sir."

"You done crying?"

She nodded. She was done. Quite done. It had been cathartic, and, even though she'd had to have that spanking to let it all out, she was glad the emotions had been released.

"Stay in the car."

"Can I sit in the front?"

"Yeah. But don't push your luck."

"No. I won't. My butt is sore."

He grunted again and helped her off his lap. She unfastened her jeans, pulled them up and then refastened them.

When he got out of the car, he reached a hand back in to help her out. She took it gladly. The sun was bright and the heat was rising. "You gonna take long?"

The coroner's wagon turned into the station.

"No." He opened the passenger door for her and she slid in.

"Can I have my phone?"

He pinned her with his gaze.

"I guess not."

"You can call from my office."

"Thank you."

He didn't respond as he walked away.