



## **DANGER ZONE ONE**

### **— FITNESS FIASCO —**

“You’re busted,” Reena shouted, running as fast as she could, but not fast enough to keep up with the disguised perpetrator. Each time she gained a little on him, he just seemed to increase speed. The sweltering midday heat and blazing sun didn’t help matters, and only made Reena feel more exhausted as she wiped the sweat from her forehead. “There’s no point running, pal!”

The fleeing man in the latex clown mask paid no heed to her warning. Instead, he quickened his pace and, without so much as a glance, flung a trio of playing cards over his shoulder.

Reena was puzzled to see the cards gliding in her direction. She would have let out a laugh at the criminal’s feeble attempt to stall her, had one of the cards not sliced through the fabric of her shirt sleeve, only just missing contact with her skin. The two remaining razor-edged cards came at her fast, one flying over her head and the other shearing off a few strands of hair next to her left ear.

“Damn,” the masked criminal hissed, disappointed that his last remaining razor cards didn’t hit their target. He reached the center of the sprawling junk yard and took a right turn where several towers of rusting Bevcon sedans were stacked. He’d have to find a new way to lose the cop.

“Geez,” Reena gasped, short on breath, “this is ridiculous!” Her heart was pounding like a jackhammer and her tired legs felt like they were on fire. She wished Madison was with her, but her partner had claimed that she would ‘circle around’ to cut the perp off. That was ten minutes ago, and Reena was *still* waiting for some much needed help. At this rate, she was certain they’d end up losing the culprit. She made her way between the two towering sedan heaps and entered into a dark makeshift path, both sides congested with the shells of corroded vehicles. Her eyes lit up at the sight of the criminal, scaling a chain-link fence. *Gotcha now*, she thought to herself. He was already over the fence by the time she got to it, but she latched on and proceeded to lift herself up. She quickly realized that it was taking her *far* longer to make it over the fence than the perp had. Her arms ached and muscles trembled as she reached the top of the fence. With a final heave, she tumbled over the other side, dropping on her rear, hard against the dirt.

“Show’s over,” a gruff voice called out from the nearby shadows, “time for your curtain call!” A

rubbery clownish visage emerged from the nearby darkness. Holding a colorful, cone-shaped object in his hand, the criminal tugged on a string at its end, expelling a blast of confetti from the cone's opening.

"Wha—?!" Reena could only watch as dozens of confetti streamers spiraled in her direction, coiling around her upper body and binding her arms to her sides.

The masked man pulled out a rainbow-colored knife from his oversized shirt sleeve and glared at the officer. "This'll teach you not to trail Zombo the Grea—"

*THUD.*

The criminal collapsed to the ground, face first.

Reena could tell from the way he was sprawled out that 'Zombo' wasn't going to be waking up from his unexpected nap anytime soon.

"Lucky for you, I arrived in time," Madison said, standing over the unconscious man. She held a police baton tight in her grip and, having just used it proudly, waggled it at her partner. "You're too slow, rookie! The chief could've climbed up that fence faster than you did—and he's nearly *three* times your age!"

Reena was still struggling to catch her breath while fighting against the confetti binding. "Th-that guy was just really fast...and I was chasing him all through the junk yard..."

Madison flicked out a pocket knife from her duty belt and, with one quick swipe, severed the confetti, freeing her partner. "Yeah, that's the problem—you should've caught up with him *before* getting to the junk yard! I circled around the entrance too early, thinking you'd have already stopped him there."

"Sorry, I'll try to be faster next time," Reena pledged, climbing to her feet. She watched as Madison already applied the handcuffs to Zombo. He was one of the lesser criminals they had encountered in the last week, having tracked him down an hour ago after receiving a dispatch report asking them to investigate the downtown area. Apparently, a man dressed in a clown costume was performing street magic—though his tricks would often end with him stealing people's possessions, particularly pricey watches, and replacing them with counterfeits, unbeknownst to his victims.

"Starting tomorrow," Madison began, turning her icy glare upon Reena, "we're starting physical training. You need to get into shape."

"P-physical t-training?" Reena stuttered. "Do we really have to?"

"You'd better believe it!"

\* \* \*

Reena was still half asleep when the banging began. She stirred in her bed, opened her blurry eyes, and rolled over to look out the window. It was darker out than she expected but, before she could determine what time it was, a new round of harsh bangs echoed off the walls, even louder than before. Reena wondered where the racket was coming from, until realizing that it was the door to *her* apartment. She glanced over to her Mr. Bearbot alarm clock and had to do a double-take. *Is it really only five-thirty in the morning?* She asked herself. *No wonder it's still dark out, the sun hasn't even come up yet!*

A fresh series of bangs followed, as if someone was hammering on the door with renewed vigor. Only dressed in her panties and tank top, Reena stumbled out of bed, scrambled out of the room, and entered the adjoining walkway. Just as she was about to reach the front door, it burst wide open—

"M-M-Madison...?!"

"You should *really* lock your door," the white-haired officer sighed, "this isn't Old Metro. You can never be too careful in Pallad City."

Reena rubbed her eyes in a frantic circular motion, unsure if she was dreaming. “Wh-what are you doing here? And *how* did you find my apartment?”

“Your address is listed with the PCPD, *obviously*—and I’m here so we can start your training.”

“Training?” Reena let the dreaded word slip past her lips. “*This* early?”

“No better time than the crack of dawn,” Madison replied. “Let’s get moving.”

“But today’s my day off,” Reena pleaded.

“I know. That’s why I’ve planned an exercise regimen for the *entire* morning.”

“You did *what?*!”

\* \* \*

## 6:03 AM

Reena stood outside the courtyard to her apartment, gazing up at the thirty-third floor of the towering skyscraper, wishing she was still up there, asleep in her bed. The sun was only just rising and it was way too early for her to be awake, especially when she was *supposed* to have the day off.

“Don’t go daydreaming already,” Madison scolded.

“But it’s *not* day,” Reena sighed, “not yet, anyway.”

Madison gestured in the direction of the rising sun, the early glow of sunlight just beginning to cast away the last remnants of night. “Close enough. Now let’s get busy—first up, we’ll do some warm-up stretches.

Reena perked up. “That doesn’t sound bad.”

“Which stretches do you know?”

“Uh...well,” Reena extended her arms over her head, straining as far as she could with a tense expression that looked like she was struggling with every ounce of her being.

“What are you doing?” Madison asked, dumbfounded. “That’s not a *real* stretch.”

“Sure it is,” Reena countered. “I’m stretching my arms.”

“Try this instead.” Madison relaxed her back, leaned forward, and reached down for her toes. “It’s called a standing toe touch.”

“Oh, I can do that.” Reena leaned over, following her partner’s example, but her fingers were nowhere close to reaching as far down as Madison’s did. She bent her knees and was able to gain a few inches of reach. She was surprised how tight her body felt. She couldn’t remember the last time she had done a proper stretch.

“Rookie!” Madison barked. “You’re doing it all wrong. Don’t bend your knees so much—the whole point is to bend over with your hips, rounding your back.”

“Eek,” Reena moaned, trying to follow her partner’s instructions. “It feels like my legs are about to snap!”

“Hold that position for twenty seconds.”

Reena bit her lip and starting counting. By the time she got to ten it felt like she’d been struggling to maintain her pose for the last hour. *Five, four,* she counted down in her head, *three, two, one...*

“Okay,” Madison began, “that’s all right for starters. Next, we’ll try something a little tougher.”

Reena straightened her back. “My spine feels stiffer *now* than it did a few seconds ago.”

Madison extended her arms out and crouched down as if she were about to sit on an invisible chair. She maintained her position, then rose back up, before repeating the process several more times. “You’ve done squats before, right?”

“Sure...” Reena answered with some hesitation, unable to recall the last time she tried one, “... hasn’t everybody?”

“Let’s see it.”

Reena squatted down the first time, her legs shaking as she lowered into position. “See, easy!” As soon as the words left her mouth, she stood back up.

“That’s it? You need to stay in that position for *longer* than two seconds—and you need to do it *more* than once. Try twenty-five reps.”

“Tw-twenty-five?!”

“And hold it for *five* seconds each time.”

Reena gulped and gave it a try. After the first three squats, she was fairly confident that she could pull off Madison’s challenge without a hitch. However, by the ninth squat, Reena could feel her knees quivering, ever ready to buckle. By the seventeenth squat, she fell back onto the concrete with a pained moan. “Th-this isn’t as simple as it looks.”

“Eight more to go.”

“And then we’re done, right.”

“Yeah.”

Reena mustered up her strength and resumed the workout, just managing to complete the remaining eight squats before dropping to her knees. “All finished, at last!”

“I see there’s a park behind your apartment,” Madison said, stretching a leg out, “perfect spot for a run. The trail can’t be more than a few miles.”

“A few miles?” Reena’s mouth dropped open. “Maybe we should take this in baby steps, something like a light walk, or a nice *stroll*.”

Madison rolled her eyes. “Fine, we’ll only do *two* miles.”

“What a start to the day,” Reena muttered.

“What’d you say, rookie? I didn’t catch that.”

“Heh, heh,” Reena laughed nervously, “I said, I always wanted to run a *relay*.”

## 8:45 AM

Reena was drenched in sweat by the time they returned to the courtyard, her light blue t-shirt and shorts were adhering to her like a second skin. She noticed that Madison, who wore a white tank top and matching shorts, didn’t appear the least bit winded after their run.

“That wasn’t a bad start,” Madison said, “but could’ve been better if you hadn’t run out of breath in the first four minutes.”

“Hey, you were going so fast, I could barely catch up. I thought it was just supposed to be a warm-up?”

“The stretching was the warm-up—*that* was actual exercise.”

“Oh,” Reena perked up, “so that mean’s were done for the day, right?”

“Wrong,” Madison said with a stern glare. “Next we’re hitting the pool.”

“The pool? That doesn’t sound so bad...actually, that sounds fun!”

“Glad to hear it. Then you won’t mind doing laps.”

“Laps...?” Reena repeated, her tone grim.

## 10:29 AM

It was the first time Reena had been inside a gym in Pallad City, and the aptly-named ‘Fit for Fight’ wasn’t the one she’d have chosen to step foot in. According to Madison, it was a gym often frequented by private military contractors, security personnel, boxers, bodybuilders, and other individuals who wanted to maintain peak physical performance.

Reena had just made her twentieth lap in the pool, despite feeling like her arms and legs were about to fall off. She reached the edge of the pool and, gathering all of her remaining strength, pulled herself out of the water. She rested her back on the floor, gasping for breath.

Madison, finishing her fortieth lap, burst out of the pool. “Good cardiovascular exercise, huh?”

“S-sure...” Reena tried to control her breathing, “...if you...say so...”

“Y’know,” Madison sat on the floor next to the breathless girl, “if it’s too much for you, you could just quit. Maybe a less *physical* career is more your speed?”

“No way!” Reena sat upright, moving like a bolt of lightning despite her exhaustion. “I’ve *always* wanted to be a police officer, and if it means getting into shape, well then I’ll push myself as far as I have to!”

Madison chuckled. It was the first time Reena had ever seen her laugh. The white-haired officer rose up from the floor, grabbing a towel to dry herself off.

“What’s funny?” Reena asked, confused.

“You’re really committed, aren’t you? That’s more than I can say for most of the other officers at the precinct.”

“That can’t really be true,” Reena protested. “I’m sure there are tons of officers who are just as committed!”

“How many officers do you see here working out?”

“Uh, none...at the moment.”

“I’ve been coming here for two years. Know how many I’ve ever seen? Zero.”

“Well,” Reena shrugged, “maybe they train somewhere else?”

“Have you seen officers like Gripps?” Madison barked. “If lifting a beer bottle’s training, than he’d quality as a certified champion. Cops like him are the reason the crime rate’s so high in Pallad City. That’s why, if you want to be my partner, you have to be *better*. When it comes down to it, there’ll be situations where you *can’t* rely on your gun or you I.D.A.C. You’ll need to rely on yourself, and being physically able could be the difference between life and death.”

“I understand,” Reena nodded, “and you have my word, I’ll try my best!”

“All right,” Madison said, tossing the towel aside, “enough pool for one day. Let’s grab some food.”

“Yes!” Reena cheered. “I’m starving!”

## 11:44 AM

“Yuck...” Reena gagged, eyeing the table of so-called food before them. The plate in front of her was overflowing with leafy lettuce that looked like it had just been plucked from the nearest garden. It was topped with a variety of vegetables—some of which she’d never seen before. And, worse yet, there was no salad dressing to go with it (too *unhealthy*, Madison had claimed). “Are you sure I can’t go to Burger World and get an egg and cheese sandwich?”

Madison took a bite of her salad. “With all the calories, fat, and grease you’d be polluting your body with, just by eating that crap, you’d have to get back in the pool for *another* twenty laps to work it off!”

“Couldn’t I have at least ordered lemonade?” Reena pleaded, motioning to the thick green substance that sat in her glass. “That stuff looks like it came out of a swamp.”

“That drink’s filled with tons of vitamins and micronutrients. I’ll admit, it doesn’t taste all that great, but it’s *good* for you.”

“Does anything good for you *ever* taste great?” Reena lamented.

“For your first day training, you did pretty well, rookie.”

“You really think so?”

“Well, you won’t break any fitness records—but it’s a start. We can call it a day—”

Reena leaned over the table, her facing glowing with excitement. “You mean, we’re finished?”

“—*after* we do some weight training.”

“Weights?” Reena cried. “Aw—c’mon, Madison, *anything* but weights! I don’t wanna be all

muscular and bulky!”

“Lifting a few weights *isn't* going to turn you into a hulking bodybuilder!” Madison responded, rolling her eyes.

“Sheesh,” Reena let her head plop down on the table, next to her plate. “I could really go for some pizza, with ice cream for dessert.”

“It’s not even noon yet!”

“But with all this exercise, I’m so tired I could already go to bed...”

“Ugh,” Madison sighed, “you’re hopeless!”

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