

DANGER ZONE ONE

03: THE UNHAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH

A NOVEL BY
MIDNIGHT



Danger Zone One, Vol. 3: The Unhappiest Place on Earth

Midnight

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Vol. 3: The Unhappiest Place on Earth

**Written by
Midnight**

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DANGER ZONE ONE

VOL. 2: The Unhappiest Place on Earth



Chapter One

The roller coaster roared around a corner of the track, slowing for a split-second as it climbed up the ramp, only to plummet downward a moment later. A rising crescendo of terrified screams and ecstatic howls were enough to drown out the disturbing rattle of metal bolts beneath the cart.

Reena reached up, her fingers digging into the red padding of her shoulder harness. Next to her, Haley sat grinning from ear-to-ear—while trying *not* to lose her lunch. Clearing their final descent, the ride operator hit the breaks, prompting a high-pitched squeal and a few airborne sparks. The roller coaster slowed down, coming to a full halt at the ride's entrance. There was a brief pause, followed by a loud mechanical *hiss*.

Reena felt pressure being lifted from her shoulders and she released her death-grip on the harness. It ascended above her head, lifting high enough so that she could hop out and make room for the next round of thrill-seekers. Stepping on solid concrete once again was a welcome feeling, despite her wobbling legs and numb fingers.

Haley came up beside Reena, doing her best to wrangle her hair into something like a ponytail. Loose strands were sticking out in all directions, her hands only able to do so much to smooth them back into place.

"That was amazing!" Reena exclaimed, her heart still pounding like a jackhammer. She was almost willing to go again. *Almost*.

"Sure was," Haley smiled, following her friend off the ride's platform with equally shaky legs. Blinding beams of sunlight greeted the pair, forcing them to lift their hands and shield their eyes from its unforgiving rays.

The world smelled like cotton candy and greasy, over-priced fried food. Everything was a blur of color and sound. Brightly painted rides could be seen in every direction, while jubilant music emanated from unseen speakers hidden throughout the theme park.

Reena Saffron had wanted to visit Fantasy Funland for as long as she could remember. But, having lived in Old Metro, it was never feasible to travel all the way to Pallad City just for an excursion to a theme park. Now that she was an officer with the Pallad City Police Department, and lived ten minutes away from the park, distance was no longer a concern. Having no one to go with, on the other hand, was.

"Wow, this is all so unbelievable," Haley said, her eyes sparkling with wonder as she glanced over to the towering Ferris Wheel, then to a massive water slide that curved around in a harrowing corkscrew, before setting her sights on a sleek, white monorail.

Reena had known Haley Ardika since they were in elementary school. Growing up together in Old Metro, the two were nearly inseparable. Reena couldn't think of a closer friend that she ever had, or could ever *hope* to have. But after graduating from high school, Reena joined the police academy's 'Fast Track' program and—less than four months later—was assigned to the Pallad City Police Department. She tried to convince Haley to join her in Pallad City, but her best friend had already been accepted at Old Metro University, where she hoped to pursue a degree in their prestigious journalism program.

"There's just so *much* to see," Haley said as they advanced through the park's central plaza. Her attention turned to the bronze statue of Fantasy Funland's celebrated mascot, Hanu the monkey, which was planted conveniently close to the ticket booth.

With his cartoonish trademark smile and mischievous wink, fez hat, baggy vest, and pair of cymbals held in each hand, it was easy to see why Hanu had become the ‘face’ of Fantasy Funland. But the character’s popularity—and history—extended far beyond the park. The initial Hanu craze started over fifty years ago, when Telco Toys released the original Hanu doll, but the public still couldn’t get enough of the character. With a recent cartoon series, several animated films, and a variety of merchandising tie-ins, Hanu had become a worldwide marketing phenomenon. It was only a year ago when Fantasy Funland purchased the licensing rights for the character, to be used as the official park mascot. It was a costly investment, the details of which were covered by all the media outlets.

An electronic sign was arched over the bronze statue’s head, and in bright, blinking letters were the words *FANTASY FUNLAND*. Below that, in slightly smaller lettering, it read: *Where all your dreams come true*.

Nearby, a Hanu mascot was walking around, waving and playfully interacting with park goers. A group of kids wasted no time gathering around, all yelling and shouting for Hanu to perform some of his usual comic antics.

Reena had worked up a sweat just staring at the costume. She figured there was no way the wearer could have been comfortable in the suit, not in *this* blazing heat. It was, after all, unseasonably warm weather for early November. She tugged at her tank top, feeling the cloth sticking to her skin.

“We should def get some ice cream later,” Haley suggested, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. “Somehow, it feels even *hotter* in Pallad City than it did in Old Metro.”

“I’m so glad you came to visit,” Reena said, raising her voice to be heard over the clamor of the excited children accosting the Hanu mascot.

Haley flashed a smile. “Are you kidding? I’m not going to let you move to Pallad City and have *all* the fun. It’s just too bad I couldn’t stay longer. One day’s not *nearly* enough.” She stuck out her bottom lip, pretending to pout. “I won’t lie, I’m a little jealous. I’ve wanted to visit Fantasy Funland since I was a little girl—and now you can go *any* time you want!”

“I wish,” Reena laughed, before giving Haley’s arm a soft nudge with her elbow. “You know, you *could* always move to Pallad City too. Hint, *hint*...”

“No way,” Haley replied, waving her hands in playful dismissal. “Pallad City is great and all, but it’s *much* too busy for me. I’ll stick to Old Metro, thanks.”

“So...” Reena paused, trying not to let her voice waver. Haley’s mention of Old Metro hit her harder than she expected. “H-how’s everyone doing? Are they all okay?”

“Seriously, you only moved away a week ago!” Haley teased. “Everyone’s perfectly fine. You’re not getting homesick *already*, are you?”

“N-no,” Reena shook her head, embarrassed. She attempted to hide the pink flush spreading across her cheeks, but it was useless. “I was just wondering...” She could see that Haley wasn’t buying it.

“Is that so?” her friend replied with a smirk.

“I just... I mean, maybe I am a *little* homesick...”

“Reena,” Haley reached up to slick back the sticky strands of hair from her eyes, “I know you wanted to be a cop since you were a kid. But, for the life of me, I’ll never understand why you picked *here* to do it.”

“I didn’t really have a choice,” Reena sighed. “Pallad City is just where the academy assigned me to.”

“Speaking of which,” Haley’s face lit up with excitement, “you know the deal. It’s time for you to *spill*. I want all the details...how many criminals did you bust in your first week?”

“Well, on my first day, some guy stole an experimental power suit and went on a rampage. Then we broke up an illegal drug ring on my second, along with this crazy underground fight club.”

“Wow,” Haley gasped, hanging onto her friend’s every word. “That sounds scary.”

Reena considered mentioning her last case, but thought better of it. Explaining away crazed scientists, earthquake-creating machines, and mechanized monstrosities—complete with *tentacles*—would be a bit much. “It’s all been pretty wild, I’m just lucky I have a partner who—”

Haley leaned in, eyes wide with intrigue. A curious smile spread across her face. “You have a *partner*? Are they cool?”

“Yeah,” Reena fidgeted, rubbing the back of her neck. “She’s *really* cool and a great officer. But...” her voice trailed off. It was a struggle to find the right words.

“Well...?” Haley prodded, tilting her head in anticipation.

“I just don’t think she likes *me* very much.”

“Seriously? Come on, how could anyone not like *you*?”

Reena shrugged. “Her name’s M...” Her eyes widened, staring past Haley as if she had just seen a ghost.

“Uh, earth to Reena...” Haley lifted an eyebrow before looking over her shoulder to see what had startled her friend. “What’s up?”

Reena was convinced she had to be seeing things. After all, there was just *no* way. As if the very mention of her partner’s name had conjured her into being, Madison was standing *right there*. She was dressed causally in shorts and a cropped tank, grinding the heel of her brown ankle-high cowgirl boot into the asphalt as she stood in front of a giant sign displaying Fantasy Funland’s intricate park map.

It didn’t look like she had detected the young officer as Reena’s words came staggering out of her mouth. “M-Madison?”

There was a pause, long enough for Reena’s heart to skip a beat or two. Finally, Madison looked up and glanced over, taking notice of her partner. She didn’t seem surprised—in fact, she didn’t even look like she cared.

“Huh,” Madison’s voice came close to a scoff as she folded her arms across her chest. “Small world.”

“I-I’m surprised you’re here,” Reena admitted. “I mean, I just didn’t think...that *you* would be an amusement park type of person!”

“I’m not,” Madison replied, her voice cold and clipped as usual. “I hate them. I’m here undercover.”

It was only then that Reena noticed Madison was wearing her I.DAC—the standard-issue PCPD communicator—around her wrist. Even a rookie knew that any officer would be unlikely to wear it off-duty. But she thought her partner *also* had the day off...

“There’s been a string of disappearances,” Madison continued, “and each victim had something in common. They were all female, young, and last seen in *this* park.”

“A new case?” Reena eyebrows shot up, a look of confusion sweeping over her face. “I didn’t hear anything about it. Did Chief Hardiman assign it to us today?”

Madison looked annoyed. She pressed her lips together so tightly that they formed a thin line. “Let me be clear on one thing. There is no *us* here. This is *my* case. I’ve been on it for the last two weeks, before you even showed up at the PCPD.”

“B-but...”

“Enjoy your day off,” Madison’s tone was as icy as ever, “rookie.” She turned on her heel, putting her back to Reena, and walked off.

“So, ah...” Reena turned to Haley, flashing a nervous smile, “*that* was my partner, Madison Wynter.”

“Sheesh, perfect name—she seems kind of *cold*.”

“Well, they do call her the ‘Ice Queen of the PCPD,’” Reena explained, sulking. She would have bet that Madison had warmed up to her after their last case, but that clearly wasn’t the situation.

“Forget about her,” Haley gave her friend an encouraging pat on the back, “we came here to have fun, right?”

Reena nodded with a smile. “Sure did. What do you want to do next?”

A sly grin spread its way across Haley’s lips. Her eyes darted to the TurboTron, then to the Zero Gravity Twister, before settling on her final choice. She held her arm out straight, pointing to a haunted house attraction. “How about *that* one?”

“R-really?” Reena swallowed hard.

The house was styled like an old, decaying Victorian mansion, with the words ‘FRIGHT MANOR’ scrawled across a sign in front of the imposing structure. Spider webs congested the yard, strung mostly in-between tombstones and wrapped around the branches of large, intimidating trees. In one tree, an animatronic owl offered an ominous *hoot*, while zombie-like arms rose up and down from a grave, cutting through the rolling fog creeping along the dirt.

Despite Fright Manor being bathed in sunlight, the attraction’s eerie atmosphere still sent a shiver down Reena’s spine. She may have prided herself as being a police officer, but when it came to ghosts, zombies, and monsters—even *fake* ones—she was the first to admit a serious lack of courage. “You sure you don’t want to go on the TurboTron?”

“Oh, come on,” Haley teased. She was all too familiar with Reena’s dislike of haunted house attractions, recalling the now-legendary incident at the Old Metro fair’s shabby ‘Spook House’ some years back. “Don’t tell me you’re *scared*? I’m sure this will be *nothing* like that one back in Old M!”

“Hey—I thought we discussed *never* to bring that up again!”

Haley grabbed hold of Reena’s wrist and started dragging her in the direction of Fright Manor. “Come on, let’s do this!”

“Wait!” Reena protested, holding out hope that her friend could be reasoned with. Despite her resistance, she begrudgingly allowed herself to be brought to the front of the dreaded mansion of terror.

“And look at that, no line,” Haley chuckled. It was obvious that Fright Manor was one of the more unpopular attractions. Though there were numerous park goers passing by, not one seemed the least bit interested in entering the macabre house.

Haley reached the front door with Reena in tow. As soon as their feet came to rest on the tattered doormat, the door creaked open of its own volition. “Nice touch, huh?”

“Yeah...swell.”

They entered, a blast of cool air-conditioning immediately hitting them both in the face. While refreshing at first, Reena could already feel it settling into an uncomfortable chill.

Chapter Two

They had barely walked through the door before Reena saw something move from the corner of her eye. She gripped Haley's hand. There was just enough light in the house to shine off the white face of a ghoul as it leapt out of the shadows, claws high in the air while releasing a blood-curdling shriek. A split-second later and the horrific apparition had already retreated into the darkness.

The girls had jumped back so far that Reena was convinced they would tumble out the door. But, much to her surprise, it had already closed shut behind them. She was tempted to try for the door handle and escape Fright Manor before they ventured in any further. Even though she had managed to swallow a terrified scream when the ghoul had sprung out, Reena wasn't entirely sure she'd be able to do so again. She tugged on Haley's hand—silently begging to be allowed to leave.

Haley pulled her arm, dragging her friend through the attraction. "Don't worry, it's not real," she said as they passed the spot where the ghoul had emerged. "I heard the mechanism it was on—it wasn't even a person in costume, just an animatronic prop."

Reena rolled her eyes. "How comforting."

As far as the girls could tell, they were the only ones exploring Fright Manor. The lack of other park goers created an eerie, unsettling quiet. For a crowded park like Fantasy Funland, it was difficult to find *any* place where they didn't have to raise their voices just to be heard. Clearly the haunted house was the exception.

"This attraction really *isn't* popular, is it?" Haley mused aloud.

Reena puffed. "I guess *most* people have enough good sense to stay away."

Fright Manor was certainly holding up its end of the promised *creep* factor. Gargoyles and skeletons lined the walls, while spider webs, coffins, and Gothic furniture filled an area that—according to a wooden sign hanging from the ceiling—was known as the 'unliving' room. A series of shelves held small goblin-looking creatures, all 'preserved' in jars of formaldehyde (or, as Reena guessed, more likely water with some dingy yellow dye).

All of it looked far too real to be comfortable. In Reena's mind, she knew all the gruesome décor were just handmade props, but it didn't make them any *less* disturbing. But what disturbed her *most* was the giant smile Haley had on her face.

"Ew, will you look at that," Haley jabbed a finger in the direction of a jar, filled with shriveled eyeballs.

"Yuck," Reena gagged, "that's gross!"

"I know, *right?*" Haley laughed. "This is great!"

Another animatronic monstrosity lashed out from the nearby darkness. This one was bigger and bulkier than the previous ghoul: a samurai dressed in crimson armor, rusted through and bloodstained. Its face was a grinning skull with an ornate helmet resting atop. A gleaming sword, gripped tight in its gloved hands, cut through the air.

The faux blade harmlessly passed over the two girls and the fiend drew back into the murky recesses from which it came.

Reena had nearly lost the contents of her bladder. She squeezed her thighs together and glared at her friend.

"Having fun?" Haley asked with a wink and playful poke to the arm.

“Yeah,” Reena grit her teeth, not letting her sarcasm go unnoticed, “*fun*. That’s *exactly* the word I would use.”

The only light in the control room was an eerie, pale blue glow emanating from a wall of high definition monitors. A dozen screens flickered in unison as they received and recorded real-time surveillance footage throughout the theme park.

Sven sat in his leather-worn office chair, hunched over the control panel. His beady brown eyes were locked on four of the monitors, each displaying a separate live-feed from inside Fright Manor. He grabbed the edge of one of the monitors and pulled it closer. The hinged metal arm the screen was attached to let out a slight *creak*. He tapped the smudge-proof display, indicating the two girls who were walking through the attraction.

“What about these two?” Sven asked, his level of interest only stretching so far as he could fake it. He had something more *interesting* on his personal laptop that awaited his private attention but, of course, he’d been forced to close it when *she* walked in.

The woman behind his chair leaned over, getting close enough that he could smell her perfume. The alluring, sensuous scent left Sven lightheaded. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the woman’s breasts, nearly bursting from her revealing top. He tried to stay focused on his task, but it was no easy feat.

Miss Bliss nodded at the screen and smiled, her crimson lips splitting apart to reveal flawless white teeth. Her stunning auburn eyes captured the monitor’s unnatural glow, making it look like her irises were small LED lights.

“Will they do?” Sven asked.

“I’d say so,” she responded with a hint of amusement. She had a perfect contralto voice, dark and warm. Yet, there was something else underneath—an unpredictable blend of authority, passion, and malice.

Her long blonde hair slipped over her shoulders as she straightened herself back up. The woman was imposing, exuding both sex and confidence in one dominant package. She wore a tight black leather jacket, opened to reveal an even tighter fitting, midriff-baring shirt. Her mini-skirt was also black leather, along with her fingerless gloves and knee-high boots. To top off the tempting vixen’s ensemble was a military-style dress hat with glossy visor that caused a sinister shadow to fall over her eyes.

The door behind them flew open and a plump, barrel-chested man with a receding scalp of hair came rushing in. A frantic expression was brewing on his face.

“Ah, Dalton,” Miss Bliss turned, trying to retain her smile—one dangerously close to becoming a scowl, “to what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?” Though she had tried to frame her words in a cordial tone, the result was less than convincing.

“Wait, just *wait!*” Dalton panted, attempting to straighten his wrinkled navy blue suit in the process. Sweat ran down the sides of his craggy face, disappearing into the collar of his shirt, already damp with perspiration. “I just found out Fright Manor was re-opened, I thought we talked about closing it temporarily, until—”

“We did *talk* about it,” Miss Bliss admitted, “but we didn’t *agree* to anything.”

Dalton shuffled his way over to the monitors, his face turning ashen white at the sight of the two girls on the screen. “We said *one* girl at a time! Wouldn’t two raise even *more* suspicion?”

“The higher the risk, the greater the reward,” Miss Bliss responded flatly. She tapped the screen with a dark red fingernail, touching upon the spot where the two girls stood. “I have clients that would pay top dollar for this pair. Just *look* at them.” She trailed her nail down the display, tracing the figures of both girls. “Look at the legs on that one, and those firm breasts.”

Sven couldn’t help but watch as Miss Bliss’s silken tongue slipped over her bottom lip with seductive assurance. He could feel his heart begin to race.

“In fact,” Miss Bliss continued, lifting a finger to the edge of her mouth, “I may have to break one of them in *myself*.”

“No, this *needs* to stop!” Dalton was sweating even more than before. He waved his hands in objection, his mind careening into panic mode. “This is *my* park—Fantasy Funland is *still* mine!”

Miss Bliss tilted her head to the side, looking at the man with a contemptuous gaze. “Is that so?”

Dalton pulled a crumpled handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his forehead, shiny in the ghostly blue light. “I’m the one calling the shots here, and I say we *wait* a few days, hold off and—”

“This festering hole only belongs to *you* until the banks repossess it,” Miss Bliss snapped, drawing her lips back into a sneer.

“But, until then, *I’m* the owner,” Dalton responded, his voice shaky.

“Remember that you’re the one who came to *us*, Dalton.” She lifted an accusing finger, pressing it against his chest. That was all the force she needed to compel him to back up. She flattened herself against his chest and pinned him up against the wall, leaning in close so that she could press her smooth lips against his ear.

“H-hold on,” he gasped, almost of breath.

“Oh, Dalton,” she sighed, a deceptively sweet sound. She spoke so softly that he could just barely hear her words. “Now’s not the time to start losing your backbone.”

“W-we need,” the flustered man shook his head, “to slow down a little, that’s all.”

Miss Bliss reached down with her hand and started rubbing between his legs. She felt him getting stiffer, and she smirked, still keeping him pinned against the wall. “You *begged* us to save your precious little park from financial ruin. And now you want out?”

“I-it’s not that, I just—*eh!*”

Miss Bliss’s hand tightened, causing Dalton to cringe in pain. “Oh, I know your kind—your opulent lifestyle is too costly. Not even all the money you make here can sustain it any longer. You tell yourself you’ll do *anything* to keep it but, when push comes to shove, you go *soft*.”

“N-no,” Dalton protested, “I’m not!” He felt her hand give him another firm squeeze, rougher than the last, before pulling away. Dalton slumped against the wall, his head hung low.

“You’re on the brink of bankruptcy, Dalton,” Miss Bliss scoffed, turning her back to him. “In two month’s time, maybe less, this park will be shut down. You can hardly afford the repairs, let alone your expansion plans. And, if I’m not mistaken, in six months you’ll lose the Hanu licensing rights too. Isn’t that so?”

Dalton remained quiet, his silence affirming Miss Bliss’s words.

“Can’t have that now—after all, what a shame it would be for Fantasy Funland to drop their beloved mascot. And let’s not forget about your *own* affairs outside the park.

All the women, the cars, those parties you throw that I hear so *much* about...your vices are endless. You spend money faster than they can print it. No one can have a taste of that life, or lust after such insatiable desires, just to give it up.”

There was a long pause before Dalton offered a slight, if reluctant, nod. “You’re right.”

“Then don’t you forget,” Miss Bliss smirked, “there’s *no* place here for second thoughts or regrets. Not now, not ever.”

“Understood,” Dalton muttered, his voice rising just above a whisper.

“Good.” With that, Miss Bliss dismissed Dalton’s presence and set her hand on Sven’s shoulder. “Make certain that there’s no one else inside the manor. Seal the attraction, and then release the gas.”

Sven’s fingers scrambled over the console, each one targeting a precise button. “Sure thing, Miss Bliss.”

Chapter Three

“Ugh,” Reena moaned, stumbling back as a large animatronic rat scurried across the floor. In the last few minutes, she had been besieged by an assortment of creatures, ranging from mummies, zombies, vampires, and even werewolves. Of course, all of them were animated props, but each still succeeded in startling her. The girl’s heart pounded away while her eyes darted in every possible direction, not at all eager to discover which possible monster would leap out next.

“I’d never have guessed this place was so big inside” Haley said, completely absorbed by her gruesome surroundings.

“Yeah, they really went all out here.” Reena followed Haley into what she hoped would be the *last* room in Fright Manor—a mad scientist’s laboratory, complete with ghastly medical equipment, bloodstained walls, and some horrific mutant stuffed in a vat of green liquid.

If her brief journey through Fright Manor had taught her anything, Reena knew that whatever was going to pop out next, could not only come from the sides, but also above or below. She readied herself for the worst, tensing her muscles for the inevitable moment.

“Hey,” Haley turned, crinkling her nose, “you smell something?”

“Huh,” Reena sniffed the air. “Now that you mention it...” A strange, burning odor caused her nostrils to flare up. “Ew, yeah—that’s nasty.”

“Wonder if it’s part of the attraction?” Haley asked.

It was then that Reena noticed a thick white mist rolling across the floor. It completely blanketed the ground, and slowly began to rise. Her first thought was that it was the result of a fog machine or some dry ice, but as the wispy vapors climbed higher, she realized that *they* were the source of the putrid smell.

“Sheesh,” Haley coughed, waving her hand in a futile effort to drive away the noxious smoke. “This stuff *really* stinks.”

Reena could feel her head start to spin and soon, she too, was coughing. The fog swirled around the room, making it difficult to see anything outside of arm’s reach. She could no longer see Haley in the smoke, but could still hear her wheezing.

“R-Reena?” Haley gagged. “Wh-where are you?”

“I’m right—” before Reena could finish, her legs almost buckled out from under her. She staggered to the side, trying to brace her body against the nearest wall. Her ears felt like lumps of cotton were stuck in them, her eyes began to tear, and her throat swelled. An unpleasant throbbing sensation hammered away at her skull. She wanted nothing more than to reach through the smoke and help Haley, but her thoughts were beginning to come unraveled. Blots of color filled her vision against the gray misty background. And then the darkness started creeping in...

Reena collapses to her knees. Not a second later, she heard what had to be Haley crashing down next to her. Straining with each new laborious breath and fighting against the gas’s vicious chokehold, Reena crawled in the direction of where she thought her friend had landed. Every movement brought her closer to passing out. The world was getting dimmer, the blackness shifting in to eclipse what little she could still see.

And then it happened.

Reena felt as if her whole body was spiraling down into an endless tunnel. Her eyes rolled up and she hit the floor.

* * *

“Wake up...*please!*” A familiar, pleading voice echoed on. “C’mon, you have to get up!”

Reena found it difficult to muster enough strength to open her eyes. She slowly came to, escaping the murky void of unconsciousness. Despite willing her eyelids open, she winced in pain—her head was aching.

“You’re awake!”

The first thing Reena saw was Haley, crouched down in front of her. The girl’s face was nervous and panicked. It took a second longer for Reena to realize something *else* was wrong—Haley was only dressed in a white bra and matching panties. The rest of her clothes were nowhere to be seen.

“H-Haley?” Reena croaked, still dazed. She pressed against her aching temples. “Wh-what’s going on?” She tried to sit up, only to realize that she was *already* sitting, her back propped up against a wall. A shiver went down Reena’s spine and she trembled from the cold. The sudden chill made no sense for such a hot day, until she glanced down and spotted the reason: her clothes were missing too, just like Haley. Reena’s only remaining garments were the blue and white striped bra and panties she had picked up last week, before arriving in Pallad City.

“Are you okay?” Haley whimpered, each word trembling with anxiety.

“I...think so,” Reena stammered. “And you?”

“I’m not hurt, but—” her voice trailed off.

At that moment, Reena realized that they were no longer in Fright Manor. The questions flooded out of her mouth before she could survey her new surroundings: “What happened? Where are we? And *where* are our clothes?”

“I don’t know, but we’re not the only ones here!” Haley said, motioning to her side.

Reena’s eyes settled on three other girls—dressed only in their underwear as well—standing nearby. Mortified, she glanced around, noticing that they were all in a small, strange room with metal walls. There was no window, and the room itself was devoid of anything, save for a pair of makeshift bunk beds shoved against the walls, and a grimy toilet in the far corner. She turned, observing what appeared to be a reinforced steel door.

“It’s locked,” one of the girls said in a sheepish tone. “We already tried, but that door won’t budge.”

Reena looked at the trio of girls. The one who spoke up was the shortest of the three, with pale skin and long, black hair. “Do you know how we got here?”

“The last thing any of us remember was going through Fright Manor, blacking out, and then waking up here,” the girl replied. “I’m Cela,” she said, before motioning to the female with strawberry blonde hair standing to her right, “and this is Rini.”

“N-name’s Kae,” the remaining girl stuttered, her head hung low, refusing to make eye contact.

“Well, I’m Reena,” she nodded in her friend’s direction, “and that’s Haley.”

Cela's expression was grim. "Before you ask, don't bother—there's no way out."

Haley shook her head. "I don't understand, what's going on here?"

"We've *all* been kidnapped," the girl with the strawberry blonde hair—Rini—answered. "I've only been here since yesterday, but they..." she glanced at the others, not wanting to finish her sentence, "...they've been here for almost two weeks."

Reena couldn't believe what she was hearing. *Was this the case that Madison had been investigating?* Reena recalled Madison mentioning that the missing girls were young, and the ones standing before her looked to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty.

"F-from what I heard," Kae lifted her head, cheeks stained with smeared mascara, "I think they're going to sell us off..."

"What?!" Reena and Haley cried in unison, both exchanging a terrified glance to one another.

Sell them off? Reena asked herself, the very thought made her sick to her stomach. *Could this be some sort of human trafficking ring?*

Rini looked like she was about to break down in tears. "They haven't done anything to us, not *yet*. But it's only a matter of time before—" she paused, unable to bring herself to even say the words.

"Before..." Cela cut in, equally shaken, "well...*you know*."

Reena wasn't just going to sit around and do nothing. She *couldn't* let herself do that. She stood up, legs shaking as she went over to the metal door and threw her weight against it—plowing her shoulder into the steel with everything she had. *If only I could loosen a hinge, or budge it*, she thought to herself.

After numerous valiant attempts, Reena stumbled back, her shoulder aching. She turned to the three girls—she could feel their eyes on her—and, judging by their dejected expressions, it was clear that they had already lost all hope of escape.

"Like I said," Cela sighed, "there's no way out."

"There's *got* to be a way," Reena replied, trying to muster her courage. Even so, her voice was still shaky.

Haley shot her friend a worried glance. "But what if she's right, what if there *isn't*?"

"We can't give up." Reena continued her attempt at putting on a confident front. She wasn't sure if it was fooling anyone but, at this point, it was all she could do. "Don't worry, I'll think of something."

Even as she spoke the doubtful words, she *wanted* to believe them.

Chapter Four

Madison stood before the entrance of Fright Manor. Her investigation into the missing girls had, thus far, produced no results. Despite visiting over half of the theme park's attractions, she was still no closer to finding a lead than when she first arrived. Yet, something about Fantasy Funland didn't sit well with her. And, though she had no concrete proof, her officer's intuition was enough to prolong an 'unofficial' investigation—at least until some tangible proof came along.

It was *more* than a coincidence that the missing girls were all last seen within the park. Madison had considered numerous scenarios, but none were convincing. She found it unlikely that a kidnapper had been entering Fantasy Funland and abducting these girls in plain sight. There were just too many people, and why wouldn't the victims—each between the ages of eighteen and twenty—put up a struggle? It was also unlikely that these girls simply up-and-left without any desire to be found. All were enrolled in college, had part-time jobs, and—according to relatives and friends—were seemingly content with their personal lives.

Madison advanced up the steps of Fright Manor as the setting sun cast a long shadow over the decrepit building. The floorboards beneath her feet creaked with each passing step, making her wonder if the sound was indeed genuine, or just some pre-recorded audio effect.

Judging by the lack of people around, she could tell that Fright Manor was one of the least favored attractions in Fantasy Funland. The thought almost made Madison reconsider even spending the time to investigate, before determining that it was precisely the reason why she *should*.

She pushed the front door open and entered. No sooner had she stepped foot inside did she hear a devilish cackle. Something sprang out from the shadows, but jerked to a stop right before it made contact. A scarecrow with a fearsome grin stood near Madison, its arms flailing for a moment before sliding back into the darkness.

Madison rolled her eyes. She figured park goers were supposed to be startled by the lunging animatronic. As it was, she remained unimpressed. After passing through the attraction's 'unliving' room, she entered a dining hall. A long table, topped with fake gag-inducing food platters, stretched across the room. The seats surrounding the table were occupied by skeletons, each rigged with an electronic mechanism that enabled their bony arms to rise and lift blood-filled goblets to their mouths, as if they were drinking.

It was then that Madison noticed a peculiar odor. She took in a deep breath and walked around the table. The smell wasn't overpowering, but there *was* a lingering burning stench. She followed the path out of the dining hall and walked into a makeshift laboratory.

For a moment, Madison suspected that the smell might have been part of the attraction, used for greater sensorial effect. But she wasn't entirely convinced. Her nose twitched as a stronger whiff of the odor rose up into her nostrils. By no stretch was the smell pleasant, but it hadn't been strong enough to make her reel over gagging. She tried to follow where the scent was most prominent, bringing her to a wall adjacent from the lab equipment. Near the floor was a grated vent, just large enough that she'd be able to stick her hand through.

Madison crouched down to get a better look. She knew the odor was far too potent to be coming from some dead rodent that had lodged itself in the vent. She pulled at the grate and, with a single firm tug, tugged the metal covering loose. She set it aside and stuck her hand into the darkened opening, just far enough to feel a breeze.

She stood up, raised her wrist, and pressed a button on her communicator bracelet. “Cherie, I’m activating detection mode on my I.DAC. It should be able to pick up any trace vapors from an odd smell I’m getting here.”

A voice crackled through the miniature speaker on Madison’s wristlet. “No sweat, I’ll run an odor analysis.”

In the dimly lit basement of the Pallad City Police Department, known to most officers as ‘the Crypt,’ Cherie Algrave’s busy fingers worked the keys on her customized computer terminal. She stopped only for the briefest of seconds to flick a pink strand of stray hair from her eyes.

Madison’s voice escaped from a speaker. “I’ve initiated the odor sampling transfer. You should be receiving it any second.”

“Roger,” Cherie replied, “computer’s already analyzing it.”

“Thanks, I owe you one.”

“I’ll remember that,” Cherie teased with a playful chuckle. “You know, Mad—most people *relax* on their days off.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

“By the way,” Cherie said, glancing to one of the nearby monitors at her workstation, “I ran that background check you wanted on the owner of Fantasy Funland.”

“What did you find?”

“His name’s Dalton Traylor. Based on the files I could dig up—some by *not* so official means—” Cherie added, making no effort to disguise the pride in her tone, “—it looks like he’s up to his neck in debt. Not sure if that matters any...”

“Everything matters.”

A series of *beeps* redirected Cherie’s attention to the central terminal screen. The Cyber Crime Division logo flickered, only to be replaced by the completed odor analysis results.

“All right,” she began, glancing over the text, “you ready for this?”

“Give it to me,” Madison answered over the speaker.

“According to the collected data, that smell is Kolokol-1, an incapacitating agent, typically transmitted by gas.”

“I knew it...”

Sven leaned back in his chair, eyes riveted to the monitor. His fingers were interlocked so tightly that he could feel the blood draining from his knuckles. He watched the woman on the screen as she spoke into some sort of communication bracelet. She stood directly in front of the ventilation shaft—the very same one used less than an hour ago in an effort to secure two more girls.

“I’m signing off for now,” the woman said. “But keep searching the PCPD database for...”

Sven didn't need to hear the rest. His heart was already pounding. He swiveled his chair around to face Miss Bliss. Behind her, Dalton was drenched in so much sweat that it looked as if the man had just dunked his head into a bucket of water.

"My, my..." Miss Bliss tapped a finger against her chin, "will you look at her. Now *that's* a body."

"Did you even hear what she said?" Sven demanded, almost breathless. "She said PCPD...she's a *cop!*"

"They're on to us!" Dalton blurted out while pacing back and forth. "I shouldn't have let you people talk me into this. This can't be happening, not to me..."

"Dalton," Miss Bliss turned, her eyes locking on the man with both amusement and annoyance, "calm down—you're *only* embarrassing yourself."

On the verge of outright hysteria, Dalton stopped in his tracks and stared at the woman in disbelief. Somehow, despite their dire situation, Miss Bliss remained composed, as if she hadn't possessed a care in the world. It was enough to drive him over the edge.

"That's a good boy," she said, offering him a seductive wink.

"No, it isn't too late," Dalton pleaded, "none of the girls have been sold off yet. We can still—"

Miss Bliss shot up an index finger, just inches before the man's face, instantly silencing him. "Tut, tut...let's have no more of that. The situation's well in hand."

"But," Sven cut in, "what are we going to do about the cop?"

"There are so *many* options." She turned, her hand falling on Sven's shoulder, fingernails digging into his skin, even through his shirt.

"Ow!"

"You know what's funny, Sven? I could've sworn I had told you to shut this attraction *down* after our latest...acquisitions."

"B-but I did..." Sven grit his teeth, wincing from the pain.

"Is that right?"

"The girls are in the cell, so I opened the manor up again," he admitted, each word strained. "It seemed harmless."

Miss Bliss pulled away from Sven, releasing her grip on him. "I see."

"I knew this was all a bad idea," Dalton muttered under his breath. "It's not worth it. If we get caught..."

Miss Bliss ignored the man's ramblings and smiled. "Let's not get our panties all twisted, boys. We'll simply put this problem to bed early." She headed for the door, hips swaying seductively, her heels converting each step into a regal stride.

"Wh-what should we do?" Sven asked. "Release more gas?"

"No," she said, pausing at the door. An evil, sly grin kissed her perfectly shaped lips. "I'll deal with this one *personally*."

Madison tapped a button on the I.DAC, ending her communication with Cherie. She lowered her wrist, gaze returning to the suspicious vent. She knew there still wasn't enough evidence to convince Chief Hardiman to launch an official investigation into the park, but Madison's personal suspicions had been confirmed—something sinister had taken root in Fantasy Funland. The presence of Kolokol-1 convinced the officer that she

was on the right track and, possibly, one step closer to discovering what *really* happened to the missing girls.

A shapely, shadow-clad figure stirred in the nearby darkness, just behind Madison. The officer was so engrossed on the vent that she failed to notice the soft footfalls advancing upon her.

This girl—such a waste! Miss Bliss bitterly thought to herself, her fingers tightening around the long metallic whip in her gloved hand. *Of course the PCPD would ruin her. The only thing they likely ever did for this girl was give her reason to exercise those beautiful legs...*

Madison heard the wooden floorboards creak behind her. It was close. At first she figured it was just another animatronic about to flop out for a cheap scare, but some inner sense told her it wasn't. Before she could turn, she *knew* that whatever stood at her back was human...

Miss Bliss fully emerged from the shadows, cracked her metal whip and swung it in the officer's direction.

"Wha—?!" Madison heard the whip's thunderous sound tear through the manor a brief second before the lashing metal coiled around her right leg. Caught off guard, she looked down at the glistening silver binding her thigh.

"Now *that's* what I call a catch of the day," Miss Bliss said with a grin.

Madison looked up at the woman. "Who the hell are—"

"All in due time," Miss Bliss cut in, caressing the handle of her whip, "introductions will come later, once we get to know one another more...*intimately.*" Her thumb inched closer to a red button on the handle and, with playful flair, pressed it.

Electricity surged from the whip. Blue crackles of energy shot through Madison's body. She let out a pained scream and tried to pry off the whip around her leg, but it was no use. She jerked her hands back while the electric onslaught increased. The officer let out another tormented yell and staggered to the side.

"My, what a beautiful voice you have," Miss Bliss chuckled.

Madison cried out again, dropping to her knees as the shocking jolts of raw electricity racked her body in agonizing spasms. Her every muscle felt like it was on fire, her entire body going rigid from the attack.

Once more, Miss Bliss pressed the button on the handle and the electricity bursting forth from the whip came to a stop. She watched as the tortured girl collapsed to the floor.

Madison hit the ground hard, groaning as the side of the face made contact with the cold wood. The electric onslaught may have stopped, but she could hardly move from the pain. Darkness slid over her vision and she succumbed to the warmth of unconsciousness.

"Well," with a smirk that oozed wicked delight, Miss Bliss stood over the officer, "just *look* at you now, lying there all defenseless and vulnerable." She prodded the fallen girl with the tip of her boot and then crouched down. "Why, you'd fetch top market value easily." She brushed her hand against Madison's face, her fingers trailing seductively down the officer's soft curved jaw.

Madison didn't stir.

"Sleep soundly," Miss Bliss flashed a grin, "for now, sweetie. When you wake, we have *much* talking to do, girl-to-girl."

Chapter Five

Reena tried her best to pry the metal panel loose from the wall. She had searched the entirety of their strange holding cell, but could find nothing that would offer any chance of escape—at least not through the reinforced steel door. What she *did* find was a large corroded panel near the bed, one of its edges bent away from the wall ever so slightly. She hoped that, if she could manage to pull the panel off, there might be an opening on the other side. If successful, she would have a chance of crawling through, along with Haley and the other girls...

It was a long shot, and Reena knew it. But there were few options at hand, and she wasn't about to give up without a fight.

"Are you sure about this, Reena?" Haley asked, worry in her voice. Behind her, the three girls looked on with forlorn expressions—clearly doubtful of any escape attempts.

"One way or another," Reena said, grunting with obvious strain as she pulled at the panel with all her strength, "we have to try, at least. After all, this could be our only way *out*."

Haley watched as the panel budged slightly, the already loosened edge moving further from the wall. She leaned in to help her friend. Both pulled, straining their muscles to the limit.

"If we can just," Reena grit her teeth, face turning red, "get this..." The bones in her fingers ached as she continued pulling.

Both girls gave it all they had and, after a few strenuous attempts, the panel tore off.

"...Loose!" Reena gasped, tumbling backwards with Haley in tow, the panel still clutched in their hands. Reena gave her friend a triumphant smile.

"Nice!" Haley cheered, before turning to the trio of girls behind them. "We're all going to be fine now!"

"Uh, Haley..." Reena stuttered, moving to the spot on the wall where the panel had been. There was no crawlspace behind it as they had hoped. Instead, there was nothing but a wall of solid concrete. "So much for that plan, I guess."

Haley groaned, sinking to the floor in despair. "It really is hopeless."

"You two *still* won't listen, even though I keep saying it—there's no way out of here," Cela said, taking a step forward and shaking her head. The other girls stood at her side and, judging by their expressions, none seemed surprised that the exposed wall panel had led nowhere.

"No way!" Reena tossed the panel aside, standing resolute. "I *won't* believe that, there's *got* to be another way. I'll find it, I promise!"

"I wish that were true," Rini whimpered. "I really do."

Reena could tell from the blank stares that few, if any, believed her words. Even Haley looked skeptical. But it didn't matter. Reena wouldn't surrender just yet. She'd find a way of escape and get them all out safely. *I'm an officer with the Pallad City Police Department, she told herself, it's my duty to protect these girls! Besides, I can't throw in the towel—Madison never would!*

Madison! Reena's thoughts turned to her partner. If there was only some way she could contact her, send some kind of signal, or...

...Reena could feel a cold sweat envelope her as a grim realization took hold. She didn't even know *where* they were. How long had she been unconscious? Were they still somewhere in Fantasy Funland? Or were they taken elsewhere?

With a loud gulp, Reena pressed her back against the wall. She still believed there had to be *some* way out, but she couldn't deny that the odds weren't in her favor.

Madison groaned before she had a chance to open her eyes. Every muscle ached and her skull throbbed with a ferocity that she had rarely felt before, save for a rare hangover. She managed to force her eyelids open, but the room was a blur. Long moments passed before her surroundings came into focus.

"What in the—?" Madison tried to spit out, but her speech was slurred. She could hardly believe what she was seeing. It was obvious she wasn't in Fright Manor's laboratory anymore. Instead, she was in a large room filled with gothic décor and walls lined with red velvet. At first Madison thought it was some kind of study or bedroom—another area in the attraction, perhaps? But then she spotted the strange devices and tools hanging from the walls, along with other similar ones on a few nearby tables, strategically placed about the room. *This isn't Fright Manor*, Madison thought to herself, trying to overcome the overwhelming mental fog, *it's some kind of sick BDSM chamber!*

She recognized her own shorts, tank top and boots thrown on the floor. Only then did she realize that she had been stripped down to her purple bra and matching panties. But, *more* surprising, was that she couldn't move!

Madison tried to budge her arms and legs, but each effort was wasted. She glanced up and then down. Her suspicions were confirmed. Both her ankles and wrists were strapped to an 'X' shaped torture table mounted to the wall. She had been positioned upright, so that her back was against the table.

She tugged on her bonds again but, the more she struggled, the more the harsh edges of her restraints dug into her skin.

Near the middle of the room, a section of velvet curtain parted, and a figure came into view. Madison's eyes had finally adjusted enough to make out the advancing woman's features.

"Finally awake, are we?" Miss Bliss stroked the handle of her whip as she walked over to a table covered in a blue sheet. With a sweep of the hand, she removed the covering, revealing a selection of her favorite *toys*. Miss Bliss gestured to them with a twisted grin. "I've picked some of my best for you to enjoy."

Madison looked down at the arsenal of bizarre instruments that had been neatly laid out across the table's surface. Her eyes gazed over a variety of ball gags, handcuffs, clamps, and iron poker, several whips, and numerous other contraptions she had never seen before.

"Spot anything you like?" Miss Bliss chuckled.

Madison noticed that the whip the blonde haired woman was holding had been the very same used before, back in Fright Manor. Except, now, it wasn't emitting an electrical charge.

"I'll make this simple." Miss Bliss reached out, gripping hold of Madison's chin—her red nails digging into the helpless officer's skin. "All you have to do is answer a few

questions and this..." she paused, smiling as she dragged her tongue over the whip, "... *nasty* bit of business will all be over. Understand?"

Madison didn't respond. She simply met her captor's gaze with an invidious glare.

"I have a feeling you're going to be a defiant one, eh?" Miss Bliss said, almost pleased. "Do you deny that you're an officer with the PCPD?"

Madison jerked her chin out of Miss Bliss's hand, wrenching her head to the side and pressing her lips together. She was not about to answer.

An amused smile spread itself thin across Miss Bliss's lips. "Oh, come now. I just *abhor* the silent treatment. How much does the PCPD know about what's going on here?"

She was met with further silence.

"You can cooperate," Miss Bliss purred, leaning in closer to Madison's face, "or you can make this *uncomfortably* difficult for yourself." She lightly dragged one bent finger down her prisoner's cheek in a playful, seductive motion. The woman's expression lit up with perverse excitement. "Please, *make* this difficult—rough is always so much *more* fun."

"Screw you," Madison hissed.

Miss Bliss's tongue darted over her pearly white teeth and she laughed. "Now *that's* what I like to hear."

Madison continued tugging at her restraints. She refused to give up until all her strength was gone.

"Oh, please *do* feel free to scream." Miss Bliss raised her whip into the air. "We're currently five sublevels beneath Fright Manor and, I assure you, the walls are so thick, not a soul will hear the faintest peep from you. But it'll certainly be music to *my* ears."

Madison readied herself as the whip came crashing down.

Chapter Six

Reena stood with her back against the wall, her shoulders slumped. Never before had she been in a situation where she felt so hopeless. It pained her to watch Haley pacing back and forth across the cell, along with the three imprisoned girls who sat on their bunk beds, each wallowing in their own private misery.

Nearly an hour had passed since their failed attempt to escape. Since then, Reena hadn't been able to come up with any new ideas, and—as much as she hated to admit it—their predicament looked bleaker than ever.

What would Madison do? The question haunted Reena's thoughts over and over again. She knew her partner would be able to devise some plan...

Klick. Klick.

The strange electronic sound drew the girls' collective attention. All eyes shifted to the metal door. Something was happening on the other side.

Reena found the noise to be familiar, but couldn't place it.

Klick. Klick. Klick.

Reena's ears perked up. She recalled where she had heard that *exact* sound! It was identical to the noise of a digital keypad—her parents had one that controlled all the locks to their house back in Old Metro. She almost leapt for joy before realizing that anyone who had a passcode to the cell was likely to be the *last* person she'd want to encounter. There was very little chance they'd have any good intentions...

The metal door slid open with a hydraulic *gasp*. Reena held her breath.

"Why should Miss Bliss get to have *all* the fun?" Sven stood in the doorway, one arm hidden behind his back. He stared at the room's occupants, while leering with sinister glee.

Reena watched as the man stepped further into the cell. Her heart dropped into her stomach. She could read nothing on his face but lust and cruel excitement. There were only a few intentions that could produce that sort of facial expression, and none of them bode well for her or the other girls.

"Besides," Sven shrugged, "how are we gonna know how much you ladies are worth selling for, if we can't *test* the merchandise first?"

Sell? The horrific thought echoed in Reena's mind. She heard the trio of girls on the bed whimpering.

Haley staggered back, visibly shaken. "Wh-who are you?"

"Me?" Sven tilted his head back, showcasing a smug look of satisfaction on his greasy face. "I guess you could say I'm..." he paused, laughing under his breath, "...with the quality assurance department. I check the merchandise for any defects, but only after putting them through some *rigorous* examinations."

"D-disgusting..." Haley choked out.

Sven turned to Reena, looking the girl up and down. He wagged his finger in her direction. "How 'bout you, babe?"

"Stay away from her," Haley ordered, but each word trembled as it departed her lips.

Sven ignored the girl, keeping his sights focused on Reena. His malicious grin widened as he pulled what he was hiding out from behind his back. A sweaty hand gripped the end of a brutal looking nightstick.

"Y-you're making a big mistake, pal," Reena barked while taking a step back.

“Now, now,” Sven said, closing in on the girl, “no funny business. Wouldn’t wanna have to get *extra* rough.” With that he lunged forward, grabbing Reena by the wrist and locking her tight in an iron grip. He pulled her closer.

“Stop!” Reena screamed. She tried to resist but he was too strong.

Haley rushed the man, flailing her arms at his chest. “Get your hands off her!”

“Don’t worry, honey—I know you want some attention too!” Sven responded, swiping at Haley with his free arm and knocking her back against the wall. “Your turn will come *next*.”

“Haley!” Reena yelled. She watched her friend bounce off the wall and nearly hit the floor.

Sven yanked Reena harder. “Come on, let’s see what you got...”

Reena felt like the man was going to wrench her arm out of its socket. She tensed her body, making it difficult for him to drag her along. *Now or never*, she told herself and twisted in his grip, kicking her leg up.

“URRK!” Sven shrieked as the girl’s foot rose into his groin. He froze for the briefest of moments, releasing his hold on the girl before doubling over. He crashed to his knees, nightstick clattering to the ground, clutching at his groin in pain.

“Creep!” Reena shouted, sticking her tongue out at the fallen man. She turned to Haley, grabbing her friend’s arm. “You okay?”

Haley nodded with frantic enthusiasm. “I am now!”

Reena looked to the other girls while motioning towards the open cell door. “Come on, let’s go!”

There was no hesitation as the three girls scrambled out of the room. Haley waited for Reena, who snatched Sven’s nightstick off the floor. Once she had it firm in hand, she followed the others.

“Wait!” Sven was curled up into a ball, but reached an arm into the air. “Get back here!”

Once everyone was out of the cell, Reena turned to the control panel on the wall and slammed her hand against a red button with the word ‘LOCK’ on it.

With a mechanical *hiss*, the door slid shut. She could hear the man trapped inside shouting, but his cries were muffled when the door’s locking mechanism kicked in, sealing with a vacuum-like *whirr*.

“I can’t believe it,” Kae exhaled, sharing her relief with the other girls. “We’re free!”

“I thought we’d *never* escape!” Rini clasped her hands together. “This nightmare’s finally over!”

Reena shook her head. “We’re not out of the fire yet—we still need to find a way out of here!”

“Do you think there’s still more,” Haley pointed to the cell door, “like *him* lurking around?”

“Let’s not take any chances,” Reena said, holding the nightstick ready with both hands. “And let’s not wait around to find out, either.” She looked to her surroundings. It appeared that they were in a corridor, walls lined with old piping and vents. She immediately got the impression that they were in some sort of basement, or building sublevel. *Could we be beneath the theme park?* Reena asked herself. She knew, if that was indeed the case, they’d have to find an elevator or a stairway exit.

“Any idea what we’re going to do next?” Cela asked Reena.

The young officer nodded. “Just follow me—this *has* to lead somewhere.”

“A good a plan as any, I guess,” Haley responded.

Reena led the girls into a sprint down the hallway. They had barely taken a dozen steps forward before a pained cry echoed throughout the corridor.

“Wh-what was that?” Rini slid to a stop.

“That was a woman’s voice,” Haley grabbed Reena’s arm, “and it sounded close!”

Reena swallowed hard. A cold sweat enveloped her body as she turned to the other end of the hall where the yell had come from.

Another tortured scream broke the silence.

To the other girls’ ears it may have been an indistinct agonized wailing, but Reena recognized the voice. *It was Madison.*

Chapter Seven

“Still won’t talk will you?” Miss Bliss smirked. “You’re quite the resilient one. I can’t tell you how much I like that in a girl. Unlike the others, I don’t think I’ll sell you. Instead, I’ll break you in myself, and turn you into my personal pet. Once I’m done, you’ll be begging to please my *every* whim.”

Madison’s slumped forward, still bound to the ‘X’ shaped torture device attached to the wall. Her chin drooped down to her chest, hair sweeping across her cheeks. Panting for breath, she let out a heavy, pained sigh. Her entire chest was tight and aching from the physical strain. Red bruises plastered her body from Miss Bliss’s whip—and yet, none had managed to draw blood. Madison chalked this up to the sadistic woman’s desire to inflict pain *without* “damaging the merchandise.” The recent disappearances at Fantasy Funland finally made sense: the theme park was being used as a cover for a human trafficking ring.

Miss Bliss cracked the whip again, flicking her wrist to give the arc some flair before striking Madison again, and without any shred of mercy. “Sing for me!”

Another scream wrestled out from between the helpless officer’s lips. Her throat was raw, causing her to cough after she finished the yell.

“Nothing to say yet, hm?” Miss Bliss cocked her head to the side, amused.

Madison grit her teeth, fighting with all the willpower she could muster to bear the pain. Her entire body felt like it was on fire and each spot where the whip had met her skin burned with unrelenting fury. She tried to twist her wrists free from their restraints, but even small movements caused the binds to dig deeper into her skin.

“I know,” Miss Bliss chuckled, “you’re a masochist—you *want* this kind of attention, don’t you?” She pulled her arm back, preparing to swing the whip again. “Well, my dear, this is your lucky day—I’ll give you *all* the attention you want, and *more!*”

“Ngh!” Madison winced as she watched the whip snap at her. It struck her left thigh with insidious cruelty. “*Agghhhh!*”

Miss Bliss was already pulling her arm back, preparing another assault. “You’re giving me quite the workout.”

Madison could tell from Miss Bliss’s face that the woman was genuinely *enjoying* this. But there was something else in her eyes, something far more disturbing: pure delight and unadulterated euphoria. Sadism was more than this woman’s sexual high, it appeared to be her very lifestyle—her *everything*. Each lash of the whip appeared to drag her closer to some kind of sick orgasm.

Yet another strike of the whip—this time across Madison’s stomach—sent her shouting at the top of her heaving lungs. She could barely bring herself to form a coherent sentence, so she settled for a primitive howl of rage.

“Shall we move on to some of my *other* toys, Ms. PCPD officer?”

“Y-you tw-twisted *bitch...*” Madison whimpered under her breath, just loud enough for her captor to hear.

“Oh, stop it,” Miss Bliss replied in an exaggerated mischievous tone, as if she’d just been playfully teased. She coiled the whip around her hand and set it down on a nearby table where other instruments of torture awaited. “Keep doling out compliments like that and I’m liable to think that you *never* want me to stop.”

Madison watched helplessly as Miss Bliss's hand hovered over the table, stopping above a serrated blade resting on the table. The woman picked up the gleaming tool and stroked the handle with loving affection.

"Well, I have good news for you, sweetheart," the woman said, her tongue flashing across her bottom lip. "The good times are only just beginning."

"G-get bent," Madison hissed.

Miss Bliss gripped the knife tight in one hand. With her free hand, she seized the front of Madison's bra and pulled it away from her breasts, distorting the molded cups. Miss Bliss stretched the silky material taut before bringing the blade down, slashing right through the center.

Madison gasped as the woman released the bra, letting both cups hang over her breasts. The bra just barely covered her nipples and was dangerously close to falling off altogether.

"Having any second thoughts?" Miss Bliss asked with a sly grin. She ran her hand down Madison's soft stomach, fingers tracing down to her captive's navel, and down to her panties. "Oh, the things I have planned for you..."

Madison's attention remained on the blade in Miss Bliss's other hand, which the woman raised into the air. A glint of light flashed across its silver surface, causing Madison to wince.

"I think it's time to *mark* my property," Miss Bliss said, inching the blade closer to Madison's stomach. "After this, you'll belong to me for—"

Thwack!

"Uurrgh!" Miss Bliss's eyes rolled back into her head and she staggered forward, then to the side. Her knees wobbled before giving out, causing her to collapse into a kneeling position. A long moment passed, making it seem as if she'd rise back up at any given second. But it never happened. Instead, she fell over, crashing to the floor.

Madison watched as the woman dropped to the ground, unconscious. *What the hell happened?* Before she could form another thought, Madison's gaze turned to where Miss Bliss had previously stood. What she saw caused her to blink in disbelief. Reena was standing before her, clutching a black nightstick in hand—clearly the tool that had incapacitated her sadistic torturer.

"Madison!" Reena cried out, dropping the weapon and proceeding to undo one of her partner's wrist restraints.

"R-rookie? How did you—"

"I'll explain later," Reena replied. She could hear the exhaustion in Madison's voice. "First, let's get you out of here."

"Th-thanks..." Madison whispered just as her partner finished untying the strap, allowing her hand to fall free. Every muscle in her shoulder screamed in pain. In seconds, the other wrist and ankle restraints were undone. She slid off the 'X' shaped device, while Reena held fast to her side, making sure she wouldn't collapse.

Only then did Madison notice four other girls in the room. One of them she recognized from her previous encounter with Reena, earlier in the park. But the other three were a mystery, despite a strange familiarity about them. Then it clicked. Madison recalled their faces from the missing person photos—they were the three girls who had previously disappeared at Fantasy Funland.

“Is she okay?” Haley asked, clearly shaken. Before receiving an answer, she shifted to Madison’s side, also helping to stabilize the weakened officer.

“She’ll be all right,” Reena answered, offering a slight smile to her partner, “Madison’s the toughest they come.”

“Yeah, I’ll live.” Madison replied with a nod. She looked down to unconscious woman sprawled out on the floor. “It’s over now—this case’s closed.”

* * *

“Following up on yesterday’s breaking story,” the news anchor reported, her face filling the massive ultra-definition screen mounted to the skyscraper’s side, “Dalton Trayer, owner of Pallad City’s Fantasy Funland theme park, was arrested on charges of human trafficking.”

The news broadcast caused Haley’s attention to shift from the outdoor hyper rail station to the giant screen. “Sheesh, you think they’d mention your name!”

“What?” Reena blushed. “Why?”

“Because you and your partner solved the case *and* saved those girls! I think you deserve some serious credit.”

“It’s fine,” Reena let out an embarrassed laugh and shrugged, “we’re police officers, after all. We were just doing our jobs.”

With a smile, Haley shook her head. “Always so humble. Well, the PCPD’s lucky to have Reena Saffron on the force. Will your partner—Madison—be all right?”

“Yeah, she’s doing okay. The chief insisted she take a few days off to recover.”

“Only a *few* days? After what she went through?”

“Heh, you don’t know Madison. The Chief *wanted* her to take a week off, at least, but Madison was determined to return to work today.”

“That’s one crazy partner you have!”

“She’s pretty amazing.” Reena glanced over at the digital tram sign. Haley’s train was supposed to arrive any minute. She turned back to her friend, head hung low. “I’m *really* sorry about everything—your first trip to Pallad City was a disaster!”

Haley held up her hands, gesturing in dismissal at her friend’s apology. “I told you already, it *wasn’t* your fault. And, you have to admit, it could have ended a *whole lot worse*.”

“I guess,” Reena admitted, though it didn’t make her feel any less guilty. “It’s just that you came here to see *me*, and then all this horrible stuff happened...”

“This is really *not* something you should feel responsible for, Reena—in fact, thanks to you, you saved those other girls and your partner, along with putting some awful people behind bars.”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

Haley offered her friend a playful wink. “But, next time, how about you visit *me* in Old Metro?”

Reena chuckled, rubbing the back of her head. “You got it.”

An electric *whoosh* cut through the air as a sleek train came to an abrupt stop at the station.

“My train,” Haley said, her cheerful expression fading into something more serious. “You know, I never *really* understood it.”

“Understood what?” Reena asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“I never understood *why* you wanted to be a cop,” Haley continued. “I thought you were way too soft, too gentle, that you weren’t suited for this kind of work.”

Reena rubbed the back of her head again. She parted her lips to speak, but Haley cut her to the chase.

“It’s just that, well, it’s so *dangerous*,” Haley sighed. “But I was wrong. Way wrong. It’s not about being soft, cold, or even callous. Not at all. You’re so selfless, always thinking of others *before* yourself. You always want to help people—you have a good heart. A *kind* heart. Always did.”

“Haley...”

“So, I think I get it now, *this* is how you can help the most people,” Haley nodded, her eyes on the verge of watering. “But, no matter what, don’t let this city change that. Stay that sweet, kind girl I know...the one who’s always there for everyone. The girl I remember.”

“I’ll always...” Reena started to reach out to her friend, but Haley seized her hand, clenching it tightly in her own.

“Never change, Reena Saffron!” Haley spoke intently.

Reena smiled. She could feel herself getting worked up in the face of Haley’s raw emotion. She held her friend’s hand as tightly as she could. “It’s a deal! I promise.”

Haley returned the smile before giving Reena a hug. She took a step back and stole a glance at her awaiting train. “Guess I better go, huh? Be seeing you soon?”

“For sure,” Reena playfully saluted. “Maybe I’ll take a trip to Old M next month!”

Haley rushed for the train, throwing one last look over her shoulder, “I’ll hold you to it!” And, with that, she disappeared into the crowd that had congregated on the hyper rail station platform.

Reena stepped back, gazing up to the city’s sleek skyline. Her friend was right. Reena had always fantasized about being a police officer and now, more than ever, she knew that she’d made the right decision coming to Pallad City. There were no regrets in her mind, nor any doubts to dissuade her. Sure, she already missed her family and friends in Old Metro, but it was in this new city where she could *finally* live her dream.

Pallad City was her home now, and there was no turning back.

End_

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