

CHAPTER ONE

THE ENGINE OF the Beams Cycle roared like a lion as I rushed down the streets of Golden City in pursuit of the most annoying criminal in the city. Weaving through traffic, it was surprisingly easy to keep track of the criminal's getaway car, which was painted in bright neon orange and green and had a big balloon clown head bouncing around on top like a bobblehead.

It helped that the criminal drove like a maniac. His car swerved and jolted, forcing cars off the streets or pedestrians to flee for their lives. It smashed apart trashcans or ran over abandoned food stands, all the while loud cackling could be heard coming from the mouth of the balloon clown head on the car's roof. That sound made me want to catch him and pop that stupid balloon of his personally.

"Ha, ha, ha!" the high-pitched, clownish voice crackled from the speaker in the balloon. "Oh, what fun this day has been so far! But you still can't catch *me*, Beams!"

I gritted my teeth. No point in responding because Makeup, the criminal who I was pursuing, wouldn't hear me over the rushing wind, roaring car engines, and screaming people in the streets. I just revved the Beams Cycle, trying to increase its speed while at the same time avoiding crashing into the various vehicles on the road. Luckily, Makeup was attempting to make his way *out* of the city rather than *in*, but he had also chosen to make his getaway during afternoon rush hour when everyone and their dog was getting off work. Whether that was deliberate on his part or just a coincidence, I had no idea. I just knew I needed to stop him.

My helmet's radio communicator crackled and I heard Rubberman's voice say, "Beams! Have you caught up with Makeup yet?"

"No," I said, swerving around a blue pickup truck with a sofa tied down in its bed. "Traffic's too thick and he's going too fast."

Rubberman grunted in annoyance. "Is his car at least within range of your eye beams?"

I shook my head, wincing as a bug smacked into the windshield of my bike. "No. If I tried to shoot him now, I would probably miss and hit someone else's car."

Rubberman sighed. "All right. Keep chasing him. The police have set up a barricade at the end of the street where we expect Makeup to try to escape. I'm going to be there, too, while Adams will keep watch from the sky via the Rubber Drone. We'll be waiting for you and Makeup to get here."

"Got it," I said. "See you soon."

The radio clicked off in my ear, which was good because I nearly drove into a tiny smart car that seemed to appear out of nowhere on the busy streets. As I swerved around the smart car at the last minute, doing my best to keep an eye on Makeup's getaway car, I found myself wondering exactly how today had gone so wrong.

It had started about ten minutes ago when Rubberman and I got a call from the Golden City First National Bank about a criminal in clown makeup calling himself, well, Makeup, robbing the bank. We got there as quickly as we could, but by the time we got to the bank, Makeup had already taken off in his garish and frankly ridiculous escape car. Seeing as I was the only one of us who still had a vehicle, I raced after him, hoping to catch up with his car and stop him before he could escape Golden City en-

tirely. Meanwhile, Rubberman had hopped into one of the police cars that had been at the scene of the crime while Adams, Rubberman's butler and right-hand man, had used the Rubber Drone to follow my progress overhead.

In fact, whenever I looked up, I would see the Rubber Drone flying overhead, bypassing all of the heavy traffic like a fish swimming through water. It made me feel a little jealous sometimes, but I didn't have time to stew over my jealousy, seeing as I was trying to avoid getting distracted by anything that might cause me to crash.

Rubberman *would* have been racing after Makeup with me, but unfortunately the Rubbermobile had been trashed by a Zero Squire last month and the replacement Rubbermobile wouldn't get here for another month, at least. My Beams Cycle—a motorcycle designed specifically for yours truly—was, therefore, our only reliable vehicle and our only means of chasing after Makeup. The Rubbermobile probably would have caught up with Makeup by now, but you had to work with what you had, not what you wanted.

Regardless, I had to figure out a way to close the distance between Makeup and I. The police barricade up ahead might be enough, but something told me that Makeup was not going to do the 'typical' thing. Therefore, I needed to figure out a way to catch up with him. If I could get close enough I could blow out his tires with my lasers, but right now the distance between us was too great for me to risk it, as I explained to Rubberman. If only there was a shortcut of some sort I could take—

An idea occurred to me, causing me to drive the Beams Cycle across traffic to an alleyway. Honking car horns and screeching tires greeted my ears as I cut across traffic, but it all faded into the background soon enough as I disappeared into the alleyways of Golden City. Using my near-encyclopedic knowledge of the city's layout, I zoomed down the back alleys and side streets, past garbage cans, stray cats, children playing in the streets, and even a few homeless people. The back alleys of Golden City were a lot less crowded than the main road, so I was hoping to bypass the vast majority of traffic to overtake Makeup.

I kept glancing down each alley I passed until I figured it was time to rejoin the main road. I shot down a short but narrow alleyway and burst out onto the main road just as Makeup's clown car went zooming down the street, though not before I kicked my Cycle into high gear and darted after him like a lightning bolt.

Now I was starting to catch up with him. With traffic clearing the closer you got to the city's exit, I found it easier for my Beams Cycle to keep up with Makeup's car. Staying on the passenger's side of the car, I pulled up close enough to be able to look through at Makeup himself. The clown criminal, dressed from head to toe in gaudy red-and-yellow clown clothes, looked at me and his eyes widened in shock, his hands gripping the wheel of his car tightly.

"Pull over!" I screamed as loudly as I could. "Pull over now or else!"

Makeup, instead of responding, just slammed his foot on the gas pedal and the clown car zoomed past me. The balloon head continued to laugh as Makeup's high-pitched voice said, "Make me, boy!"

Shaking my head, I said under my breath, "Your funeral."

I held out a hand and blasted an energy blast at the car's back tires, but the car swerved to the right at the last minute and my energy attack missed. I tried to fire an-

other energy blast, but that also missed. Every time I missed, the bobbing clown head on the roof of the car would make that same annoying laugh that I assumed had to be Makeup's own laughter at this point.

That was when I heard a police siren and looked ahead to see the police barricade that Rubberman had told me about earlier. Six police cars were set up in the middle of the main highway out of Golden City. All other traffic was being redirected down other roads, but all of the side roads were too congested with traffic for even Makeup's car to fit through. That meant that Makeup had only two options: Either ram through the police barricade and probably get himself killed or stop and let himself get arrested. I saw Rubberman standing among the police, his hands balled into fists as he probably prepared himself for Makeup's incoming vehicle.

"Boss, we're nearly there," I said, tapping the side of my helmet to speak into my radio. "Tried to shoot him but couldn't hit him."

"I see that, Beams," said Rubberman's voice in my ear, "but you did a good job herding him in this direction. I'm sure he'll start slowing down as he gets closer to the barricade and then we'll catch him."

I frowned and looked at Makeup's car. "Not to rain on your parade, boss, but ... it looks like Makeup is actually going *faster*."

That was true. Makeup's car was clearly picking up speed, going so fast that even the Beams Cycle struggled to keep up. Makeup had to be pushing his vehicle to its absolute limit to stay ahead of me, but it didn't make sense. Was he going to ram the barricade? That made no sense. His car wasn't big or strong enough to plow through all those cars. Ramming the barricade would destroy his car and either kill him or cripple him for life if he was lucky. Perhaps he was more suicidal than I thought.

"He's going faster?" said Rubberman in confusion. "Yeah, now that you mention it, he *does* seem to be picking up speed, but why would he do that?"

"No idea," I said. "Watch out!"

Turns out I said that too late. Makeup's car was so close now that there was no time for Rubberman or the police to dodge. Rubberman just stretched his body to form a rubber barrier of sort around the police officers, but even I knew that that would not protect them.

At the very last minute, however, springs shot out of the underside of Makeup's car and it flew straight up into the air. When the car got into the air, flames exploded from its exhaust, sending the clown car flying well over the police barricade as the clown head on top of the vehicle cackled in delight. Rubberman and the police could only stare and gape as Makeup's car flew over them like a rocket. Makeup even waved down at the mockingly from the driver's side as he passed.

Then Makeup's car hit the road on the other side of the barrier. After bouncing a couple of times, Makeup's car zoomed off down the road toward the highway, the cackling from the clown balloon growing fainter the farther he got.

"No!" said Rubberman as I brought the Beams Cycle to a screeching halt to avoid crashing into the police barricade myself. He returned to his normal proportions and ran over to the barricade, holding out a hand toward the speeding clown car. "No! Get back here, you idiot!"

Frowning, I hopped off of the Beams Cycle and said to Rubberman, “Sorry, boss, but I don’t think Makeup can hear you. He’s gone.”

Rubberman scowled. “No. We can’t let him get away. Not like this.”

I shrugged. “I’m not any happier about this than you, but he’s going too fast for even the Beams Cycle to keep up. We have no choice but to let him go.”

Rubberman pounded the hood of one of the police cars forming the barricade. “Dang it. We were so close to catching him.”

I nodded, but then heard rumbling overhead and looked up at the sky. Dark clouds had formed seemingly out of nowhere, blocking out the beautiful spring sunshine and making me feel like it was fall again. “Clouds? I thought the weather report today said it was supposed to be sunny all day. Is it going to rain now, too?”

Rubberman shook his head. “Great. Just what we need right now: Rain. Guess that’s appropriate given how we failed.”

I was about as excited for rain as Rubberman was, but at the same time, I didn’t see any point in complaining about it. I just looked up at the dark clouds, wondering where they came from, when I noticed another weird thing about them: They were staying mostly centered over Makeup’s car. And then I saw what looked like the silhouette of a woman in the clouds above, especially when rumbling thunder could be heard, though it might have just been my imagination at work.

“Might as well call it quits, boys,” said one of the police officers, staring sadly after Makeup’s fleeing car. “We’re not in any position to go after Makeup, either.” He looked at me and Rubberman suddenly. “But we can give you two a ride back to your base, if you need—”

Boom.

Everything went white for a split second. The air became superheated and the smell of ozone could be scented even through my helmet’s air filter. The very ground under my feet shook like an earthquake and the windows on some of the police cars even shattered from the impact of the blast. Heck, the blast actually knocked Rubberman, me, and the police off our feet. For a moment, I thought the world had come to an end or we had been the victims of some kind of nuclear blast from a hostile foreign power.

But then the whiteness faded and I found myself still alive and whole on the ground next to Rubberman, who was clutching his eyes with both of his hands.

“What ...” Rubberman groaned. “What was that?”

I had no idea. Shattered glass from the police car windows lay scattered all over the asphalt underneath us. The dark clouds in the sky looked a little brighter than before, but other than that, everyone seemed normal.

That is, until one of the police officers at up and pointed down the road. “What the *heck* happened to Makeup’s car?”

Surprised and puzzled, I also looked up. At first, I wasn’t sure where Makeup’s car was. All I saw was a big, black smoking crater in the middle of the—

Wait. That crater ... wasn’t that where Makeup’s car was just a few minutes ago?

But now ... it was gone. And there was not even a hint that the car had ever even existed, much less been driving down the highway full of stolen money.

“Where ...” I gulped. “What happened to Makeup?”

“He was ... vaporized,” said Rubberman in an equally mystified voice. “Somehow.”

A rumbling thunder directly overhead made us look up at the dark clouds that had appeared out of nowhere. The clouds rumbled more loudly than ever, making me wonder if we were going to get hit by a lightning bolt, which would definitely be a terrible way to end our day.

Instead, however, the clouds parted to reveal the most beautiful—and deadly—woman I'd ever seen in my life. And she did not look happy.

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