

Chapter 1

Kevin's role was simple, tag along and take the paper.

Of course, any reports he wrote would reflect the genius of his training officer. It didn't matter what division new guys worked, they were all treated the same. The only difference, in the detective bureau, the bullshit would end in a couple weeks.

He and his partner, Michael, were in the middle of a gravel lot with excavation equipment parked along its perimeter chain link, reminding Kevin how he used to line up his Tonka toys as a kid. His partner knocked a little too hard on the aluminum door and the trailer wall shuddered.

Earlier in the day, he was assigned a training officer and handed a case to get started. The entire file consisted of a scrap of paper bearing somebody's scribbled notes reporting the disappearance of two backhoes—worth three hundred thousand dollars each—from a local construction site. The theft took place downtown, three nights prior. No witnesses, evidence, or leads, thus making it the perfect dead-end investigation for a new detective.

He didn't know how to tell a backhoe from a grader. They were all painted yellow and none had license plates. He guessed the primary reason they were even at the equipment facility was its proximity to his partner's latest squeeze and he wanted an excuse to drop in on her.

He stood at the base of the wooden stairs leading to the trailer, while Michael charged forward.

"Geez, take it easy, will ya!" came a voice from within the trailer.

A scruffy-looking man opened the door. He was wearing a Star Wars tee-shirt one size too small and dirty white socks sticking out the bottom of his pant legs. "Yeah, whaddya want?"

Kevin's partner opened a badge wallet. "I'm Detective Michael Humphries. This is Detective Kevin Ingalls. We're with the Long Beach Police Department and would like to see your paperwork for the backhoes."

Scratching at the stubble on his chin, the man sucked in a quick breath. "You got a warrant?"

Michael turned to Kevin. "Get a black-and-white down here and have 'em stop every truck and trailer coming or going from this place."

"Hey! You can't do that," the man protested, waving an arm and filling the air with body odor.

Michael said, "Buddy, nothing's coming in or outta this place until you show me the goddamn titles."

"Take it easy, I've got 'em in here somewhere."

Michael followed the man into the trailer. Kevin caught the door before it closed on him.

The front of the trailer had a Formica counter across its width with a spring gate on the side. The rest of the space had been made into a waiting area with a tired-looking red sofa along a wall, a scratched oak coffee table and two white plastic lawn chairs with cigarette burns on the arms. Kevin was pretty sure he remembered seeing the couch and maybe the table in an alley behind one of the city's government housing

units when he had to transport prisoners for Vice. That was six weeks ago, when the sofa was being used by a couple of hookers to turn tricks behind the projects.

The man stepped behind the counter. "I really don't think I have any paperwork here."

Michael stuck a finger in the man's face. "We're gonna shut you down until we see the fucking titles, pal."

Kevin never lied in his police reports, but he considered himself to be an accomplished wordsmith when it came to fitting statements and actions into probable cause and the law. Even with his most creative writing skills and a gift for massaging the facts, turning this into a consent search might prove to be a challenge.

He shook his head. His first day on the job, and he had to get assigned to this showboater.

"I might have something down here," the man said as he stooped under the countertop.

Michael grabbed his forearm. "Get back up here, buddy, and don't be sticking your hands anywhere I can't see."

The man rubbed his arm where Michael held it, and his eyes darted side to side behind the counter. "I know it's here somewhere."

Michael leaned on the counter like a drunk in a bar and turned toward Kevin. "Last night, I went to the gym and my trainer was spotting for me."

Kevin looked surprised. "You have a personal trainer?"

“That’s not the important part,” he said. “Anyway, this really hot-looking chick comes in and I ask my trainer what machine should I work on so this babe will pay attention to me. He tells me the ATM cash dispenser.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. At the same time, the man behind the counter pushed a spring-loaded panel behind the counter, yanked a pistol-gripped shotgun out and slammed its receiver. The blast was deafening. Michael jerked with the impact, then stumbled back, a red stain spreading across his chest and left shoulder. Blood sprayed Kevin’s face and Michael corkscrewed into a heap on the floor.

Kevin and the gunman locked eyes, and for an instant time stood still.

The forearm on the pump shotgun moved back and forth, ejecting the spent shell and loading a fresh round. Time accelerated to fast forward and Kevin gasped for air, his body trembling with fear. Turning to get away, he tripped on a pair of work boots left on the floor. He hit the dirty linoleum as the second shot pounded into the aluminum sidewall over his head.

Pulse pounding, he scrambled across the floor, getting between the sofa and coffee table. He knocked the table over, using it as a shield, and scooted as close to it as he could. He didn't know if it would stop the blast from a shotgun, but he hoped and prayed it would.

He didn't think to grab the Ruger .380 in his ankle holster. He was only concerned with putting as much distance as he could between himself and the muzzle of the shotgun. He thought about making a dash for the door and looked around the edge of the table. However, Michael lay staring at the ceiling, gasping for air with a pool of blood spreading around him, blocking his escape.

Kevin jerked at the table, pulling it across the floor. It hung on a raised crack in the linoleum and fell on top of him, legs in the air as a third shot thundered from the shotgun. He felt the jolt as one of the stubby table legs splintered from the blast.

Bluish-grey smoke hung in the air from the shotgun. It tasted chalky and bitter as it lodged in Kevin's throat. Despite the ringing in his ears, he heard shuffling coming from the counter and braced himself for the man to come around and finish him off. In desperation and with the full weight of the table on him, he thrust his hand to his ankle holster and grabbed his pistol. The movement of reaching for his weapon caused the table to slide sideways.

His breath caught in his throat, and he raised his gun, expecting the man with the shotgun to be standing over him.

No one was there.

He looked across the floor and Michael was gone. Only a wide blood trail painted across the threshold remained.

Kevin aimed his pistol back and forth between the counter and the trailer door. Nothing.

His hands trembled. He gripped the small automatic harder, hoping it would stop the shaking and noticed that he had forgotten to disengage the manual safety. All dexterity was gone from his fingers and it took several tries to flip the safety and ready his weapon.

He tilted the table on its side for protection and peeked over the top. He felt something dribble down his legs and tensed. He glanced down expecting to see blood or discover he had been gut-shot, but there was no wound.

Outside, gravel crunched under a set of tires, followed by the sound of a car door being opened and shut. He aimed at the front door and his sights bounced wildly from the door to the wall and back. If the trailer door opened, he was going to shoot until his gun was empty and hope for the best.

“Drop the gun!” A man shouted from somewhere in the gravel yard, followed by a loud boom and five quick pistol shots.

The black-and-white he'd called to stop trucks from going in and out of the lot had arrived, and the shots outside were from the officer confronting the gunman. Shoving the table aside, he pushed himself up to join the officer. He slipped on the blood in the doorway, hit his head on the metal door frame. A burst of pain, and he fell unconscious outside the trailer.