

THE SILVER NINJA®: A BITTER WINTER (Preview)

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INTRODUCTION

In the year 2010, Dr. Ursula Wolf created the first hybrid single cell organism. Made of both organic matter and machinery, her creation became the first step into what would eventually be called: nanotechnology.

Several years later that same nanotechnology would be used to create the world's first . . .
Super-human.

CHAPTER 1: From Hero to Zero

Three days ago a member of the Mubarizun of Allah walked into a soccer stadium in France and blew himself up. He waited for the home team to score before pulling the detonation cord on his suicide vest. Thousands of screaming fans were rushed to local hospitals with their limbs lost among the wreckage. Last week, an MOA zealot barreled a van through Times Square. Seven were mutilated and crushed under the weight of the madman's vehicle. It was the age of terror.

This was when she was once human. Before her name instilled fear. Before her body became a weapon. Before she inspired a revolution. She was Cindy Ames, a woman who wore her history through the aged, subtle scars on her left cheek bone and the bridge of her nose.

Tonight the Javits Center was host to a brand new conference called Future Technology Today. All the important political VIP's (except for the governor) were going to be in attendance. The security was so high that even the Emergency Services Unit SWAT team and K-9 unit were on patrol.

Cindy watched the SWAT officers from her security checkpoint near the main entrance. On a normal day, ESU would be all smiles when chatting with fellow LEOs. But tonight, they were severe and quiet with their fingers near the trigger. The threat of another MOA attack was real and everyone needed to be on point. Despite the tension, she was jealous of them. Two years ago, when Cindy used to call herself officer, she had an opportunity to train with the ESU SWAT team. The first time she had tried on a vest and helmet, she remembered being surprised at the heaviness of the gear and how awkward it was to push the stock of an M4 carbine into her shoulder. It was fun though, and made her feel badass whenever she carried it. She missed being a law enforcement officer, being a LEO was definitely better than being a security guard at Javits. Not that there was anything wrong with security, it just wasn't what she wanted.

An officer from the K-9 unit crossed her line of sight. She smiled at the German Shepard being led on a leash with its snout sniffing the freshly mopped floor. She once considered trying out for the K-9 unit but was too afraid of being bitten by police dogs in training. She saw the scars some of the guys had and didn't want to add more to her collection.

A young guy, a hipster type, with the classic horn rimmed glasses, thick beard, flannel shirt, and torn jeans approached her checkpoint. He had a backpack strapped to his shoulders and had willfully ignored a sign which read: *No backpacks, luggage, or bags allowed, no exceptions.* He took out his cellphone and showed Cindy his barcode to get in.

"Sorry, Sir. No backpacks allowed tonight."

“No worries, it’s just for my laptop.”

“You’re going to have to leave your items with us. You can pick it up after the event.”

“Um, I work for the press and I need this to take notes.”

“What press?”

“It’s a new startup in Bay Ridge.”

He handed her a business card. She didn’t bother to look at it. “Never heard of it. Use your cell phone for notes, leave the bag and your laptop here.”

“This is ridiculous. I have a right to free speech. You ever heard of freedom of the press?”

She questioned whether this kid actually worked for the press, if he did, he would know MOA’s sick preference for blowing people up with backpacks. There was no way she was going to let herself be blamed for a bomb getting through. The man shrugged off the straps of his backpack. “Hope you’re enjoying your power trip.” As he crossed the metal detector he muttered, “You rent-a-cop.”

“Excuse me, Sir. I need you to come back.”

Those waiting in line backed away from the checkpoint. The scrawny young man spun on his feet and looked at her as if she were baseborn.

“What?”

“Could you please repeat what you said?” Despite Cindy’s head only coming up to his chest, the hipster seemed to have lost his nerve. “Something about a rent-a-cop?”

“It was a joke.”

“You think I’m a joke because I’m a security guard?”

“N—no of course not.”

She pointed at the numerous signs at the main entrance, hanging banners, and the security checkpoint itself. “The signs over there, there and there say no backpacks allowed. You know why? Because we don’t want terrorists to blow us all up. But you seem to think the rules don’t apply to you. So now you get the first class TSA treatment.” She clicked on her radio. “Fourteen to Command One.”

“Go ahead fourteen.”

“I’m sending a guest over to the police checkpoint for a strip search. He tried to sneak a backpack through the south access point.”

“10-4 we’ll send someone over.”

Cindy looked up at the mortified young man and glared at him. “There’s nothing funny about backpack bombs. Follow the rules next time.” She faced the crowd and shouted, “Next!”

By seven o'clock, there were people everywhere. If they weren't drinking overpriced lattes at the café they were milling about the vendor kiosks on the exhibition floor behind her. She was surprised that so many people had come. She expected this kind of turnout at Comic Con but not a technology conference. While she scanned in guests, a hand reached out from the crowd and tapped her shoulder.

She spun around and mentally prepared her usual speech, *Bathrooms are downstairs to your right, the presentation is*—her face suddenly brightened. “Hey baby!” She threw her arms around Jonas's neck. “I'm so happy to see you.”

“I'm surprised I got the jump on you. You're usually like a motion detector.” Jonas flashed his trademark boyish smile. His hair was the color of oil, freshly shaved on the sides, styled with gel on top. His jaw was buttery smooth from a clean shave and he smelled like the night they first slept together. There was something about his smile and calm demeanor that was infectious. She couldn't stay mad or grouchy whenever he was around. Hopefully this will still be the case once the honeymoon phase is over.

“Look at you all cleaned up and sexy like you're going on a date,” she said with a smirk. “Who's the lucky girl,” she teased.

“My wife.” He smiled at her. “Smart ass.”

She sighed. “I'd rather be hanging out with you than standing here.”

“Having a tough night?”

“Work sucks today.”

“You always say it sucks.”

“I got snippy with a guest. Wasn't my best moment.”

“What'd he do?”

“He disrespected me.”

“Uh oh.” He gave her a sideways glance. “Did you hit him?”

“They'd fire me if it wasn't in self-defense. No, I just sent him over to the police checkpoint for a strip search.”

Jonas chuckled. “Oh well he's lucky then. You hit pretty hard for a little woman.”

“If I see the guy I should probably apologize.”

“Hell no.” Jonas seemed offended she would even suggest that. “You made the right call. No one wants to explode tonight, especially me.”

“Thank you.” She adjusted the collar of his shirt. “Why didn't you tell me you were going to clean up tonight? I would've—” she leaned in. “—worn a thong.”

Jonas raised his eyebrows with interest. "I have to present in front of all these people. The last thing I need is my flag at full mast."

She grinned mischievously. "We've been married two years and I still feel like I can't get enough of you. Working security at night and gymnastics during the day sucks."

Jonas lifted her chin. "That's going to change after tonight. Once I finalize selling my company to Raymond you can quit both jobs and do whatever you want." He rested his hands on her hips. "And we'll definitely celebrate. Do you still have that polka dot thing you bought?"

Her lips spread into a toothy grin. "That's what I would've worn," her voice became sweet like melted chocolate. "Anyway." She changed the subject and opened her eyes wide with amusement. "Did you see your giant photo?"

"The one they plastered on the steps?" He grimaced. "I look like an idiot."

"You don't look like an idiot." She giggled. "You look like you belong in a Hispanic boy band. Eres muy lindo, Papi."

"I can't wait till they take it down."

Cindy laughed. "I took a picture with my phone."

"Oh come on."

She tapped his arm. "You should get going. I don't want you to be late." Cindy went up on her tip toes and kissed his lips. "Love you."

"Love you too."

After Jonas had gone, she continued to dwell on the idea of quitting her jobs. Well . . . maybe not gymnastics. Life would be a little too boring if she couldn't teach her students. It was nice to have a group of young girls who looked up to her and treated her with respect.

The voice from the head of security blasted out of her radio. "Command One to Fourteen."

Cindy squeezed the radio which had a number fourteen label taped on it. "Go ahead."

"Head of security wants you reassigned to the mayor when he gets here. Make sure he and his family have no problems getting where they need to go. If the mayor asks where the bathroom is, you take him there."

"He has a security detail."

"Doesn't matter. You're the point man."

"Shouldn't the shift supervisor—"

"They're dealing with a vehicle situation down at the loading dock. Handle it."

"Copy."

The photographers circled around the mayor's family like vultures eyeing a meal. His security detail, a group of men wearing suits and sunglasses, shoved anyone who got too close.

A bored looking teenager shuffled in the middle of the group. Her hair was a collection of black squiggles barely controlled by a scrunchie. Blonde accents shot across the crown of her head to break up the black, a style inspired by a popular musician. Her name was Priscilla Montez, she was the mayor's daughter and also happened to be a student at Ninja Gymnastics.

"Mrs. Ames?" Priscilla jumped with excitement. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm . . . working security," she said with resignation.

"Oh my gosh." Priscilla looked horrified. "Does that mean you're not teaching gymnastics anymore? I thought we—"

"It's just a part time gig. Don't tell anyone okay?"

"Why not?"

"You know how you don't want photographers to bother you when you come to my class to practice your uneven bars? Same thing here. Can you promise not to tell anyone?"

"Of course!" Priscilla waved her family over. "Mom, dad, come here. My coach is working security."

"Great . . ." Cindy muttered.

Mayor Montez approached with a confident stride. He reached across his droopy chest and into his suit jacket pocket. He pulled out a printed ticket with a barcode and held it in front of his barrel belly. The photographers swooped in with their shutters clicking, bulbs flashing. Cindy put her hand over her face and scanned the mayor's ticket.

"Smile for the camera," a photographer yelled.

"No, thank you."

The photographers were caught off guard. Not many people turned down a photo op with the mayor. "Come on. Just a quick one of the two of you."

Cindy shook her head no.

Mayor Montez leaned in with a big, genuine smile. "No need to be shy," he said reassuringly. "The sooner we take the photo the sooner they'll be out of your hair."

Cindy felt sick to her stomach. She didn't want the guys on the force to see her picture on newspapers or social media. She didn't want them laughing at her for becoming a security guard.

"Can we not take the photo, Sir? I have personal reasons."

The mayor nodded and told the photographers they would take a family photo instead. Mayor Montez blocked Cindy from view and held onto the shoulders of his wife and daughter. Once the flashes were gone, he turned around and introduced his wife.

"You remember my wife, Carmen."

How could she forget Carmen? Despite being rich and the Mayor's wife, she was refreshingly down to earth. Unlike most wealthy parents, Carmen did not give Priscilla everything she wanted. All she gave her was a roof over her head and food in her belly. If she wanted new shoes or expensive clothes she had to earn it by working, volunteering, studying, or doing chores. It did not matter if you approached Carmen with holes in your shirt and two dollars in your wallet. She would happily welcome you into her luxurious home with open arms. "Mrs. Ames, it is absolutely delightful to meet you again." She extended her hand. "Where is your sister, Jadie?"

Cindy smiled and shook her hand. "She might stop by a little later."

"Wonderful. Priscilla simply cannot stop raving about the both of you and your class. I knew once she started putting on her father's underwear and tying a towel around her neck that gymnastics would be a perfect fit for her."

"Mom . . ."

"She would lift the furniture and make-believe she had super strength."

"Mom! Oh my God."

Carmen waved her hand. "Oh honey, relax."

"Priscilla if that's the most embarrassing thing you've done, I will happily trade places with you."

"Me too," Carmen added.

Priscilla shook her head. "Please kill me."

Mayor Montez turned to Cindy. "How long has it been since you've left the force?"

She grimaced, hard. "Two years now, Sir."

"That's a shame. I thought the uniform suited you."

"Me too," she said quietly.

"I bet you were a badass cop," Priscilla said.

The mayor's security detail barged into the conversation and informed the mayor they were clear to travel. Cindy radioed command to let them know she had the VIP and led the family to the third floor where Jonas's big presentation was fifteen minutes away from commencement. At the end of the convention hall was the elevated stage where Jonas would make his appearance. Standing near the base of the presentation platform were two men surrounded by their own security detail. Senator James Albright and a man whom Cindy had hoped never to see again. Police Commissioner Patrick Gates.

The mayor waved the men over. She didn't know Commissioner Gates was going to be here, didn't even see him check in. She tailed the mayor's bodyguards and used them as moving wall cover.

"Quite the turn out," Senator Albright said. "I wish this many people would turn up to the polls."

"Then we'd be out of the job," Mayor Montez said.

They laughed.

"You know." Commissioner Gates lowered his voice. "I'm eager to see this new toy I've been hearing about. Have you guys heard about this?"

They shook their heads.

"Supposedly this presentation is about a combat suit; thin, lightweight, completely bulletproof. I would love to get my hands on one."

"Don't come crawling to me with a proposal to increase your budget," Mayor Montez replied.

"Dad," Priscilla whined. "Do you really have to talk about your boring politics right now?"

"It's called work, Muñeca. Zip it."

She watched the commissioner from within the shadow of the broad chested guard. Being short sometimes came in handy, this was one of those times. Carmen walked up to Cindy and touched her shoulder.

"What are you doing hiding, Mrs. Ames? Don't tell me these men intimidate you."

"What? No. No." She stammered. "I don't want to get in the way."

"Nonsense." Carmen took Cindy's hand. "No need to be bashful. These men have the same flaw you and I do. They are human."

She tried to squirm away. "No, Carmen, please. I don't need to speak with them."

As Cindy gently, but firmly resisted Carmen's nudging, a tall, blonde woman shoved her way through the crowd and made a bee-line for the mayor. The guards spotted her right away.

"We got incoming."

The blonde woman stood at almost six feet tall. She twisted and side-stepped through the crowd while calling out, "Sis, Sis," before being tackled by two bodyguards. "Ow. What did I do?"

"Damn it, Jadie," Cindy muttered to herself. She left the shadow of the security guard and told them the woman was her sister.

The guards ignored her and looked to Mayor Montez for the approval.

"Dad, tell your jerk bodyguards to let go of my coach."

Mayor Montez waved his hand. "You don't need to bully my voters."

The security guards released her. Jadie rubbed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “Thanks a lot. Jerks.”

The guards scattered and left Cindy out in plain view of Commissioner Gates. The man she hated, glared at her with an equal amount of hatred in his own eyes. The reason she wasn’t a cop anymore was because of him and the reason his son wasn’t alive was because of her.

“I didn’t know they were hiring more—” Commissioner Gates leashed his tongue in the presence of the mayor and his family. “—more personnel. You didn’t mention Cindy was with you, Manny.”

“She’s not technically—“

Cindy cut him off. “I’m with the Javits center, Sir. They requested I guide the Mayor.”

“Security.” Commissioner Gates’s face narrowed into a wolfish grin. “Good for you to still be able to find work befitting of your skills. Being a part of New York’s finest is a tough, demanding job, it’s not for everyone. I think you’ve definitely found your calling.”

She was amazed by how easily the commissioner was able to call her a piece of shit without anyone noticing. She stared at his smug face and fantasized about cracking him across the jaw.

She took a deep breath and swallowed her emotions. “Well . . . I should get back to my post. Enjoy the show.”

“You do that.”

“Bye Mrs. Ames.” Priscilla waved cheerily. “See you in class later.”

Cindy walked out of their line of sight and deflated. She didn’t even want to watch Jonas’s presentation anymore. She just wanted to go home and crawl into bed. The commissioner had stomped her last scrap of dignity under the heel of his glossy black loafer.

“Hey you okay?” Jadie put her arm around Cindy’s waist. “Don’t listen to that prick.” Jadie waved a middle finger over her shoulder. “You want to hear something ironic?”

“What,” she said without enthusiasm.

“Mayor Montez said don’t bully my voters, but I never voted for him. Whoops.”

Before Cindy could respond, a familiar voice boomed through the convention center loud speakers.

“Standing behind me is a technology the likes of which you have never seen. It is both robotic and organic. And before anyone out there gets too excited, it’s not a Terminator.”

“Jonas’s presentation,” Cindy whined. “I’m missing it.”

“So let’s not.” Jadie dragged Cindy over to the presentation stage. “I’m excited to see what this thing is.”

Jonas paced across the stage with a small microphone curved around his cheek.

“Imagine a suit no thicker than a hundred page paperback novel capable of being burned, shot, and hit with no damage to the user. A combat suit that you don’t need to squeeze into but can still give you the strength to lift a car. You wouldn’t believe it exists, but it does because my team at Lucent Labs has created it.”

Jonas pointed to a giant capsule standing behind him. The cylinder hissed. Gasses spilled out from its exhaust ports and curled across the stage platform.

“I feel like I’m on a movie set,” she said to Jadie.

“Yeah it’s like, overly dramatic.”

“He loves to make a big show. I wouldn’t be surprised if he filled that thing with dry ice.”

Jadie laughed.

Jonas strode to the right of the stage and pointed to the awakening machine. “Ladies and gentlemen I present to you, Stealth—” The lights throughout the convention floor went dark. Jonas’s voice lost its amplified volume. “—umm, hello? Can anyone hear me?”

The spectators turned on their cell phone flashlights and murmured amongst themselves. The Lucent Labs team joined him on stage and checked the cables to investigate the power outage.

Cindy squeezed the broadcast button on her radio. “Fourteen to Command One.” A loud buzzing rang from the speaker, possibly interference from all the cell phones nearby. She turned to Jadie and said, “I’m going to check out the loading dock to see if everything is all right. I want you to get Jonas and his friends out of here, just in case.”

“You think it’s serious?”

“No, but I don’t want to take any chances. I’ll call you once I know what’s going on.”

A sound, like a giant lawnmower sputtering its diesel engine, vibrated the walls of the convention floor and the wooden kiosks. The auxiliary lights powered up and cast dim light over the crowd. Cindy looked up at Jadie and smiled. “Probably just a brown out.”

She went down the narrow grates of a stopped escalator and ventured to the locked doors accessible only to Javits personnel. She waved her badge keycard and continued through musty cement corridors where she walked past forklifts and stacks of plywood. The feral cats *employed* by the Javits Center took notice of Cindy and followed her shadow. After too many complaints from loading dock workers about rats jumping out of boxes, the Javits Center captured and vaccinated a feral cat colony to deal with the infestation.

Cindy found a cat sitting atop a spilled puddle of red paint next to a Javits moving van. She made a feeble smile and gingerly approached the animal.

“Hey there.”

The cat stared at her and meowed.

“You’re cute,” she said in a gentle voice. “You don’t care that I’m a loser.”

The cat meowed again and swished its tail.

“I’m supposed to check on something down here but you make me feel better. So I’m just going to pet you for a little bit and get back to work, okay?”

Cindy knelt by the cat and noticed red paint over its paws. “Did you knock over a paint can?” She pet the animal which purred at her touch. “They’re going to fire you for that. No more free food.” A strong, nauseating smell of copper wafted into her nose. She sniffed the cat and didn’t smell anything. She smelt the puddle and coiled back. “This isn’t paint.”

There was a scarlet trail leading from the cat to a parked van. There she found the slain corpse of a woman next to the tires. Her eyeballs were bulging out of their sockets and her blouse was stained with an explosion of red ink. The head of security ID badge dangled uselessly from her chest.

“Oh my God.”

CHAPTER 2: A Taste of Death

The cats gathered around and licked the blood off the face of the former head of security. Cindy fell back and landed on her bottom. Her hand patted around the floor and stopped atop a slimy rock. Her fingers had poked into something soft and squishy. She looked down and shrieked when she saw her finger pushing an eyeball inside the skull of her shift supervisor. They were dead, they were all dead.

“Oh my God, Oh my God.” Her hand trembled as she spoke into her radio. “Fourteen to Command One. I need—I need police officers at the lower level loading dock. 10-34 Young. Send a—” There was a hole the size of a quarter punched into the shift supervisor’s head. She closed her eyes and held the radio with both hands. “—send a 10-54 Union.”

The radio whistled and popped over a bed of buzzing noise. “Hello? Command One do you copy?” She couldn’t hear anyone over the growling radio. “Are there any ESU units on this frequency? Hello?” She checked her boss and the shift supervisor’s body for the master keys but they were missing. A sound of whispering in the windless corridors made her freeze where she was. There were men talking in hushed tones. Cindy pressed the radio to her chest and crouched next to the parked van.

“Did you hear something?” the voice said.

She steadied her breath but couldn’t stop the pounding in her chest. Her neck and back ached from the stress flooding her system. She pushed against the driver’s side door and listened. Heavy boots thumped over the crunch of loose asphalt. Each step jingled like keys or handcuffs. Was it the police? She leaned past the headlights for a better look.

A group of men, six from what she could gather, stood behind the open hatch of a delivery truck. A man wearing a bullet proof vest and gas mask climbed into the back of the truck and began prying open crates with a crowbar. Definitely not police, but they didn’t look like Mubarizun terrorists either. For starters, MOA members were poor and didn’t have access to much equipment. These guys were unloading machineguns from the back of the truck. They must have been hired mercenaries, but who hired them?

Cindy tried to call 911 through her cell phone but she had no reception. She was connected to the Wi-Fi but for some reason the call wasn’t going through.

“Probably a cat. You see how many are down here? It’s like a cat house. Get it? Cat . . . house?”

“I got it you moron. And since when do cats sound like women?”

“Well they are puss—“

Cindy's radio screamed with distorted, ear splitting noise. "—up *static* Rep—me—ge." She frantically twisted the volume knob and shoved the speaker against her jacket.

"I knew there was something over there." The mercenary raised his gun.

Her sneakers squeaked against the floor. There were mechanical clicks of pregnant ammo box feeders being snapped onto their weapons.

"You were supposed to kill all the security guards."

"I did!"

Cindy bolted from the van and ran as hard as she could. She slid around a corner and crashed into the wall leading to the stairwell. The footsteps chased after her but she didn't dare look back. She tore up the stairwell steps and rammed through the heavy doors at the top. She slammed the doors shut and put all her weight against them. Her shirt became wet with fear as she waited for the doors to slam into her back but they never did. Did they stop chasing her?

A German Shepard lunged at Cindy with saliva spraying from its chomping maws; barking as it stood on its hind legs. She screamed and shielded her face. The officer from the K-9 unit yanked on its leash and gave the command to stand down. The dog immediately sat with its ears pointed at full attention.

"Sorry about Bishop," the officer said. "He's been acting weird."

"There's six gunmen downstairs, they've got guns, and—and I think they shot my boss, and they were chasing me—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa slow down, take a breath, and tell me what you saw."

"I-I-I saw shooters at the loading dock."

"Shooters? Are you positive?"

She nodded.

His eyes went wide. "The mayor." The officer called on his radio only to be greeted by the same interference she encountered. "Something's wrong with the radio. Can you lock that door?"

"My boss was down there and she had the master key."

"Damn it. Okay. We need to find the mayor and get him out of here."

"I don't have a gun."

"That's okay, we got Bishop." He scratched the dog's neck. "Right boy? What's your name anyway?"

"Cindy."

"Cindy? Got it. You can call me Yang. C'mon, let's get going."

"We have to block this door first."

Cindy grabbed a nearby table and dragged it in front of the door. Officer Yang joined her and helped create a stockade of upside down chairs and plastic tables.

“Why haven’t they barged through? They were right behind me.” It was a rhetorical question she didn’t mean to vocalize.

“Could be some kind of strategy. Maybe they know that if they come through here the ESU guys can shoot ‘em from the upper level. Either way, we’re moving out.”

Officer Yang went up the escalator and urged her to follow. She didn’t want to go, not without a gun, but he didn’t leave her much choice. A security officer was supposed to get to safety, call the police, and give them an incident report. But they were also obligated to assist local police if asked. She eyed the exit doors a mere twenty paces away and for a brief, shameful moment, she considered leaving through them.

She had no gun, no badge, and no courage. Her hands were shaking and the sweat on her skin left her cold. Police Officer Ames didn’t know what fear was. She would have led the charge instead of Yang. Security Guard Ames lived in fear, knew the kind of screw up Officer Ames was. The older she got, the less invincible she believed herself to be.

A gunshot rang from the floor above followed by the screams of thousands of guests. Their cries sounded almost identical to the people who died in the terror attack in France and those who were run over in Times Square. It didn’t matter that she wasn’t a cop anymore. What mattered was getting everyone to safety.

On the floor above Officer Yang and Cindy, the people stampeded down the escalator, pushing and shoving each other out of the way. She tucked her head and shouldered her way through the panicked herd. At the top of the escalator was the hall where Jonas’s presentation had taken place, and where a massacre was currently underway.

Flashes of light were followed by the crack of gunfire. People landed on their knees and cupped the blood spilling out of their stomachs. Officer Yang drew out his service pistol and fired at a gunman shooting from an emergency exit. The gunman fell through the door with a scattered array of quarter sized holes in his chest. Another exit door thundered open. A gunman stepped through the entrance and aimed his gun at Cindy. All prior training had abandoned her. She froze in place, waiting for the gun barrel to explode. Officer Yang dropped the gunman before he could fire a single shot.

“Don’t just stand there, Cindy! You’re going get yourself killed.”

Another gunman at the far end of the hall readied his light machine gun to fire. Officer Yang tried to take aim but hordes of running people kept getting in the way. He knelt down beside Bishop and unhooked the leash from his collar. “Bishop, arrest!”

Bishop's paws scratched along the carpet as he weaved between the legs of the running guests. The animal lunged at the gunman and chomped down on his arm. Bishop snarled as he savagely whipped the man's arm and tore fabric and flesh like paper. Officer Yang aimed his gun and was sucker punched by a gunman who had been hiding near the kiosks.

Until this moment, Cindy had been in a dream, carried by the whims of her nightmare. The threat to Officer Yang's life awakened her dormant training and reignited her innate desire to protect. She trapped the assailant's gun wielding arm with her hands and stretched it until the limb could go no farther. She delivered a palm strike to his elbow and burst the joint forward. His muffled howls bellowed from inside his gas mask. She tore off his mask and raked his face with her fingernails, kneed his stomach, and smashed his head with her elbows. Staggered and dazed, he fell to the floor.

"Holy crap," Officer Yang said. "You know how to fight. Thanks."

"I'm going to need a gun." Cindy bent down and picked up the assault rifle the gunman was carrying. To her great surprise, the gun spoke to her.

"Security breach, unauthorized user. Weapon is now locked."

"Are you kidding me?" She tried to pump the trigger but it wouldn't budge. "They have gun controls on this." She dropped the rifle and found a flashbang grenade on the unconscious mercenary.

Officer Yang fired at the gunman wrestling with Bishop. With the suspect dead, the dog returned to Yang's side. "Don't worry about the guns. We're getting out of here as soon as we find the mayor."

Officer Yang, in a lot of ways, reminded Cindy of who she had been. Decisive, brave, willing to put his life on the line for others. Fighting by his side reminded her of how much she wanted to be like him again.

Bishop sprinted over to the presentation stage and led Officer Yang and Cindy to the mayor's family and their security detail. Priscilla bawled inside of Carmen's arms. "Why are they doing this? Why are they killing all these people?" No amount of comforting from Carmen could stop her tears. Mayor Montez sat between his guards and nervously rubbed his hands together. He was quiet and isolated, even from his own family. Officer Yang approached the bodyguards while Cindy hung back.

Priscilla saw Cindy and her face suddenly filled with hope. "Mrs. Ames," she said as her cheeks glistened. "You used to be a cop. You can get us out of here right? You can save these people."

“We’re going to get you all out of here.” Cindy didn’t believe her own words. She had lost her edge and had become useless in her time out of action. Deep down she knew their lives were dependent on Officer Yang and Bishop. If those two couldn’t lead them through this mess, then they would all be dead. She thought about Jonas and Jadie. Were they still in the building? Did she need to go rescue them? Cindy checked her cell phone but it still didn’t have any bars. The Wi-Fi must have been sabotaged.

Officer Yang got in her face. “Cindy? Did you hear what I said?”

“What? I’m sorry. I’m worried about my family.”

“You got family here?”

“My husband and my sister.”

“Mayor takes priority, then we find your people. Okay? I need you with me on this.”

She nodded.

“We’re going to move out as a group and make our way to the second level exit. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Officer Yang turned to his dog. “Bishop, c’mere buddy.”

The dog’s ears perked up. Yang scratched Bishop’s neck and tousled his fur. “I need you to keep an eye out for bad guys okay?” He patted Bishop’s belly, stood up, and gave the command. “Search.”

The group followed behind Bishop. He listened for the sounds of gunfire and kept the group away from those areas. As they walked past acres dead bodies, Mayor Montez grabbed Priscilla and covered her eyes. The expo had become a warzone. Kiosks were toppled over and used as make-shift cover for people who couldn’t escape. The carpet was filled with brass casings, wood chips, and made wet squishing noises wherever they stepped. Cindy kicked herself for not having been able to do more to prevent the massacre. She should have known something was wrong at the loading dock, should have acted faster. It was such an obvious red flag. She couldn’t believe how dense she was not to recognize the blood sooner.

Bishop stopped in the middle of the floor a mere twenty feet away from the fogged glass exit door. His ears stood on alert, eyes locked in front of him. Officer Yang told the bodyguards to keep an eye out. Though the space looked empty, Bishop could sense something was wrong.

“What does he see,” Mayor Montez whispered.

“Trouble,” Officer Yang replied. He loaded a fresh magazine into his Beretta; the bodyguard’s did the same. The glass door opened. Seven gunmen stormed through the second level entrance with their guns pointed at the group. Bishop and Yang remained resolute and defiant. She wanted to be brave like them but couldn’t seem to muster the courage. She stuck

her hand into her security jacket pocket and threaded her thumb through the hoop of the flashbang grenade.

The lead gunman took off his gas mask. He had a spider web tattoo over his eye and a bald head. The gunman addressed one of the guards protecting the mayor. "This wasn't a part of the plan, Boss. We shouldn't have lost this many guys."

The bodyguard replied. "Yeah I know." He pulled out a Glock pistol from his jacket, spun around and blasted a hole into the forehead of the guard behind him. He shifted his aim then exploded Officer Yang's stomach. Another bodyguard revealed himself as an accomplice as he turned around and killed the last remaining bodyguard. With the security detail neutralized, the accomplice focused his aim on Mayor Montez.

"Dad!"

Cindy staggered back. Officer Yang and two bodyguards were dead. She had blinked and just like that, they were gone. Her only hope for survival had been taken away and now the mayor was next in line to receive a bullet. Time seemed to slow. Her senses became heightened. She could hear the firing pin slide back in the chamber, could smell cheap cologne, and tasted the salt from her own sweat. It was all up to her now.

She brought her foot back, harnessed the power of her hips, and threw a punch which rippled the accomplice's cheek. His gun popped off and shattered one of the thousands of glass windows surrounding the Javits Center. The rest of the gunmen took aim and she could feel their scopes lining up with her body. Cindy pulled the pin from the flashbang grenade and lobbed it into the group of killers.

"Grenade," they yelled.

A metallic pop blasted her ears. She quickly lost her balance and nausea rose up in her throat. The piercing tone reverberated inside her head. Blind and unable to see, she pushed on Mayor Montez's back not realizing they were next to the stairs. They rolled down the granite steps, groaning and yelling as their bones smacked against stone.

As the effects of the flashbang began to wear off, she could hear the hollering of the criminals on the level above and Bishop barking. "Get rid of the fucking dog!"

A dull thud echoed from the second level followed by Bishop yelping in pain.

"Ruuuun," Cindy yelled.

Mayor Montez huffed as Carmen and Priscilla sprinted for the exit. The mayor, drenched in sweat, wheezed from the burden of his own heavy weight and could run no more. She crashed into the winded mayor and urged him to keep moving. "You can't slow down, you can't slow down."

To which he replied, "I can't breathe."

A sharp, stabbing sensation punched her shoulder, followed by another. Her head snapped back and when she touched her lip, she wondered why there was blood on her fingers. The back of Mayor Montez's suit jacket burst into a wet rose. His face smacked the floor as more gunfire filled the lobby. Priscilla screamed for her father as Carmen pushed her through the doors where Cindy could feel the cold air blowing in. Her legs grew weak and she began to stumble until her palms slapped the floor. She looked over her shoulder with pain haunting her every breath. The bodyguard came down the stairs with smoke rising from his Glock. The rest of his team remained on the second level with their guns ready to fire.

The bodyguard grabbed onto his neck and ripped off his own face which had been a mask. Underneath, the man had a peppery goatee, long, balding stringy hair, and steely grey eyes. She remembered his face from two years ago, burned it into her memory after what he had done to her partner. The man's name was Ned Pickler, a.k.a. Death Dealer. He killed Cindy's partner in the line of duty and was the reason she had lost her job.

Despite the pain radiating from her wound, she dragged herself across the floor and left a smeared trail of her own blood. She crawled on top of Mayor Montez and shielded his body with her own.

"You," she said to Ned.

"Am I supposed to know you?"

Strings of red spittle flicked out of her mouth. "You killed my partner."

Ned shrugged. "I've killed a lot of people, Hon. Especially people who screw up my operations. I don't know you from Nancy." He raised his gun and pulled the trigger once. A hot punch burrowed into her belly. He fired again. Blood spurt from her chest. Her teeth chattered from the sudden chill spreading through her limbs. She wondered if Jonas was safe, wondered if Jadie had . . . if . . . if the lobby had always been this cold.

The end of a chapter does not mean the end of a story.

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