**ONE**

THE UNIFORM COP didn’t realize he’d stepped into a nest of vipers until the first gunshot took his right leg away. The second shot got him in the chest but only knocked the wind out of him since his sergeant had reminded him to wear his body armor that morning. This was only his second shift on patrol, and he shouldn’t have been alone on the street, but his tutor was in Maple’s Donuts at the corner of Fifth and Main. The third shot ended his career before it began, hitting him just above the Kevlar vest and blowing out his trachea.

All because the rookie was going to issue a ticket to the car parked in a no-waiting zone outside the Tres Cruces Western Fidelity Bank. That’s not where the gunshots came from though. The gunman was a silhouette against the early morning sun, like those Jap fighters that used to come out of twelve o’clock high, but that’s not what the kid was thinking. He just wished he’d gone in for a donut as well.

THE SUN ROSE early over the small desert town and was already high in the clear blue sky by the time life spilled onto the streets. Sprinklers came on automatically to combat the dry heat and keep the lawns green. Stars and Stripes were run up numerous flagpoles, ranging from the main one in the town square to the angled poles outside almost every house. Kids got ready for school and parents got ready to take them. Main Street Bakery already smelled of fresh bread and Maple’s Donuts had served three cops and a firefighter who were kick-starting their day with a caffeine fix and a pastry before getting ready for the early shift. Horses in a nearby field were skittish, as if sensing the day wasn’t going to be smooth sailing.

A veteran police sergeant read the morning briefing in a green-painted room next door to the radio despatch, the operator wondering who had decided that particular shade of green would be calming for the half-dozen cops sitting on hard wooden chairs. The sergeant reminded the rookie to wear his bulletproof vest, even though this was a quiet town. You never knew when there’d be trouble at the bakery. The radio operator called up the three patrol cars for any last reports that needed to be handed over to the day shift. Three cars. Six cops. That’s all it took to keep the peace in a town the size of Wal-Mart.

Across the street from Maple’s Donuts an elderly woman with a blue rinse and horn-rimmed glasses came out of Tres Cruces Western Fidelity Bank and ran up the flag. Same as every other day in the high desert. Until the woman went back inside and a black-gloved hand grabbed her from behind.

“ISN’T IT A bit early for a donut?”

“What’s this, your second shift?”

“It is.”

“Well, get used to this. If the sun’s up it’s never too early for a donut.” The long-service medal glinted in the morning sun as the older cop looked at his young charge. “Is the sun up?”

The rookie gave the same answer. “It is.”

The veteran held his hands out, palms skyward. “I rest my case.” He went into Maple’s Donuts, giving the young cop one last piece of advice. “Keep your eyes peeled. You never know when there’ll be trouble at the bakery.” He and the shift sergeant being on the same page.

The rookie let out a sigh and stood on the corner of Fifth and Main. Across the street the Stars and Stripes fluttered outside the bank. The lawn sprinklers had stopped but the damp grass glistened in the morning light. The sidewalk was already beginning to dry. He was watching steam rise off the lawn when the car pulled up at the curb, a rusty brown sedan that looked like it belonged in a ’70s action movie. Exhaust fumes pumped into the clean bright air. Nobody got out. The driver cranked down his window a couple of inches, tossed a cigarette onto the road, then cranked it back up.

The rookie saw all sorts of violations, litter being the least of them. Illegal parking, dangerous rust pockets and a hole in the exhaust. Those fumes were polluting an otherwise beautiful day. He glanced at the donut shop and considered waiting for his tutor, but he remembered how to write a ticket.

The engine rumbled and popped, a deep throaty roar each time the driver dabbed the accelerator. The rookie wondered about noise pollution but reckoned he already had enough to slap the driver with a hefty fine. He reached for his citation book and began to cross the street. He was halfway across when the bank doors burst open and the alarm sounded.

The rookie was quick. He didn’t panic and he didn’t fumble. First thing he did was get on the radio and call it in. “Two-eleven in progress at Western Fidelity.”

He kept it brief. Everyone knew where the bank was. All units knew to back up the first officer on the scene. The first officer on the scene was a rookie fresh out of the academy. Being fresh meant he was eager and fast. His hand went from the radio to his holster in one smooth movement, his eyes tracking the two men coming out of the bank while keeping the driver in his peripheral vision. He could already hear sirens from the other two patrol cars. The robbers were going to be boxed in before they reached the getaway car.

Being fresh also meant he was naïve. He didn’t realize he’d stepped into a nest of vipers until the first gunshot took his right leg away. The second shot got him in the chest, but the Kevlar vest took most of the blow. The two men carrying canvas moneybags kept low and ducked behind the car. The driver revved the engine. It was the fourth man who was doing the shooting. He came around the side of the bank with the low sun at his back. The young cop dropped to one knee, still struggling to get his service weapon out of its holster. The gunman took careful aim just above the bulletproof vest and ended the rookie’s career.

The veteran cop came out of Maple’s Donuts and fired twice. Not at the gunman but at the driver’s window. There would be no getaway without a getaway driver. The glass shattered and the shock jerked the driver’s foot on the gas pedal. The ’70s action movie car shot forward and knocked over a fire hydrant. Water gushed into the air and the two men with the bags dived for cover. The gunman fired across the street at the veteran cop, but adrenaline and distance were against him. This wasn’t shooting a rookie at point-blank range; this was returning fire under combat conditions. The veteran cop fired again to keep the gunman’s head down.

The sirens grew louder. The alarm rang out across the street. Water soaked the sidewalk and created a rainbow in the morning sun. The Stars and Stripes fluttered in the breeze as if nothing unusual was happening. The horses in a nearby field bolted. There were gunshots and squealing tires. This was a long way from trouble at the bakery. Two patrol cars screeched around the corner, blue lights flashing. The veteran knelt behind his own unit and leveled his gun across the hood. The scene was set for the final act shootout. Everyone was in position when a voice shouted through the bullhorn.

“Cut. Check the gate.”

The tension went out of the scene. After a few moments the voice shouted again. “Close-up on the robbers. Reset.”

Larry Unger stood next to his technical adviser outside Maple’s Donuts. The short dumpy movie producer looked pleased with himself. “You did good Vince. None of the cops walked like ducks.”

Vince McNulty looked less than happy. The ex-cop didn’t like to see cops getting shot, even if it was just for Titanic Productions’ latest action movie. “Yeah, well, you never know how you’re going to move when the shit hits the fan.”

Then the film crew reset the lights and camera for the close-ups.