

PROLOGUE

WELCOME TO THE NEW O.K. CORRAL

Officer Kim Knudsen turned up the air-conditioning of the squad car. On hot, steamy nights like this, even maximum AC couldn't compete with Chicago's humidity.

"Hot enough for you?" she asked her partner, Vinnie Velez.

"*Muy caliente*," said Velez, showing a smile of too-white teeth. The rookie thought he was a ladies' man. "But some of us like it hot."

The happily married Kim, and mother of two, smiled at her partner's attempt at flirting and said, "I like it quiet."

Of late, Chicago had been anything but quiet. The Windy City no longer felt like the same place she'd grown up in. It had become the murder capital of the US, with up to fifteen homicides every week, and things only seemed to be getting worse. Gangbangers were fighting for turf, and citizens and cops were merely collateral damage. It seemed as if every month Kim had to put on her dress uniform and go to the funeral of yet another CPD officer, where she had to listen to the mayor do his usual lip service.

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“Are you up for going to the range Saturday?” Velez asked.

“Sounds good to me. I’ll just have to make sure Tom can look after the kids.”

When Velez had become her new partner, Kim insisted the two of them spend some time together at the shooting range. She had found it was a good way to bond. Besides, she wanted to make sure her partner had her back. Anything that improved her chances of making it home to her family was a good thing.

“Which range?” asked Velez.

Kim didn’t even have to think about it. “The old hall suits me. Libertyville gets too many suits.”

Libertyville, Kim thought, almost felt like a club. The police union had pushed for its construction. Kim’s thinking was that if something wasn’t broken it didn’t need fixing. It was the same way with her service weapon. The police union had pushed for every cop to be outfitted with the Sight-Clops—the supposed latest and greatest in gunsight laser technology. She and Vinnie had recently been equipped with the holographic gunsight, and had tried it out the previous week on the range. After the first go-around, Kim with her “show me” attitude had found herself pleasantly surprised by her target practice results.

“Just call me Annie Oakley,” she’d said to Vinnie. Then again, even without Sight-Clops, Kim was already an expert shot.

The squawk box suddenly came to life. During patrol, the voice of dispatchers was a constant drone only half-listened to, but they were all ears when it came to hot calls that involved them. Shots were being fired in West Englewood.

Velez liked to complain that Kim drove “like a grandma.” That was true enough, until they got dispatches like this one. Kim pressed down on the accelerator of the 470 horsepower Dodge Charger, and hit the sound-and-light show. With sirens blaring and

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the rooftop showing a “rocket’s red glare,” the squad car approached warp speed before it came to a screeching stop on South Racine Avenue near 63rd. They could see other squad cars had already gathered at the opposite block’s end near 64th and Ogden Park.

The area looked like a war zone. White flight had occurred long ago; that had left the blight of burnt out and ransacked buildings towering over decaying streets. It didn’t look like an area worth fighting over, but the two vying gangs didn’t seem to have gotten that memo. Shots rang out even as the gangbangers began running off in all directions; the presence of cops meant a short timeout in their game of killing.

Guns drawn, Kim and Velez jumped out of their squad car. They used the shelter of their opened doors to hunker behind and get the lay of the land—and of the carnage. Several bodies were bleeding out in the street.

From the shadows, they heard the staccato sound of approaching footsteps. Someone was running their way. To her left, Kim saw a presence take form. A skinny, wild-eyed kid wearing a red hoodie showed himself. In his right hand, she could see a gun.

Her partner saw the same thing. Staying low, Velez circled around the patrol car and took up a position roughly ten yards in front of the driver’s side of the car. Kim wished she could wave him back, but it was too late. Vinnie was too gung-ho by half. She was the one who should be taking point. At least the rookie had known to position himself slightly to the right of Kim to keep clear of her direct line of fire.

“Drop the gun!” screamed Velez. “Drop it! Hit the ground! Now!”

For a moment, the gangbanger slowed, but then thought better of it and started to raise his gun. That was enough for Kim. She centered on his chest and fired. The banger should have been hit.

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He should have dropped where he stood. But he was somehow untouched.

From the corner of her eye, Kim saw Vinnie falling to his knees and then toppling over. There had only been one shot. Her shot. But how could she have shot Vinnie? That couldn't be right. That was impossible.

"Vinnie!" she screamed.

Her partner would have to wait, though. The kid was turning his gun her way. As Kim raised her own gun, and focused her hologram sight on the banger, she shot and missed. With her target point blank, Kim fired a second time.

And missed.

The banger didn't. Kim never got off her third shot. The fire in her gut dropped her to the asphalt. She tried to right herself, but no longer had the strength to get up. From the ground she found herself staring at Vinnie. He wasn't moving.

Kim thought of Tina, her four-year-old, and Jason who was seven. Mommy wouldn't be coming home tonight. Mommy might never come home again. Before leaving for work Kim remembered she'd told each of her children she loved them. There was that at least, but it wasn't nearly enough.

She tried to slow the flow of blood coming out of her. Every second that passed was making her more lightheaded. I'm like the Little Dutch Boy, she thought, but I can't keep the dike from breaking. She lost consciousness as her blood filled the street.



See the world, Cary Jones thought. That's what the army recruiter had told him. It had sounded so good coming out of the mouth of that slick recruiter in his dress uniform. Now, at the ripe old age of nineteen, Cary realized that just about anything would have

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sounded good to a kid who'd never been out of South Carolina. Hell, he'd barely been out of Gaffney. Growing up he'd thought of Gaffney as a shithole. But that was before he'd been deployed to Afghanistan. That whole damn country was a shithole.

The army said it was his job to train local militias in the proper use of firearms. The ragheads loved to shoot off weapons, but had little interest in doing anything else. At least half his trainees were high on kif. And even a kid from Gaffney could see that those he was training had no dog in the fight. Over the centuries, countless invaders had tried to make their claim to parts of this ancient land of warlords and fiefdoms. Eventually, the invaders all went away, always the worse for wear. The natives knew it was only a matter of time.

Those that Cary Jones was supposed to be training had the ultimate short-timer's attitude. Maybe that's why no one had showed up for training that morning. Why bother? Of course, it was possible there was some holiday going on. And it was damned hot, even by Afghanistan standards. The recruits might have come to their senses and said it was too hot to work. Or maybe they weren't in their senses, having gotten their hands on some great kif.

Or maybe they knew the shit was about to hit the fan.

When bullets were flying, or if danger even seemed imminent, the Afghan recruits were always noticeably absent. Earlier that day, Cary had reported the no-shows to his sergeant. It was enough for the regular guard to be doubled. Of course since his recruits hadn't shown up leaving him nothing to do, Cary had been assigned to that guard. Even worse, he'd been given picket duty. He was the first line of defense for the camp.

Cary didn't even want to think how hot and humid it was. Even the mangy local dogs were staying put. Everyone back home used to complain about the steamy, summer weather. Little did they

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know that compared to the weather in Afghanistan, Gaffney was heaven. Sure it got hot back home, but not hot like this. What was it that Grandma used to say? Then he remembered: “It’s so hot the hens are laying boiled eggs.”

Grandma was a big woman who didn’t like the heat. She used to go to church carrying a big, white fan, and during the sermon she’d work that fan something fierce. Grandma was a Bible-thumper. Before being deployed, she’d prayed for him, quoting some biblical passage about his being a stranger in a strange land. Gran had sure been right about that. Cary felt like that guy in Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* who was so far from home on that lonely and desolate planet. Afghanistan was his Mars, he decided. Cary wasn’t much of a reader, but that had been a pretty cool book, at least compared to other books he’d been assigned in high school. When he’d arrived in Afghanistan he’d been shown around by a seasoned grunt who’d said, “This ain’t quite the end of the world, but squint a little and you can see it from here.”

Cary fought the torpor that came from the heat and tried to remain watchful. It was all he could do to raise his head. In the distance, where the winding road showed itself, he saw movement. Two figures were coming his way.

It might have been too hot for the dogs, thought Cary, but not for Ahmad. Cary didn’t even need to raise his binos to make an ID on the kid. Ahmad had a way of carrying himself that separated him from the rest of the rat pack. And when he came “on a sales call,” as this apparently was, he always wore his best Pashtun clothing. Sarge always told Cary and the other soldiers to not “engage” with the Afghan children, but Cary was an easy mark. Besides, to Cary’s thinking, kids were kids whether they were in Gaffney or Kabul. Ahmad separated himself from his peers, though. The other children begged for candy or gum, but not Ahmad. He was like a

peddler of old, always trying to hawk one trinket or another. Cary was always buying one of Ahmad's so-called "priceless relics."

The kid's companion was much older. He had to be the grandfather Ahmad was always talking about. That was another thing about Ahmad. His English was better than anyone else's in the village because he was always trying to sell anything he could to the soldiers.

"I will bring my grandfather to meet you," Ahmad had said. "No one makes sandals like Grandfather. You will see. He will make you some."

Sandals, thought Cary. As if he needed, or would wear sandals in this place. With all the camel spiders and scorpions around, Cary didn't dare wear sandals, but he was always a sucker for Ahmad's sales pitch. The kid—he couldn't be more than twelve—could have made a fortune in the States selling used cars.

Ahmad and his grandfather continued their trek up the hill. "My American friend!" the boy shouted. "I have brought my grandfather to greet you!"

Cary wasn't listening though. Other sounds had his attention. A billowing cloud of dust and smoke signaled the approach of a vehicle. The moving cloud obscured the driver and his passengers, but Cary was pretty sure what was coming up the pass wasn't the Welcome Wagon.

"Get off the road!" Cary screamed, wildly gesturing for Ahmad and his grandfather to scatter.

Ahmad tugged hard at the hand of his grandfather, but the old man could only move so fast. Roaring up the incline, and emerging from its dust cloud, Cary saw a makeshift-armored Toyota 4Runner. He pivoted, sprinting towards the fortified sentry post. As he vaulted behind a cement barricade, he heard the sound of bullets striking all around him, but it was the blast that rained debris down on him that really got his attention.

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Shit. They had an RPG, and the sky was on fire.

From a kneeling position, Cary raised his eyes above the cement barricade. The mujahideen were firing away from every open window in the 4Runner. It was time for Cary to return the favor. He scoped on the driver's head and fired.

The windshield should have shattered. The driver's brains should have splattered all over the rest of the mujahideen. But Cary's round somehow went right—far right—opening up a red bloom that began coloring the robe of Ahmad's grandfather. The old man staggered, then fell to the ground.

Ahmad's wail was louder than the gunfire. His cry of pain and betrayal filled the air. Cary's barricade couldn't shield him from that raw anguish. Nothing could. Cary peered over the cement wall, but wished he hadn't. Ahmad was staring at him. Tears were pouring down his anguished face. The boy knew that Cary had fired the round that killed his grandfather. Cary knew that as well, although he didn't know how in the hell that had happened.