

Off Duty

As a police officer prepares to propose to the woman he loves, he finds himself unprepared to handle a life-threatening situation.

Martin Forster was an hour away from getting engaged, and he wasn't about to die in the cereal aisle. He could hear screaming from the few people who had already been shot in the store, and the scurrying of those trying to get away. The shooting had ended for the moment, but he knew better than to assume the threat was over. All he could do was secure his location and wait for the first opportunity to conduct a search, which would be tough since his shift had already ended and he had swapped his gun and body armor for flowers and a well-worn blazer.

Twenty minutes earlier, Martin had been making plans for a romantic evening.

"It's been a long day," he told Samantha, "so I'm ready for a nice dinner and then some...TV?"

"You mean you're ready to start an episode of British Baking Show, then fall asleep right before the technical challenge?" she replied with a smirk.

"Sounds wonderful, huh?" Martin smiled as he considered his actual plans for the night. "I just need to stop at the store, then I'll be home. Pepperoni or cheese?"

"Pepperoni. And maybe some Oreos?"

"That doesn't seem like an appetizing pizza, but whatever you want, Sam."

"You're a dork, but I love you. See you soon."

When the conversation ended, Martin placed his hand on his chest. In his coat pocket, he felt a delicate band holding a modest diamond. His heart fluttered, but primarily with excitement rather than anxiety. Her answer was fairly certain, especially since they had already tasted wedding cakes and created a reception music playlist. Sam's favorite Broadway ballad was officially "their song," and they had danced to it every night for a year.

"Come and get me!" The shooter sounded like he was about four aisles away. He was nervous, probably in a highly adrenalized state. The words were more forced than forceful. Martin guessed the kid was 19, maybe 20. Time to see if he could end this.

"Okay, this is done now," Martin said. He was loud but calm.

"Who's that?" the kid asked.

“My name is Detective Martin Forster. I’m off duty. I don’t have a gun. What can we do to figure this out?”

“That’s bull,” the kid shouted. “Cops always have their guns.”

“Well, right now I wish that was the case, as you definitely have an advantage, but I guarantee you I’m only holding a bunch of daisies and a quickly thawing frozen pizza.”

“Where are you?” the shooter asked.

The kid was moving, and Martin could tell his voice was getting closer. The detective quietly stepped away from his previous location and moved a few aisles over, avoiding the shooter’s sightline.

“Hey! Where are you?”

“As long as you have that gun, I’m really not all that excited to make your acquaintance in person. Instead of you finding me, how about we just chat for a minute. Looks like you’ve done plenty of damage, so now we can talk about why.”

“I’m evil,” the voice was soft and empty. “That’s all.”

Martin thought a moment before responding. It’s likely there was some truth to that, but if he wanted to get home to Sam, the story needed to be a bit longer, at least long enough for someone to call 911 and get better equipped cops to back him up.

“You’ve done some wicked things tonight,” Martin said. “That’s for sure, but I’m willing to hear your story. From a distance.”

There was no answer for at least a minute. Martin’s eyes darted around as he expected to see a long gun barrel peek around one of the many corners in his vicinity.

“I’m just...angry,” the shooter said. He hadn’t moved.

“That’s clear. But why?”

No response.

“Hey, talk to me!” Martin yelled. “There’s no reason not to at this point.”

“I’m done,” the kid said. “Where are your friends?”

“I’m sure they’re on the way. What’s your plan?”

“I think you know. You watch the news.”

“Really? So you’re just a copycat?”

“What?”

“Ugh, that’s pathetic. That’s not even evil. It’s just lazy.”

“Shut up.”

“Seriously, to just see some wingnut on TV and decide that was the way to end your life. Makes no sense.”

“I’m serious!” As the kid shouted a final warning, Martin could hear him start to move.

The detective shuffled toward the checkout lanes, tossing random items off the shelves along the way. As he approached the front of the store, he saw the carnage left just minutes before. He crouched behind a counter, inches away from the body of a cashier. He was accustomed to crime scenes, but he was terrified to be so exposed. Martin tried to shake off the fear as the shooter followed his breadcrumb trail of groceries.

Peeking under the counter, Martin could see a pair of work boots stalking him. They kicked aside a few bags of chips and candy bars from the checkout area, then approached the end of the lane.

Martin found a pair of scissors under the cash register, probably what the late cashier used to clip coupons for unprepared customers. They would have to work. As one boot came closer, Martin lunged and drove the blades in the back of the shooter’s knee. The kid squeezed the trigger, but the searing pain in his leg ruined his aim and saved Martin’s life.

Leaving the scissors firmly in place, Martin grabbed the kid’s wrist, sinking his fingers into a pressure point to loosen the shooter’s grip. The gun fell to the floor and Martin took down the assailant with ease. Red and blue lights sped into the parking lot.

As a horde of officers cuffed the screaming shooter and began to clear the violent scene, the detective caught his breath on a bench outside the store. With a hand over his coat pocket, he called home to let Sam know he was running a little late.