

## Duty

by David Meadows

By the middle of the morning, Anna had stopped watching the news. The looped footage of the landing ships above Beta City told her nothing other than reporters didn't have any idea what was going on. Anchors repeated the same empty words while desperately hoping for a quote from the government, the army, even a superhero.

She tried to act as though it was a normal morning, sorting the laundry, washing and stacking the breakfast dishes, cleaning the kitchen. She left the TV on as a background drone, not because she wanted to hear the news, but because it masked the distant thump of what sounded like heavy firepower from downtown. Downtown was where Carl would be

right now.

She had begged him not to leave for work that morning, but he had argued that on this day he was needed more than ever. People--civilians--would be out there, caught in the crossfire, trapped, panicked, looking for authority figures. The city needed every cop on the street, doing his duty.

Of course Carl would think of his duty first. That was why she loved him.

"Look after Joey," had been his last words before he kissed her and walked out the door.

Four-year-old Joey was a constant nuisance underfoot, bombarding her with questions she didn't have answers for. He couldn't grasp what was happening. To his young eyes, the pictures on the TV were no different to the cartoons he watched. Anna prayed that the fighting would be confined to the city centre and wouldn't spill out here to the suburbs. Wouldn't threaten her child.

The TV noise hid the sound of a car pulling on to the drive, so she nearly leaped out of her skin when the front door opened. It was Carl, in his police uniform, his expression tense. Grime streaked his dark skin but he looked unhurt.

Anna flung herself into his arms.

"Honey! What is it? Are you hurt? What's happening--?" she babbled.

"Daddy, you're home!" cried Joey, running into the room.

Carl disengaged Anna's arms.

"I'm not hurt. Pack some things. We're leaving."

Anna gaped. Carl squatted down to talk to his son.

"Joey, I need you to get Tigger and your blanket and put your coat and shoes on, ok? We're going for a trip."

"I can put my own shoes on!" Joey announced as he marched off to his bedroom.

"Honey, what--?"

Carl cut her off as he strode to their own room.

"It's bad, Anna. Real bad. I don't think the superheroes can contain this. I mean, we're going to lose the city. They'll have to evacuate." Carl was stuffing clothes into an overnight bag. "We need to get ahead of the evacuation, get out on the highway before the panic starts. Pack what you can, but do it quickly. I don't know how much time we have."

"Carl... your duty..." Anna didn't know what else to say. Part of her was screaming with joy that they would get to safety. Another part of her couldn't believe those words had come from Carl.

"Screw duty!" he said, turning on her with violence in his eyes. Anna flinched and Carl turned away again.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said. "But you didn't see what I've seen. Now help me pack."

Without arguing further, Anna went to the bathroom and began emptying the medicine cabinet. Carl had never spoken to her in that tone. She had never seen him this rattled.

In a surprisingly short time, they had packed everything they could think of as essential--a surprisingly small amount--and were carrying the bags out to where Carl's big police cruiser sat on the drive. Carl still wore his uniform, his gun sitting on his hip. Anna had hastily thrown on travelling clothes before helping Joey dress.

"Are we going in Daddy's police car?"

"We sure are, champ. Climb into the back seat while me and Mommy load up the bags."

Carl opened the trunk and lifted in the largest of the bags, his brawny arms swinging it effortlessly. Anna looked at the police-issue riot gun securely fastened into the trunk.

"We're really taking this?" she asked.

"It's the safest and the fastest way." He caught her arm and swung her to look into his eyes. "Honey, you know I wouldn't do this if I didn't think there was no other choice. But you and Joey come first. The city's lost. I won't lose you with it."

There was a distant heavy whump and Anna's eyes were drawn to the skyline, where a pall of smoke arose from somewhere in the direction of the financial district. How many people were caught there, hurt, scared, without the option to flee?

Carl was right. Their own family had to come first.

While they were loading the remaining bags, old mister Hennerson came out on to his porch over the street. "Carl,

what's happening? The TV ain't telling us squat."

"Downtown is a war zone. The city isn't going to be safe to stay in. We're getting out of town. You need to do the same, as soon as you can."

"Yeah... yeah. Thanks Carl." Hennerson didn't move, just watching Carl as he slammed the trunk lid and opened the driver's door. After a second's hesitation, Carl strode across the street and up to the Hennerson's porch. Anna stood watching him.

"I'm not kidding, Hennerson. Look... if you want, you can come with us. We've got room in the cruiser for you and Martha." Another distant whump punctuated his words.

Hennerson looked in the direction of downtown and then back at his house.

"I appreciate the thought, Carl. But... Martha ain't much one for travelling. And... this is our home. I reckon we'll stay and ride it out."

Carl shook his head helplessly. "Stay indoors then, ok?" He turned from the old man and crossed back to his family.

Anna and Carl got in the car and Carl started the powerful engine. He turned on the radio and Anna heard a flurry of messages. She thought the police dispatcher sounded scared.

Carl pulled into the street and turned the car south, away from the downtown combat zone and heading for the expressway out of the city. After a minute he swung a left

turn, reacting to something on the radio. Using the police alerts and his own knowledge of the streets, he threaded a crooked path to avoid the chaos rapidly engulfing the city. But it made for slow progress, and as the minutes ticked by he began to mutter frustrated curses under his breath. Anna glanced across at his profile as he concentrated on the road ahead. He looked grim, alert, but not afraid. She didn't think she had ever seen him show fear.

"Do you remember the first words you spoke to me?" she asked abruptly. Carl glanced at her and barked a short laugh.

"I think it was, 'Can I buy you a drink?'"

"No, that wasn't it," she murmured softly. But Carl didn't appear to hear.

"I still don't know why you said yes. I was already a little drunk when you walked into the bar, otherwise I would have known you were way out of my league."

"It was the day you faced down Amber."

"Yeah. Me, the big cop hero, taking on a super villain. That's why the guys were all buying me drinks that night. They couldn't decide if I was incredibly brave or incredibly dumb. Neither could I." He laughed again. "But I must have scared her real good. She hasn't been heard of since that day--"

He was interrupted by an ear-splitting whine. A loud crash sounded close behind them, the shockwave jolting the car forward. Something--a brick perhaps--impacted the rear windshield and cracked it. Joey yelled in fear. An instant

later some kind of metallic object screamed over their vehicle, so close that Anna thought it might rip the lights off the top, and impacted the pavement a dozen yards in front of them.

Carl fought the wheel and slewed the car around before it hit the crashed object. He brought them to a halt sideways across the street.

"Joey, get down on the floor," he said, quietly but firmly. Joey scrambled to obey.

Anna looked left and right, up and down the street. The crashed object was a squat metal cylinder, about the size of a big van, and apparently undamaged by the crash. Its impact crater completely blocked the road ahead and littered the sidewalks with debris. Behind them, she could see that it had smashed into the corner of a building on its headlong flight. The rubble from that impact effectively blocked the street in that direction too. They were trapped.

Ahead of them, the cylinder swung slowly open.

"Stay in the car. Watch Joey," Carl ordered, popping the trunk. He opened his door and stepped out. Without taking his eyes off the opening alien cylinder, he moved towards the rear of the car and reached into the trunk.

The capsule finished opening, revealing a padded, crash-proof interior, and a single figure unfolded itself from within. A figure that was clearly not human. Humanoid, yes, but its short, thick legs supported a body over nine feet tall

and proportionately broad. Its torso was a nightmare mixture of pulsing grey flesh and robotic parts. Its armoured head had no face to speak of but a single large, watery lens that looked disturbingly organic. Its powerful left arm terminated in three long, articulated metal claws. Its right arm had no hand at all, it simply ended in a massive metal gun barrel, the aperture of which glowed red hot.

The alien monstrosity stepped clear of its capsule and panned its head from left to right. Its unblinking, watery gaze came to rest on the stalled police cruiser in front of it.

Carl took the riot gun from the trunk and stepped away from the cruiser, drawing the alien's gaze. With a click, he worked the mechanism to chamber a round. Then he pointed the weapon at the alien and, without any hesitation, without any verbal warning, fired directly at it.

The boom of the large-calibre riot gun echoed around the street. The blast struck the alien directly in the centre of its metallic chest armour--and had no effect at all. The alien raised its weapon arm.

Carl was already moving, diving to the ground and rolling to his left, all the time leading the creature's attention away from his wife and child. The alien's weapon spat a gout of red fire which passed over Carl's head, close enough to knock his cap off and singe his hair. Carl rolled to his feet and chambered a second round into the riot gun, knowing that

it wouldn't hurt the alien, knowing that he would probably die within the next few seconds.

From somewhere to his right, a straight beam of orange light flashed out and struck the alien's gun arm. It struck with a palpable, physical impact, crumpling the metal and spinning the alien off balance. As it flailed for balance, a second orange beam struck it dead centre, cracking the armoured plate and smashing the massive creature to the ground. The alien twitched once and lay still. Dead or merely unconscious, Carl didn't know and didn't care. It was beaten, and his family was safe. Carl stood shakily and turned to face his rescuer, his gun still held at the ready.

A woman floated in the air above the police car, surrounded by, and seemingly buoyed up by, a glowing orange halo of light. Carl's mouth worked silently for a few seconds before he was able to speak.

"...Amber?"

"Yes, Carl."

The halo of light that granted Amber her powers distorted her features and had kept her true identity a mystery for years. But here, this close, there was no mistaking who it was. He recognised the clothes, and even without that he would have recognised his wife anywhere.

"Anna...?"

"Yes, Carl." Anna drifted down to alight on the road in front of him. "It's me. I'm Amber."

A dozen warring emotions crossed Carl's face, and pure disbelief won. He shook his head, trying to deny what he was seeing. The riot gun dropped from his nerveless fingers to clatter on the ground. The sound seemed to restart his brain and his face took on an angry look.

"You're a--my wife is a--a super villain!"

"Was, Carl. I was a--"

"And you never thought to tell me that six years ago? What, have you and your super villain buddies been laughing at me for six years?"

Tears stung Anna's eyes. "No! God, Carl, I wanted to tell you--I wanted so much--but how could I? You were a cop and I was--"

"A god-damn super villain! You robbed banks. You--you put people in hospital. You --" His eyes narrowed. "Why the hell did you marry me, Amber?"

Anna blinked away her tears. She had to make him understand. Not just for her sake, but for his.

"The day we first met. Your first words to me."

"Huh?"

"I was robbing a bank. Yes, I did stuff like that. But it wasn't malicious--it was more like a game to me. I had this power, so much power, and I could get anything I wanted with it, so I did. So, that day, I was robbing a bank, and I'd flattened three superheroes and an armoured response team that tried to stop me. And then... then this beat cop was standing

in front of me. No powers, no armour. Just him and a revolver against a flying woman who had just taken out three superheroes. And he said--"

"'Drop the bag and get face down on the ground'," said Carl.

"I would have laughed, if I hadn't seen the look in your eyes. A look of... knowing you were right. Not the stupid overconfidence that superheroes have, just... absolute certainty that you were right. That this was your duty, and nothing was going to stop you doing it."

"Mommy!" Joey chose that moment to run from the car and towards his mother. With the slightest thought, Amber sent a tendril of light to scoop him up and draw him within her invulnerable shields. "Cool," mumbled Joey as he wrapped his arms around her neck and buried his face in her shoulder.

"I can't--can't process this..." said Carl. Anna reached out to put a glowing finger on his lips.

"Don't try to. This is all you need to know: I went straight for you, Carl, six years ago. I gave up my power to spend my life with the most extraordinary, selfless, fearless man I had ever met." Anna took a deep breath before continuing. Carl needed to hear this. "And today I can see that man falling apart. You're abandoning the city you've devoted your life to, and it's tearing you up inside. Every fibre of your being wants to stay and help, but you're afraid."

Carl flinched and began to speak. She cut him off.

"Not for yourself. You've never been afraid for yourself. You're afraid for me and Joey. Well, guess what," she gestured to indicate her glowing form, "You don't have to be. Look at me, Carl. I'm Amber. I can fly Joey out of the city faster than any car, and there's nothing human or alien that can stop me."

She lowered her shields long enough to kiss him on the lips. "I'll take Joey to your folks' in Missouri", she promised. "And then I'll be back to find you."

With another thought--and, oh lord, she had forgotten how easy the power was, what a joy it was to use--she levitated the police car and set it on the other side of the rubble that blocked the road. Facing back towards the city's centre. She rose into the air and smiled down at her husband.

"Now go and do your duty, officer."