



## **DANGER ZONE ONE**

### **— ELEVATOR ZONE —**

Madison didn't *want* to go out for New Year's Eve, and a party attended by Pallad City's rich and famous was certainly *not* her idea of a good time. She glanced around the ornate penthouse, bustling with the city's so-called elite—all dressed in elegant formal attire. The white-haired officer looked down to the ghastly red dress she'd been forced to wear. It may have been a rag compared to what those around her were walking around in, but it was still fancier than anything she had ever owned before. Even so, there were few things she despised *more* than gaudy attire, including dresses. She felt constricted under the cloth, which made her movements static and awkward.

Her attention shifted to the large grandfather clock at the other end of the room. It was an hour before midnight—just sixty more minutes until she could go home and be away from the upper-class riffraff.

*Why'd the Chief have to foist this case on me of all people!* Madison lamented to herself. Typically, the wealthy wouldn't want cops loitering around during a party, even undercover ones. They'd employ private security, which were often better equipped than the PCPD, as sad as *that* was to admit. But Madison's presence went beyond typical security. Lori Lace, the party's hostess—and a prominent leading actress in the film industry—had received a series of threatening letters from an apparent stalker. It was impossible for the PCPD to follow up on *every* threat, especially when so many were harmless cranks or from degenerates with too much time on their hands. However, the letters Lace received possessed all the hallmarks of an authentic threat. Whoever had been writing them was in close proximity to the actress, due to the intimate photos they'd often include with the letters. Further, it was believed the stalker could be a Netraver—an elite hacker—due to their apparent access to Lace's private information, collected from secure Net servers.

“At least *try* to blend in,” a voice lashed out with obvious disgust.

Madison turned, coming face-to-face with Lace. The woman was dressed in a shimmering white gown—clearly custom designed, as it perfectly conformed to her large pregnant belly. “Mrs. Lace, I'm

here to make sure nothing happens to you—not mingle with your guests.”

“You’re here to make sure nothing happens to me?” Lace repeated the officer’s words with disdain, rolling her eyes. “*Hah!* What a laugh. I didn’t even *want* you here. It was my husband who insisted the police attend tonight, just as an extra measure of safety. Personally, you’re here doing little more than taking up space and looking absolutely appalling in that dress.”

Madison bit her lip, trying to keep her temper in check. It was well-known by the general public that Mrs. Lace had a less-than-stellar reputation in the film industry. She was notorious for being difficult to work with, and Madison was quickly becoming aware of just *how* difficult. Her husband, Roe Demari, was a real-estate mogul who shared her infamous reputation for lack of social grace. Fortunately, Demari wasn’t at the party. He was thousands of miles away, supervising the construction of several luxury hotels in Galvograd.

“At least those *other* officers are out of sight,” Lace continued. “It’s bad enough I have to look at *you*.”

“Those other officers are busy figuring out the layout of this building,” Madison explained, “since your husband refused to give us access to the blueprints.”

“You’re standing in the most advanced building Roe Demari has *ever* constructed, and this party marks its opening,” Lace snapped. “My husband isn’t going to just hand over the layout of this technical marvel to some rabble and risk it *leaking* to competitors.”

“He should be *more* concerned about your safety,” Madison replied, gesturing to the woman’s belly, “and the safety of his unborn child, instead of a building. That last letter you received was specific that something was going to happen tonight—at *this* party—before midnight. Based on the files they sent, it’s clear they know more about this building than *we* do!”

Lace waved her hand, as if to brush off the officer’s concerns. “I’m a celebrity, you know how many sickos send me letters a week?”

“How many of those sickos have access to vital personal info?”

Before Lace could answer, a waiter passed by with a tray of champagne glasses. “You—*hold it!*”

The waiter froze, struggling to balance the gleaming platter. “Yes, madam?”

“Are you serving the Peldon Vantel?”

“N-no, madam,” the waiter replied nervously. “We’re serving the Bollignon.”

“Bollignon?” Lace said with a sneer. “Why are you serving that swill at my party? I specifically ordered Peldon Vantel for tonight. Didn’t it arrive?”

“It did,” the waiter answered, “but it’s downstairs.”

“What’s it doing down there?!”

“The private security wouldn’t let us bring it up—they claimed they needed to verify the crate’s contents to make sure it was safe.”

“Of all the stupid—!”

“Madam, if you would like, I can call down and—”

“No!” Lace spat. “I clearly can’t leave this in the hands of an incompetent. I’ll handle it myself.” She spun around—as fast as she could in her pregnant condition—and marched towards the elevator.

“Hey,” Madison called out, following the actress, “where are you going? You need to stay in the penthouse where it’s secure.”

Lace reached for the elevator panel, jabbing her thumb against the down arrow. “Secure, you say! Give it a rest. This entire building’s secure—*too secure!* That’s why those idiots wouldn’t let my Peldon Vantel upstairs. The imbeciles are probably down there drinking it as we speak!”

The elevator door opened and Lace entered.

“Dammit!” Madison trailed after the woman, hurrying into the luxurious glass elevator. The clear see-through panels allowed for an impressive nighttime view of the Pallad City skyline. The elevator itself was roomy, especially with only the two of them occupying it.

Lace tapped the button for a lower level and stood back. “You don’t need to babysit me. In fact, I’d

prefer it if you *didn't*—especially with the way you're dressed.”

“Believe me, if it wasn't my job...” Madison muttered under her breath.

“And that—” Lace pointed to the white bracelet on the officer's wrist, “— what is *that* abomination? You actually call that jewelry?”

“It's *called* an I.DAC,” Madison replied, her blood pressure rising by the second, “Intel and Data Aid Communicator.”

“I wouldn't be caught dead wearing an unsightly thing like that.”

Madison sighed, leaning back against the glass panel of the elevator. *This is going to be a long hour.*

“And that hair,” Lace continued, “when was the last time you had it—”

*KREEAANK!*

The elevator came to a shuddering halt. The overhead light blinked off, quickly replaced by the red glow from an emergency fixture.

“What happened?” Lace shouted, panicked. “What's wrong with the elevator?”

“Maybe a power outage,” Madison responded, looking out the glass panel to the city below. “Strange, it's only *this* building—the power's on everywhere else.”

“This is one of the most advanced skyscrapers ever constructed,” Lace claimed, raising her voice. “This isn't supposed to happen. My husband has a multi-generator mini-core beneath this building—do you even know what that means? We should *never* lose power!”

“Yeah, well you did,” Madison snapped. “And I have a feeling this *wasn't* due to an accident.”

“What?” Lace threw her arms in the air. “Why would you say that? Why would you even *think* it?”

“If the power grid's as good as you claim,” Madison said, “then this *isn't* an ordinary outage. There's a good chance it's been hacked. The letters you've received—we believe they were sent by a Netraver.”

“Wonderful—just *wonderful!*” Lace bellowed, pacing the elevator. “My party's ruined!”

Madison raised her wrist and spoke into the I.DAC's speaker. “Rookie, you there?”

“Yeah,” Reena's voice crackled through the bracelet's miniature speaker. “Did the power go out where you are too?”

The Rookie's words confirmed what Madison feared—the entire building had gone dark. “It did. We're stuck in the elevator right now and—”

“Aagh,” Lace cried, staggering to the side.

“What's wrong?” Madison asked, alarmed.

“I think—” Lace cradled her belly, wincing, “—I think I'm going into labor!”

“Are you *kidding* me?!” Madison raised the I.DAC again. “Rookie, you need to locate the vent system and find access to the elevator shaft—I need help here!”

“D-did I hear that right?” Reena asked, her panic evident over the speaker. “She's having a baby *now?!?*”

“Looks like it. You and Gripps try to get access to the elevator. Have Sev go downstairs to investigate the sub-level. We don't know much about this building's layout but, apparently, there's a mini-core beneath us. If someone hacked the power system, that's where they'd be.”

“Got it!” Reena replied. “We'll try to get to you as soon as we can!”

“Shit!” Lace dropped to her knees, her water breaking. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Madison rushed over to the actress. “You're going to be fine, just lie down and I'll—”

“You'll do *what?!?*” Lace barked, struggling to lay back. “You're not a doctor!”

Helping the woman down, Madison sighed. “Don't worry, help's on the way.”

“Help? Is *that* what you're calling it?”

“I had a hot date tonight and I'm missing it for this,” Gripps moaned, straightening his collar.

“Worst New Year's Eve ever.”

“Don't worry, buddy—the blow up doll will *still* be waiting when you get home,” Sev chuckled.

“Real funny,” Gripps said, folding his arms, “a real comedian's what *you* are.”

“Come on,” Reena urged, “you heard Madison—we need to find that access vent.”

Gripps yawned. “And how are we gonna do that?”

“You start by *looking*,” Sev said, opening the door to the emergency exit. “I'm heading down to the sub-level. I'll let you know if I find anything.”

“All right,” Gripps relented, turning to Reena—admiring how the black dress accentuated her ample breasts, “let's hunt down this stupid vent.”

“I wasn't supposed to go into labor yet,” Lace moaned, lying on the elevator floor, “I have a party to host! What will the guests think?!”

Madison attempted to crouch, but found her dress restricting any such movement. She reached down, grabbed the hem, and gave it a firm pull. To her satisfaction, the cloth easily tore. She continued until the bottom half of her dress, from her thighs down, had been ripped away. With her newfound freedom, Madison knelt down next to Lace. “You hanging in there?”

“No,” Lace shouted, hands grasping for her stomach. “I'm in a shitload of pain!”

Madison held up her I.DAC, tapped a button on it, and inched closer to the miniaturized microphone. “This is Wynter, over. Get me in contact with Dr. Belanie—*now!*”

“How are you going to get a doctor up here?” Lace cried out in between pained gasps. “Are you stupid or something? The power's still out!”

Madison ignored the woman, her attention locked on the I.DAC.

“This is Dr. Belanie—” a voice crackled through the communicator's speaker.

“We've got a situation,” the officer responded, cutting the doctor off. “I have a pregnant woman here and she's going into labor. We're trapped in an elevator and cut off from any medical help.”

“Run an ultrasonic scan on her with your I.DAC,” Belanie instructed with such certainty that it surprised the officer. “The I.DAC's scans aren't perfect—but it'll give me *some* idea what we're working with.”

Madison wasted no time holding up her bracelet and striking a button on its side. A beam of blue light streaked out, flickering over Lace's body.

“What's that thing doing?” Lace asked, concerned.

“Just lie still and keep quiet,” Madison replied tersely. After the scan was finished she tilted the communicator back near her mouth. “Belanie—the scan's done! Sending it your way.”

“Okay, give me a moment and—” Belanie paused for a moment before continuing, “—I see it. The scan must be off somewhat, because I'm getting duplicate readings. But, from what I can tell, it's showing that she's currently in active labor.”

“No shit!” Lace shouted. “I didn't need some *scan* to tell me that!”

“In some cases,” Belanie continued, “active labor can take four to eight hours, so—”

“No—” Lace bellowed, “—I paid for augmented labor inducers. I'm *not* doing this shit for eight hours.”

“What the hell are augmented labor inducers?” Madison snapped.

Belanie's voice escaped from the I.DAC speaker. “They're relatively new—and outrageously expensive—but nanites are implanted in a pregnant woman early on. They safely speed up the labor process. Some claim the nanites reduce the pain too.”

“That's bullshit,” Lace cursed. “Believe me, I'm in a *hell* of a lot of pain right now...”

“So what's this mean?” Madison asked. “With the nanites, how long until she's popping the kid out?”

“Typically,” Belanie said, “twenty or so minutes—give or take. *You're* going to have to deliver the

baby.”

“*Me?!*” Madison gasped. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I’ll guide you through it,” Belanie replied, trying to sound as confident as possible, though it did little to fool Madison.

“Great way to end a year,” the officer muttered sarcastically.

“It’s the vent!” Reena cheered, shining a flashlight on the grated shaft cover, affixed to the wall. “At least, I *think* it’s the right vent. Without the schematics, it’s more like a guessing game, huh?”

“Oh, no—not gonna happen!” Gripps raised his arms in protest. “There’s no way I’d *fit* in there.”

“It’s okay,” Reena pressed a switch near the vent. “I’ll fit.”

The vent grate lowered, allowing access.

Gripps stepped back. “All yours, princess. I, for one, don’t wanna kick off my year stuck in a ventilation shaft...”

Ignoring Gripps, Reena climbed into the vent opening.

*Shhrrrip!*

“Whoa, baby!” Gripps said, clapping his hands together. “The view just got better!”

Reena gasped. A cool breeze reached up to her panties. The dress had torn near her rear end! “Oh, no...”

“Keep pushing!” Madison said, spreading Lace’s legs apart. “I think I can see something—it looks like a head.”

“Good,” Belanie’s voice echoed from the I.DAC’s speaker, “you’re making progress, Mrs. Lace. Keep it up.”

“*Aaagh!*” Lace cried out. “I’ve *never* been in this much pain before! How much longer?”

“You’re getting closer,” Madison replied, “the baby’s coming. Just *keep* pushing.”

“*Keep pushing—keep pushing!*” Lace parroted in a mocking tone. “What the hell do you think I’m *doing* here?!”

Reena crawled through the length of the ventilation shaft, coming to another grated panel. She pushed the easy-access panel open and poked her head through. The officer was surprised to find a panoramic display of glass panels, providing a stunning nighttime view of Pallad City.

*This is the elevator shaft! I’ve found it!*

Reena looked downwards, spotting the motionless elevator cab nearly thirty feet below. Her attention shifted to the cable stretching down to the cab and she cringed. She wasn’t sure if she’d be able to rappel down it, but there was no other option. Fearing that the cable would cut into the palms of her hands, she grabbed the fabric of her dress and tore two long strips off. She wrapped the fabric around her hands and reached for the elevator cable.

*Hope this works!*

Taking hold of the cable, Reena pulled herself out of the vent. She slid down a few feet—faster than expected. She wrapped her ankles around the cable in an effort to slow herself down. Her arms and legs began to tremble as she struggled to carry her weight. She continued down a few more feet, then a few more. She neared closer to the elevator cab, deciding to pick up the pace due to the throbbing muscle aches in her arms.

*Just a little more—I’ve got to do it! I can’t give up now...*

Reena’s grip loosened and she slid further, letting out a panicked yelp as she fell back—her hands letting go of the cable. She opened her mouth to scream, but the effort was cut short as her back

slammed against the top of the elevator cab.

“Ow!” Reena moaned, realizing that she had only fallen several feet. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she turned over, spotting an emergency exit panel on the top of the cab. She climbed to her knees and pulled the release lever.

Madison awkwardly cradled the newborn in her arms, wincing as it cried. “It, uh...*he*...looks healthy. At least, I *think* he does.”

“He sure *sounds* healthy!” Dr. Belanie chuckled over the I.DAC.

“I’m not done yet, you idiot,” Lace said.

Before Madison could respond, the emergency hatch on top of the elevator swung open.

“Are you okay?” Reena called out, already climbing down into the cab. Her eyes widened at the sight of the baby. “Whoa—did you deliver the little guy all by yourself, Madison? That’s amazing!”

Madison cocked her head back slightly. “Well, it wasn’t *that* difficult.”

“Good!” Lace shouted. “Then you should be able to deliver the *second* one!”

“S-second one?!” Madison stammered.

“She’s having...*twins*?” Reena gasped.

“That must be why the scan results looked distorted,” Belanie said, noticeable surprise in her voice.

It was two minutes to midnight by the time the second newborn—a girl—had been delivered. Reena, holding the baby in her arms, turned to her partner. “They’re so cute, huh?”

“Well, they’re loud—that’s for sure!” Madison cradled the other crying child as her I.DAC beeped.

“Wynter, you there?” Sev’s voice discharged from the communicator’s speaker.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“A whole lot—I caught the little creep responsible for this whole thing. He was sneaking around the sub-level. He’s already confessed to hacking the power grid and sending those threatening letters to Mrs. Lace.”

“I was supposed to bear her children!” A strained voice called out over the communicator. “I loved her! I watched all of her films, hundreds, no—*thousands*—of times! It was *me* she was destined to—”

“Pipe down,” Sev barked before a sudden *thunk* echoed through the speaker. “Anyway, the power should be back on any sec.”

“Good work,” Madison replied, turning to her partner. “Looks like our work here’s done.”

“I guess you aren’t *entirely* useless,” Lace said, lying with her back against the elevator’s glass wall. She gave the officer the slightest nod of approval. “I’ll see what I can do about getting you a few free tickets to the premiere of my next film.”

“How thoughtful,” Madison groaned.

A flash of orange light briefly illuminated the interior of the elevator cab. A green light followed, then a blue one.

“Fireworks!” Reena’s mouth dropped open in awe as she looked out the elevator’s glass window. Explosions of multicolored fireworks spread across the sky. “You know what that means, don’t you? It’s midnight! Happy New Year!”

The elevator shuddered and the overhead emergency light blinked off. The standard bulb flickered back to life and the cab began its renewed descent.

Reena smiled at her partner. “Maybe this means we’re in for a good year, huh?”

Madison looked to the newborn in her arms, then glanced back to the window, watching the breathtaking fireworks display. “One can only hope, Rookie. One can only hope.”

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