

Chapter 1

How long had that light been flashing? Chase reached over and flicked off the music he'd been blasting from the satellite radio he'd picked up outside Salem. He took in the gas gauge, which was sitting close to empty.

“Shit.”

What had he been thinking—or not? He should have stopped at the last pullout two hours ago, but he'd been distracted after speaking with his brother Aaron about his upcoming UFC fight and with Luc about his dating woes, then coordinating a time for both brothers to meet in Vegas before seeing their mom and dad in Henderson.

Their parents hadn't been together in years, not since his mom had walked out after the savings account suddenly hit zero, as his dad had gambled away every last cent. His mother, who'd adopted all of them, who'd wanted them, had left them as well. Why was he going back again? Oh, because of his need to fix everything for everyone. His dad had called him, freaking out after secretly dating his mom again, because he'd just found out after all these years that he had a daughter, a biological daughter. Chase was still struggling to make sense of all of it.

He couldn't stop himself from giving his all to everything he did: talking, organizing, mediating. He had put everything else out of his mind, including his obvious need for gas.

“Shit, fuck!” He slapped his hand on the steering wheel and looked into the distance for a sign, anything that would give him the reprieve he so needed.

He had to be close to the Nevada border, but he hadn't seen a sign for miles, nothing but the flat brown land and hills in the distance. Then he saw what looked like a gas station, and as he got closer, he saw it had four pumps.

Chase pulled up to the pump and took in a pickup parked off to the side at the other pump, a rusty seventies model, faded red with wooden panels in the back. He guessed it was often used for livestock. There was not a body around. He half expected tumbleweeds to blow past from the dry dust in the air and the bright desert sun.

He climbed out of the car, taking a minute to roll up the sleeves of his white dress shirt. His dark blue suit pants were creased from having sat too long. He ripped off his loosened tie and tossed it over to the passenger seat, where his suit jacket was also folded, along with his cell phone.

“Hello?” he called out, expecting some grease monkey to appear, but there was no one. He could pump the gas himself, but he wondered whether prepaying was an option here. He was about to open his gas cap when he thought he caught some movement inside the station.

He stepped around the pump, taking in the garbage bin overfilled with takeout packaging and the dirty windows that made up the front of the station, which appeared as if it had never been cleaned. He rested his hand on the door and pulled it open to see a man with an overly bushy mustache and a receding hairline, the remaining dark hair slicked back in some eighties style.

It was in his face, the expression stuck there: Something was off.

It all happened in a manner of seconds as Chase took in the man behind the counter, pale, alarmed, eyes wide, staring at him. The guy said nothing. His hands were up. Chase saw movement, and then someone was pointing a gun toward slick behind the counter. The guy holding it was short, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, and the only thing that registered was that the gun was now pointed at him. Someone was yelling, and everything went into slow motion: the yelling, the movement of the gun and the skinny guy holding it.

“Drop the gun,” Chase said. His hand went out, knocking over a rack of candy, and he grabbed the guy’s wrist as it swung toward him. He took in the scar that ran up the inside of the arm holding the gun—slender, not a lot of muscle.

Someone screamed behind him, and the gun went off. Glass shattered, but he didn’t let it go. Was he hit? Adrenaline surged. He had no idea. He knocked the hat off the guy, and long hair spilled out, a freckled face. Huge bright blue eyes stared up at him from the face of a girl, a teenager. *Shit!*

“Seriously, a kid?” He had the gun now, and he pinned the girl against the counter, his arm holding her. She was fighting him, kicking back with her hard-soled shoes, nailing him in the shin. He groaned. Christ almighty, the girl had fight. “Stop fighting, kid! Settle yourself down.”

“Let me go!” she shouted and was squirming still. He shoved the gun in the back of his dress pants before he could lose his grip.

“Cops are on their way, you little shit,” the store keep snapped. He was holding the phone, rightfully furious. He was still yelling, but Chase wasn’t looking at him. He was staring down at the teen, who was squirming and trying to break free, giving everything she had to breaking away.

“Tie up that little hellion until the sheriff gets here and can haul her ass away,” some guy with a deep voice shouted from behind Chase. He only glanced back to see an older man in overalls, short and stocky, with white hair that was in bad need of a cut. Behind him was a woman in a pink ball cap. Must have been the screamer. She said nothing now, but then, Chase couldn’t exactly chat when he was occupied with holding the girl.

Then he felt teeth bite into his arm, deep. That damn wildcat had sunk her teeth into him!

“Fuck!” he yelled, worried she was biting into his bone. He didn’t think as he reacted, grabbing a handful of her dirty brown hair and yanking hard. She screamed, which was great, since she no longer had her teeth sunk into his arm. He yelled in his head as he stared at the ragged gouge and the imprint of her teeth now embedded in his forearm, oozing blood.

“Let go of me!” she shrieked again.

“Yeah, I think not,” he said as he lifted her and dropped her onto the ground, pinning her arms behind her as his knee jabbed in her back. “How old are you, anyway?” He took in his right arm, which had blood running down it. He squeezed his fist and shook it, the throbbing giving way to burning and stinging as he took in the trace of blood still on her lips. Fuck, now he was going to have to get a tetanus shot and most likely a round of antibiotics.

Suddenly the girl went quiet, her lips tight. After all her screeching and hollering and fighting to get away, she was lying there as if she’d given up. He expected tears, but instead he was staring at pure stubbornness, the kind he’d seen in the faces of his brothers growing up. So he tightened his hold on her, because that kind of stubborn didn’t give in so easy. She was thinking, trying to give him a false sense of security. *Not likely.*

“Anyone know her?” he asked, looking up at the three faces. The grungy guy in the overalls was frowning. The guy behind the counter had just hung up the phone, and he could hear sirens in the distance.

“That there looks like one of the Humboldt kids,” the overweight farmer in the overalls called out, rising up on his toes, spitting as he talked. “They have a brood of kids they foster. Hey, kid, you one of those no-good troublemakers?”

The girl didn’t answer, but Chase was staring at her face and didn’t miss the flinch. “Is this Humboldt family where you’re from?” he asked.

Her cheek rested on the dirty speckled floor, and she glanced up to him. “And what’s it to you?” she snapped with an attitude that had him looking a little closer. Yeah, it was nothing but piss and vinegar to cover up how scared she really was. He could see a lot now.

“I asked you how old you are,” he said, his voice lower, sharper, demanding, the kind he used on all the minions who worked in the Massachusetts congressman’s office—correction, the former congressman’s office, where he was the former aide and chief of staff. They were both retired now and exploring their options.

He was sure she wouldn’t answer when two cop cars squealed in. He could see the dust flying, and the older farmer was out the door, lifting his hand to get their attention.

“Please, mister, let me go.” She was scared for sure and begging, too.

“Not happening. Name, age, now,” he snapped.

“What in all hell is going on here?” someone said from the doorway. “What a damn mess this is. Someone please tell me what happened.”

Chase was looking at two solid cops, one short, one tall, wearing tan uniforms and badges, with guns on their hips. Another older man stood behind them in blue jeans, with a star pinned to his chest. It was this man who had spoken, and it didn’t take Chase more than a minute to figure out he was the one in charge.

“You get off her,” the man said. Had to be the sheriff, with a thick mustache, threads of gray in his hair, and a stomach that hung over his belt. He was now standing over Chase.

Chase stood, and the girl he’d been holding down slowly sat up. He took in her face. The tough kid was doing her best to hide how scared shitless she was. “I’ve got the gun tucked in the back of my pants,” Chase said. “Got it away from her.” He went to reach back for it.

“Stop right there. Hands up where I can see them. Don’t be reaching for anything,” said the sheriff.

Chase lifted his hands and waited as the sheriff stepped around him, his hand resting on his holstered gun, and lifted the gun tucked in the waist of Chase’s pants. He stepped back and handed it to the tall cop over by the door.

“Goddamn little shit came in here and pulled a gun in my face,” the man behind the counter said. He’d been crapping his pants when Chase walked in, but he was now working his way up to being an asshole.

“Near as I can figure, I heard the commotion from where I was at the back of the store,” said the overweight farmer. “Saw the gun. Then this numbskull walks in, and everything went to hell.” He was actually pointing to Chase as if he were responsible for all of this, and he seemed angry at Chase for having put an end to something that could have gone really badly. The woman in the ball cap still hadn’t said a word as she crossed her arms, but her eyes made a *God help me* roll to the ceiling. She obviously knew the farmer.

“Vern, you carry on worse than any woman,” she said. “And truth be told, the only thing this holdup stopped was you shoving another one of those Twinkies down the front of your baggy overalls.”

“What the hell you accusing me of, woman? The girl’s the thief. I’m just a victim, minding my own business, stopping to gas up my truck.” The man was spitting, and patches of red appeared on his round pockmarked face, the kind that hinted he spent his evenings drowning his sorrows in some cheap bottle of Jim Beam or a godawful version of Keystone. Whatever it was, Chase was sure there was probably an empty bottle and dozens of cans tossed in the back of that rundown flatbed.

“That true, Vern? You shoplifting?” the sheriff said, taking a step closer to the fat man. His scuffed boots scraped the floor, his hand resting on his belt. “And you, girl, stay right there.” He jabbed his finger to the girl. Chase was still waiting to learn her name. She’d yet to say one word.

“Hell, no. She’s the damn criminal. What the hell you all doing looking over here at me?” Vern said, spitting again, sounding overly outraged. Chase couldn’t help glancing down at the bulge in his middle, wondering whether maybe he had something else stuffed down there.

Chase took in the girl on the ground, her back resting against the wall of the counter, her knees pulled up. She was looking down, contemplating something. “How old are you?” Chase asked her again just as he tuned out the sheriff and this idiot, whom the sheriff was now demanding to show what he’d stuffed down his overalls. It was crazy like a bad sitcom, back and forth.

The girl wouldn’t answer, and he finally squatted down in front of her.

“What the hell you doing?” he heard one of the other cops say, and he glanced over to the shorter one, who had a pissed-at-life look on his face. “You just stand up there and move away from the girl,” he said. He had cuffs pulled from a pouch on his belt, moving to the girl as Chase stepped back, noting how the cop pinned her down and cuffed her hands behind her back, patting her down—a little too grabby and rough, in his opinion, anyways.

“Hey, jerkoff, get your damn hands off my boob,” the girl said. She had a smart mouth, and Chase could see she wasn’t going to make this easy on herself.

“Hey, take it easy. Can’t you see she’s just a kid?” He was standing behind the cop.

“Get your ass back there out of my space,” the cop snapped at him again. “Armed robbery is something we take seriously around here. Don’t care how old she is. Shoving a gun in someone’s face isn’t just a slap on the wrist.”

“I wasn’t robbing anyone.” It was the first time she’d said anything.

“You just shut your mouth, girl,” the shop keep said, jabbing his hand toward her, his face dark. Chase couldn’t help wondering what the hell he’d walked in on.

“If you weren’t robbing the place, then what were you doing?” Chase asked, taking a step toward the girl, who was now standing. The cop was holding her arm, maybe interested in her answer.

“Just getting what was owed to me,” she said. She wasn’t looking at anyone, but Chase heard a breath catch behind him and took in the shocked expression on the face of the woman in the ballcap. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach that he wasn’t going to like what was coming.

“Owed? What is owed?” the other cop asked. Everyone was looking at the shop keep, who had wide eyes, his hands raised now as if he were the innocent one here and everyone had forgotten it.

“Thirty dollars he didn’t pay me for services rendered,” the girl said.

“She’s a damn liar!” the man shouted, and Chase took in the debacle of a scene and quietly kicked his ass for not filling up in the town forty miles back.