

## Chapter 1

*did anybody see anything...*

Two shots rang out at close range.

John dropped his water bottle and reached instinctively for the Beretta on his hip. His F-150 fishtailed and bounced onto the grass. He battled it back onto the gravel and skidded to a stop, sliding down in the seat, pistol pointed out the window.

“Yee-haw!” A man on horseback, holding a six-gun over his head and dressed as a cowboy, complete with boots, hat, and gun belt, galloped past, just off the gravel road.

“What the hell?” John holstered his pistol and pushed himself upright. A quarter mile back, he drove under the overhead archway marking the Santa Anna River Shooting Complex. There were rules about where someone could shoot, even at a shooting complex, and shooting next to the road was strictly prohibited.

John had often seen shooters dressed like cowboys at the shooting complex, and occasionally they were on horseback. He thought they might be putting on a re-enactment, like groups commemorating Civil War battles. This guy was probably just an over-exuberant participant who’d ventured out of his designated shooting area. Dangerous behavior, but not criminal.

He blew out a slow breath as his adrenaline levels dropped. He’d report the event to the range office on his way out, to be on the safe side.

He arrived at the parking area, with dozens of cars scattered outside the pistol range. At the entrance, he parked in line with four other trucks, evenly spaced across the open gap of the range.

Built in the center of the Santa Ana flood control basin, the range consisted of several miles of open fields and areas with thick trees and underbrush surrounded by urban sprawl. There were close to two dozen tennis-court-sized ranges, each with dirt embankments or berms on three sides. A few larger ranges accommodated rifle shooters. North of the pistol ranges, an area for shotgun shooters had been established, with a sporting clays course and several trap and skeet fields.

In front of the trucks he’d parked beside, four other instructors, wearing similar red “STAFF” polo shirts, khaki cargo pants, and pistols, stood in a circle talking. They were a diverse group—

a woman, a Hispanic man, a black man, and a white cisgender male. That was a perk in the current political climate. But beyond that, they were a top-notch crew.

Mano, the youngest of the four, said something that made the others laugh. Then Rebecca rolled her eyes, and Blakesley, the veteran, gave the younger man a high five. Scott, a little less gregarious than the others, turned away, smirking, and caught John's eye. He nudged Blakesley with an elbow and raised a hand waving at their sergeant, John Chambers.

The range was nearly an hour drive from the Long Beach Police Department, but outdoor ranges were hard to come by. Officers who worked the range were assigned day shift with weekends off. Their time at the range was paid at an overtime rate, but having a set schedule with weekends off was the main draw. That, and all the free ammunition they wanted, made for a very attractive collateral assignment.

John walked up to the group and asked, "Did anyone see anything strange driving in here?"

Rebecca lifted an eyebrow and waved a hand to encompass the group. "You're going to have to be more specific than that, Sarge. I'm surrounded by strange things."

"I saw some guy dressed like a cowboy, riding a horse and shooting a revolver next to the road. I didn't know if I was witnessing a crime or just looking at a kook."

Mano looked up and flashed a grin. With his Hollywood features and boyish charm, the young Hispanic officer was good-looking and knew it, but was too personable to dislike. "Yeah, I've been seeing those guys a lot. I don't know what they're doing."

John said, "If you run into any of 'em, watch yourself. The guy looked like a wacko. Now, let's get this group started. Are you guys ready?"

Blakesley made a tumbling motion with his hand. "Let's roll."

The police recruits wore black cargo pants, baseball caps, and royal blue tee shirts with their last names embroidered in two-inch white letters front and back. Around their waists were shiny-new, thick leather duty belts known as Sam Browne belts. The belts were organized identically with holster and gun on one side, T-handle baton, known as a PR-24, on the opposite, two extra magazines in front, and handcuffs centered in the back.

Looking over the group, John shook his head. They looked younger every year.

Pushing the wannabe cowboy from his mind, John stepped away from the instructors and called out in a loud voice for all the recruits to hear, "I want the class sergeant, now!"

A fit Hispanic recruit who looked to be in his mid-twenties ran up and stood at attention. His head was shaved, he wore standard issue Oakley sunglasses, and tattooed just under his shirt sleeve was the combat infantry insignia of a musket over an oak leaf wreath. "Sir, Class Sergeant Flores reporting as ordered, Sir!"

"Flores, form the class up."

Flores barked back, "Sir, yes, Sir!" He made a sharp about face, took three steps, and then yelled, "I need all recruits to form up into your squads."

After a minute of shuffling and shoving into perfectly straight rows, the class sergeant waited for them to become settled before calling out, "Class...Attention!" He turned to John. "Sir, academy class is ready for inspection, Sir!"

It was obvious to John that Flores was chosen as the class sergeant for his military bearing.

John stood next to Flores. "At ease."

In unison, the recruits snapped their left legs eight inches to the left and moved their hands behind their backs to rest on their handcuff cases.

John looked out across the ranks and said, "There's a reason the department uses different staff officers for the range than at your regular academy. We're not here to gig you, have you do push-ups or make sure you're marching in step with spit-shined boots. Here at the range, there'll be no 'sir sandwiches.'" He glanced at Flores. "When asked a question, I don't want to hear, 'Sir, yes, Sir.' I want to hear your honest answer. When you're back at the academy, those staff officers demand a certain level of discipline. We have another. If you forget to enter a victim's date of birth on a crime report, your sergeant can make those corrections with you. If you make a mistake in a shooting situation on the streets, there's no fixing it. Somebody dies."

He paused a moment to let that sink in, then said, "Let me see a show of hands. Who served in the military?"

Of the 100 recruits, nine raised their hands, including Flores. John turned to Flores. "Have the class go to their cars and put away their batons. Then I want everyone to return wearing hearing

and eye protection. The nine recruits who raised their hands, have ‘em each bring a folding chair. Be back in formation in six minutes.”

While the recruits were at their cars, John walked back to the group of instructors.

“Okay,” he said. “Blakesley, you shoot the PPC course. The rest of us’ll just hang back and look pretty.

Right on time, the recruits were back, standing at attention.

Flores and John took their place in front of the class and John addressed the class. “I want our veterans who served our country so valiantly and courageously to put their chairs along the safe area, to the side of the range. You're welcome to sit, relax and drink water while the rest of the class stands out here with me. Those recruits who stayed at home watching *SpongeBob Square Pants* and voting to legalize marijuana, need to stand up and do something that just might benefit this country.”

John saw several recruits attempting to suppress grins and hoped they were cartoon fans and not dope smokers.