

The  
**SUPERVILLAIN**  
and Me

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**DANIELLE BANAS**

*Swoon*  
**READS**

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Mom & Dad—

*Thank you* doesn't scratch the surface.

# CHAPTER ONE

**T**hey never stood a chance.

Tires screamed as the van sped around the corner. It hopped the curb, and the vehicle jolted, the back door swinging open, spilling a sack of priceless artifacts—paintings, sculptures, anything and everything the thieves could snatch from the Morriston History Museum. Not that it mattered. They would be apprehended quickly. They always were.

A golden platter slid from the back of the van, spinning like a top in the middle of Fifth Avenue's busy intersection before falling still. Rotor blades flapped as a helicopter hovered overhead, a cameraman dangling out the door, filming the scene for the world to see.

But the real show was just beginning.

It started with a shadow—long and narrow, stretching over the river where the wharf met the city. The shape grew, widening as it torpedoed to the ground. Blink and you'd miss it. A red blur shot

through the air into the back of the van, stopping it from traveling down the ramp to the riverbank, where a boat waited at the docks. Brakes screeched. The van spun in a tight circle, coming to a crunching halt against a guardrail. Dozens more relics fell through the doors, landing in a heap at the side of the road. The camera feed from the helicopter shook as the man inside struggled to get closer.

Smoke curled into the air.

The passenger door opened slowly.

The hero who emerged wore a bright red suit, paired with a mask that covered the cheeky grin likely unfolding across his face. As he forced the thieves—a young man and woman—toward the onslaught of police officers, the crowd on the sidewalks erupted, cheering his name.

*“Red Comet! Red Comet! Red Comet!”*

I wanted to barf.

“Abby, wasn’t that the coolest thing ever?” My best friend, Sarah, put away her cell phone, silencing the video clip of Red Comet’s latest rescue as we took our seats in the school auditorium for a Friday-afternoon assembly.

“Anyway,” she continued, “do you want to go out somewhere tonight? I just bought a new Taser.” She unzipped her purse to show me. “You can’t go wrong with glitter and pink.”

“Well, at least it’s better than the can of pepper spray you accidentally shot in your eye last month.”

“Hey now. My screams of agony kept that guy from stealing my car out of the mall parking lot. I call that a win.”

I wished I could laugh, but in reality the crime rate in Morriston had grown to such a height that we would be stupid to step outside without some form of protection. Gangs and muggers ran rampant, and then there was that one guy who robbed the mini-mart on Bay Street every Thursday evening like clockwork. After a while, people

started making light of the situation just to spare themselves the pain. *The pickpocket stole my homework* was a common joke among students. The police and the supers were stretched thin, and my father, Morriston's longest-tenured mayor, was running himself into the ground to contain it.

Taser or not, I couldn't give Sarah a definitive answer. I was too busy dreading the upcoming assembly. According to Principal Davis, Morriston High had managed to wrangle a famous surprise guest. Surprises had a tendency to make my stomach sour and my palms sweat.

What a shame that Morriston was full of surprises.

It started and ended with the supers. All things did. The nationwide obsession with the heroes had existed far longer than the seventeen years I'd been alive, and would no doubt live on for decades after. Some called them celebrities, others called them gods, but it couldn't be denied that their inhuman abilities had led them to become somewhat of a saving grace throughout the country. Literally. They worked in conjunction with the police forces, but everyone knew the supers stopped crime faster, more efficiently, and . . . they did it while wearing tights.

Only two were currently active in Morriston. The ever-charismatic Red Comet held the top spot in the superhero hierarchy, followed by Fish Boy—an aquatic hero with shiny blue flippers and a gas-guzzling motorbike. Fish Boy showed up late to every crime scene that took place on land, appearing only marginally sooner to those taking place on water. Understandably, he didn't garner much press coverage.

No one could explain how their powers came to be. There were theories of course. Overexposure to radioactivity, genetic manipulation, popping out of the womb with the ability to use more brainpower than the average human, but none were ever proven

true. How did Chicago's favorite hero, the Force, control the weather to strike down criminals with lightning bolts? How did Seattle's Chameleon shape-shift into any animal she desired? Why could Red Comet fly faster than the speed of sound while I was stuck sitting on the bus for thirty minutes on my way to school?

The answer: The supers were exceptional. The rest of us had to work our butts off all day, every day, to get the slightest bit ahead.

"Attention! Attention, students!" Principal Davis tapped the microphone onstage with two pudgy fingers. A loud squeal echoed through the auditorium, ceasing conversations, raucous laughter from a group of sophomores sitting behind Sarah and me, and at least five make-out sessions.

"Who's this assembly for again?" Sarah whispered in my ear.

"Not sure." But I had an inkling.

"I know you're probably curious why we pulled you out of last period," Principal Davis continued. "The faculty has a very special treat for you today. It was hard to track him down, but we succeeded in the end. He's here to say hello and speak a bit about public safety in our fine city of Morriston. . . ."

*Oh God*, I thought, wiping my palms on my jeans. *Please no.*

"Put your hands together and give a warm Morriston High School welcome to . . ."

*No. No way. He's not the only one in the city. It doesn't mean that it's—*

"Red Comet!"

I was fairly certain I was the only student who slumped in their seat and groaned instead of immediately jumping up and screaming. The junior and senior boys had decided to stomp and chant, "Com-et! Com-et! Com-et!" and nothing the teachers did could make them stop. Red Comet was the superhero every teenage guy wanted to be and every teenage girl (and a few boys) wanted to be with.

He was also my nineteen-year-old brother, Connor.



If Connor Hamilton was a hurricane, then I was a drizzle. He was popular and athletic, while I didn't care much for either. Where I was book-smart, Connor was street-smart—he never cracked under pressure and always knew what to do. While I clumsily stumbled my way through high school—just ask my PE teacher—Connor flew gracefully above the streets of Morriston, spending his days and nights saving the world.

“Oh my God, Abby! OH MY GOD!” Sarah began smacking my shoulder. “It's him! It's really him! Oh my God, I—I can't! I just can't!”

“Can't what?” I muttered. Connor wet the bed until he was eight, and no amount of muscles or spandex could make me forget the nights he barged in my room, his pajama pants still soaked with urine.

Sarah was too busy losing her mind to notice the scowl on my lips. She was Red Comet's biggest fan. She owned T-shirts and posters and wrote hideously sexual Red Comet fan fiction that I refused to read because thinking about my brother in that sense didn't do much for my appetite.

If Sarah ever discovered that the so-called “sexy superhero” in the red-and-gold suit was the same blond-haired dork who belched nacho cheese in her face at the summer festival, I knew she would immediately burn her Red Comet shrine and repent. But instead, she, like so many other rabid fans, was busy snapping away photos of the famous Red Comet to sell or Instagram or masturbate to—whatever people did with his picture nowadays.

Despite the head-to-toe super suit covering every inch of skin, including his eyes and mouth, I could immediately tell when Connor caught my eye and smirked at my agony. He probably also threw a wink in my direction, just for good measure.

*Go ahead, Connor. Soak it up, why don't you?*

“Quiet! Everybody, quiet!” Principal Davis returned to the

microphone, placing a hand on Connor's shoulder, unaware he was fondling the same kid who only two years prior spray-painted his Jaguar hot pink for a senior prank.

The students continued cheering until Connor calmly raised a hand in silence. One by one they resumed their seats, some kids in awe, some shaking, and others, like Sarah, with tears streaming down their cheeks.

"I can't believe he's here," Sarah whispered, sniffing into her sweatshirt. "I can't believe it."

"I am honored to be here today," Connor began, his voice deepening as part of his disguise. "A hero's job is never easy, and I would like to thank each of you for your support. Protecting a city is not a one-man job, and on behalf of all the superpowered men and women in Morriston and beyond, we are grateful for your vigilance and your devotion to keeping our streets and neighborhoods safe. A few things we can do to improve . . ."

I ignored the rest of Connor's speech, which was probably written by our father, the great politician, and ran through song lyrics to the school's fall musical, *Hall of Horrors*, in my head.

*Don't eat the flesh—*

"Thank you, have a safe evening," Connor graciously bowed away from the microphone as Principal Davis shook his gloved hand.

"Abby, let's go meet him! I need his autograph! Do you think he'd let me interview him for the school paper? Or for my blog? Oh God, I'm so nervous! His voice is so sexy, I could listen to him talk all day!"

"I don't think he's doing a meet and greet. Come on, I really need to rehearse for my audition next week." *Hall of Horrors* had completely consumed my thoughts for the past month. The show was a rock comedy about a cannibalistic royal family and their servant, who falls passionately in love with the crown prince, and as a senior, I wanted a good part. Theater was my passion; it was *my thing*. Sure,

Connor could surpass the speed of sound, but I could do a kick-ass pas de bourrée.

“What? No! You’ll have tons of time to rehearse.” Sarah latched onto my wrist and pulled me through the crowd forming at the edge of the stage to get Red Comet’s autograph. “Does my hair look okay?” She desperately fluffed up her auburn curls while I contemplated five different means of escape, one of which involved projectile vomiting all over Connor’s red suit.

“Hi, Red Comet!” Sarah squealed over the head of a short freshman girl. The girl moved away, tears clouding her eyes, and Sarah pulled us to the front of the line.

“Ladies, how are we?” Connor reached for Sarah’s phone, scrawling *RC* on the case with a permanent marker. Sarah looked like she was about to pass out, and judging by the amount of hypothetical if-I-ever-met-Red-Comet conversations I’d endured over the past three years, I knew she was either going to hit the deck or jump his bones.

“Want me to sign anything?” Connor turned toward me. Even though gold lenses covered his eyes, I could imagine his cocked eyebrow and lips smirking at me through his mask.

“No thanks, I’m good.”

“Is it, um, is it hard to f-fly?” Sarah stuttered.

Connor shrugged, patting her shoulder. “Easier than breathing, sweetheart.”

Lie. Connor put at least ten holes in our walls while learning to control the powers he discovered after his sixteenth birthday. Flying wasn’t easy.

“Red Comet, could I—do you think maybe I could get a—a hug? Maybe?”

“Of course, come on up.” He gestured for the teachers to let us onstage. A few students yelled in protest, but Connor didn’t care. He

led us toward the curtain and pulled Sarah into a hug that lasted far longer than he intended. Too bad Connor didn't possess super strength, because it took him three tries to politely extricate himself from Sarah's death grip around his neck.

"Ohmigosh, ohmigosh, ohmigosh!" Sarah was crying again, the ends of her shirtsleeves covered in tears and snot.

"I think I just ruined her life," Connor muttered in my ear as he pulled me to his chest, his voice no longer as husky as when he made his speech. "I was only trying to be nice."

"You definitely made her life, not ruined it. She'll be incorporating this moment into her fan fiction for years to come."

"Awesome," he chuckled, but his voice betrayed him. Connor was as terrified of Sarah's Red Comet fan fiction as I was. "Hey, what's for dinner tonight?"

"Depends. What are you making?"

"Nothing. I think Dad mentioned steaks as long as his press conference doesn't run over."

"You're actually going to be home for dinner?"

"Of course, as long as I don't . . ." Connor trailed off, tilting his head toward the ceiling. I knew that look—his superhuman sixth sense for trouble was tingling. "Shit. See you later, Abby." His hands fell from my shoulders, and he took off, hovering above the stage to many *oohs* and *aahs* from the student body before he flew to save the day—leaving the door dangling off its hinges in his wake.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Dad? Connor? Anyone home?” I called out when I entered my house later that afternoon. My voice bounced off the vaulted ceilings and didn’t receive a response. Our house was far too large for three people who barely set foot in it, but it was secluded at the end of a quarter-mile-long private drive in the woods, which was exactly what we needed.

My parents purchased the five acres of land and the mansion that came with it three years ago, after Connor discovered his powers and needed a place to practice. I couldn’t forget that day even if I tried. We had just returned home from Connor’s sixteenth-birthday dinner. At first, he thought he was only coming down with the flu. His head ached from loud noises, and he felt like he would throw up every time he smelled food. Connor went to bed early that night without opening any of his presents, and when he awoke the next morning, his vision had heightened to the point where he no longer

needed glasses and he flipped out because he was hovering four feet in the air above his mattress. My family moved to our new house the following morning.

But now Mom was long gone, which was the reason Connor decided to suit up and save the world and hardly eat a meal in our house, and my dad had been reelected mayor and was working around the clock to make Morriston the safest city in America. The large mansion with its tall windows and expensive electronics was only regularly home to me, but because of the secrets my family kept, I couldn't invite any friends over to enjoy it.

"Abby? You okay?" Connor found me in the kitchen an hour later, staring helplessly at some science homework. I was surprised he was home this early after his abrupt departure at school, but even more surprised that his super suit was dirty and ripped and he looked like he was about to cry.

"I'm fine. Are you okay? What happened to you?"

Connor shrugged, throwing his mask on the kitchen table. I was used to Connor wearing his Red Comet getup around the house, but sometimes it still startled me. For as much as I teased him about his nerdy powers or screaming fans, I often forgot that my charismatic, pretentious brother was capable of feeling normal human emotions like exhaustion or sadness.

"Bank robbery downtown," he finally said. "Hostage situation."

I gulped. Of all the terrible things that happened in Morriston, I always was filled with dread at the mention of a bank robbery. Too many bad memories.

"Is everyone all right? I mean, did anyone—"

"No, it's fine." Connor's blue eyes hardened, and he reached to pull me into our second hug of the day. The tang of sweat and smoke clung to his suit, but I didn't protest when he ran a hand over my hair. "You know I'd never let that happen again."

I knew he wouldn't dare lie about that. Connor lied about a lot of things—his secret identity, his grades in his online college courses, whether or not he spent the night fighting crime or in some girl's bed. But he would never lie about saving hostages. Not when our mother was shot and killed in a similar robbery three years ago. Her death was the catalyst for Connor's transformation into Red Comet. Mom had always been too afraid for Connor's safety to let him become a hero, but Connor had pleaded with our dad, suggesting that using his powers to save others and prevent another death like our mother's would be a good use of his time.

Dad never disagreed.

Finally, Connor pulled away and reached for his mask, stuffing it in a pocket in his suit. His eyes were red-rimmed and I knew mine looked the same. Connor and I were two years apart, but we looked more like twins with identical dirty blond hair and bright blue eyes. I knew we looked even more alike when we were crying over our mom. We had done quite a bit of it over the past three years.

I only blamed one person for Mom's death: the man who pulled the trigger. But I would be lying if I said I never wondered why Connor hadn't done something to help her. He wasn't Red Comet at the time, but he still had powers. He could have been *right there*. Yet every time I got close to asking why, Connor would go off on a tangent on some homework problem he needed my help to solve or a new burger joint he wanted to visit with me, and I chickened out, preferring my relationship with my brother over reopening old wounds. Maybe the truth was best left hidden, just like Red Comet's identity.

"Cheer up, kid." Connor flashed me a toothy grin, and just like that, his sadness disappeared from view. If Connor wasn't a superhero, his acting skills, straight white teeth, and sharp jawline could make him a viable candidate for a movie star. "You still need to help me with my calc homework."

Connor may have been a crime-fighting superhero, but I was the straight-A student in the family.

My dad arrived home just as Connor hopped out of the shower. The sound of their conversation drifted from the front hall to the kitchen, words like *assault rifles* and *disaster* reaching my ears. I could picture my father, all salt-and-pepper hair and glasses, running a hand over his jaw before jotting down notes from Connor's afternoon escapade on the cell phone that never left his person. Once he even dropped it in the toilet because he refused to put it down.

"I'll take care of it," I heard Dad say. "We'll wipe all the crime from this city yet, you mark my words."

The stairs creaked as Connor disappeared upstairs to his room.

"Abby, I have something for you." Dad kicked his shoes off on the mat by the back door and pulled a beer from the fridge. A hostage situation so similar to the one that killed his wife undeniably shook him, but he didn't show it. Benjamin Hamilton wouldn't be Morriston's favorite mayor if he did.

"What is it?" I asked, a little skeptical.

My phone buzzed on the table, and Dad grinned, gesturing at the screen. "I sent you a new self-defense video. This one is about escaping choke holds."

"Oh. That's . . . great." This was self-defense video number ten in the past three days alone, otherwise known as my dad's attempt to teach me how to defend myself without superpowers. I'd insisted years ago that I was too athletically challenged to attend karate lessons, and so this was the agreed-upon alternative. Gouging eyes, throwing elbows, escaping zip ties—you name it, Dad found a video tutorial and sent it to me. I understood his reasoning for wanting to protect me from dangerous Morriston criminals; I probably understood better than anyone. And so I watched the videos to appease him, nothing more. Fighting crime was Connor's hobby, not mine.



Dad took a long swig of his drink, then sat across from me. “So how was school?”

I was about to answer when Connor returned to the kitchen. He had changed out of his costume and was now wearing faded jeans and an old Morriston High PE shirt, making him look less like a supernerd and more like the average college student.

Smirking, he dropped a packet of calculus homework on the table in front of me. He’d only completed one problem, and it took me two seconds to realize the answer was wrong.

“I got an eighty-one percent on my history paper,” he announced proudly. Rolling my eyes, I fixed the math problem he’d butchered with a stroke of my pen, then threw the packet at his chest. Connor had received his eighty-one percent solely because of the three closing paragraphs I wrote for him after he’d lost interest in typing and decided to rush downtown to help the victims of a car accident on the Morriston Bridge instead. But I didn’t tell Dad that.

“I got a hundred on mine,” I said instead, pulling the paper on British literature out of my bag and sliding it underneath my dad’s elbow.

He glanced up, smiling. “Really?”

“Really, really. The English department is going to feature it on the school’s website and everything.”

“That’s great!” He actually put his phone down. I beamed. Winning his attention with my brother in the room was never an easy feat.

“And Principal Davis told me that—”

“Oh, Connor, before I forget, I’m thinking of setting up another press conference for you,” said Dad. He shifted forward, and my paper slipped off the table and fluttered to the floor. When I picked it up, it was covered in last night’s pizza crumbs. *Awesome*. I shouldn’t have been surprised. I loved him to death, but everything with

Connor felt like a competition, a giant game that I never agreed to play.

I'd grown used to it. Connor was Connor, and I was just happy he hadn't gotten hurt in his life of fighting crime. After Mom died and Connor became a hero, I worried constantly, but I'd eased up in the years since. Connor was a superhero powerhouse, and I needed to worry less about how many criminals he was punching and more about how often I was rehearsing my lines and lip trills if I wanted to be successful too.

But . . . I still waited up for him to come home more nights than I cared to admit.

Connor reached for my English paper and brushed away a few of the lingering crumbs. He presented it to our dad with a flourish and wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

"I got you," he whispered to me. Then he grabbed a bag of chips from the pantry and floated—yes, *floated* (it's like flying but with a bit more hover)—through the air, landing in the chair next to our dad.

Connor grinned cheekily and shoved a handful of salt-and-vinegar chips past his lips.

Once a supernerd, always a supernerd.

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The following week brought record amounts of rain to Morriston, slightly less crime for Connor to fight, and an abundance of nerves as I prepared to nail my musical auditions.

"Abby! Abby, Abby, Abby! Wait up!" Sarah sprinted down the hall to catch me as I entered the auditorium, bumping into anxious freshmen, the night janitor with a bucket of someone's regurgitated lunch,

and a group of stage-crew kids having a makeshift sword fight with a pile of two-by-fours.

“Where’s the fire?” I reviewed song lyrics in my head while scoping out a prime auditorium seat in the first row, which would provide the most opportunities to brownnose Mrs. Miller, our director.

*Foes and rivals, knock ’em to the ground . . .*

“There’s no fire, I just . . .” Sarah placed her hands on her knees and leaned against the corner of the sound booth, catching her breath.

*Feast and bury, never to be found . . .*

“I wanted to tell you that . . .”

*When we’re through, they’re merely skin and bone . . .*

“That I’m . . .”

*We don’t care ’cause we’re sitting on the . . .*

“That I’m auditioning for the musical.”

The last lyric flew out of my head faster than Red Comet high on caffeine. I didn’t think Sarah could sing. Actually, I was sure she couldn’t. She once composed a song about Red Comet and sang it to me and Connor, and we thought our ears were going to bleed. It was so horrible that Connor wanted to make it his theme song just for shits and giggles.

I looked at Sarah. Her big brown eyes lit up with excitement as she bounced on the toes of her sneakers. “You’re auditioning for the musical?”

“I’m auditioning for the musical.”

*Uh-oh.* “You can sing?”

“Well . . . no. *But* I really wanted to do this with you because I know all I talk about is Red Comet this and Red Comet that, and I know you don’t really like that, and so I thought we could do something that you’re interested in—*Hall of Whores.*”

I snickered at her mispronunciation of the show title, but felt a surge of affection for my best friend for wanting to do something with me other than talk about my brother and his bright red tights.

"It's *Hall of HORRORS*, not 'whores.'" I fought to maintain a straight face, but all I really wanted to do was smile. "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely. Trust me, Abby," Sarah said. "This is going to be so . . . so . . ."

I never found out exactly what it would be because Sarah emphatically spread out her arms at the exact moment that the door to the sound booth opened behind us, punching the poor boy who emerged square in the nose, knocking him to the floor.

"Oh no!" Sarah clapped her hands over her mouth. She gave him a muffled "sorry!" as her face blushed.

"S'okay," he mumbled. He began gathering the stack of papers he had dropped, so meticulously that I wondered if he was only doing it to stall until he was forced to look up at us.

Sarah and I crouched beside him to help. "I think your nose is bleeding," I said, noticing a few red specks on the paper nearest him.

The boy's shoulders slumped. "Happens to the best of us." He rubbed his nose on his sleeve.

"Do you need a tissue? Or the nurse's office?"

"They have really big Band-Aids in there," Sarah chimed in. "Like almost as big as your head."

"As appealing as that sounds, no thanks." When we stood, the boy finally unglued his eyes from his shoes. He was a good several inches taller than me, which wasn't exactly difficult to accomplish. Deep brown hair fell into deeper brown eyes and curled around his ears, which stuck out just a tad too much. The boy rolled a chapped lower lip between his teeth while trying to clean the blood from his face.

"The Band-Aids in the nurse's office really aren't that big." I

laughed, trying to lighten the mood. “You have a very average-looking head, so they should fit you fine.”

The frown on his face melted into something slightly softer. “Is . . . that a compliment?”

“Well, it was really just an observation. Your head doesn’t look like a cantaloupe, so I thought ‘average’ might be the correct description. But if I was wrong . . .”

“No. Um . . . no. That’s . . . funny,” he murmured the last word. But he didn’t look like it was funny. He looked anxious and repeatedly scuffed the toe of a sneaker along the floor, his fingers twitching against his thigh.

Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t winning the award for World’s Most Talkative Human anytime soon—Connor was already a frequent nominee in that category—but I’d never met a guy so painfully shy. A cute guy at that. If Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome would crack a smile now and again, then he might actually appear approachable. I knew I recognized him from last year’s musical, and I had a vague memory of taking a class with him during our freshman year—or was it our sophomore?—but I couldn’t remember his name for the life of me.

“Sorry about all of . . . *this*.” I gestured to his nose, then prodded Sarah when she didn’t speak.

“Right. Yep. Sorry.” Her cheeks were still pink with blush.

The boy’s brown eyes flicked up again before returning to the floor. In that brief moment, an emotion other than anxiety washed over his face. His eyes widened and his shoulders relaxed. He looked shocked that we had bothered to apologize. “Don’t worry about it.” His voice was the equivalent of speaking near a sleeping baby—so quiet he barely said anything at all.

“I know I’m about to sound like a total jerk,” I said, “but what’s your name?”

The boy blinked at me, saying nothing.

“I mean, we’ve gone to school together for a while, but I don’t think we’ve been introduced.” I looked at Sarah. “Have we been introduced?”

“Don’t think so,” she replied.

“Right. So . . .” I offered him my hand. “I’m Abby. This is Sarah.”

Another blink. No words escaped his lips. My hand dangled in the air.

I cleared my throat. “And you are . . . ?”

“Oh.” He seemed to steel himself, and then he was gripping my hand with calloused fingers and a clammy palm, squeezing perhaps a bit too tightly as he said, “I’m Rylan.”

“Ryan?” He was so *quiet*.

“No. Rylan. There’s an *l* in the middle.” He drew a large *L* in the air with his finger. “Rylan Sloan.”

I grinned. “Well, Rylan, it’s nice to meet you.” He finally let go of my hand. I tried really hard not to make it obvious when I wiped his sweat residue off on my shirt.

“Likewise, Abby.” I caught a hint of a smile cross his lips, but a second later it was gone.

“Oooh! Oooh, Abby, it’s starting!” Sarah pointed out two empty seats near the front of the auditorium as Mrs. Miller took the stage.

“We’re really sorry about your nose,” I called back to Rylan. He nodded, never speaking, then returned to the sound booth.

Sarah and I sat in silence while Mrs. Miller passed out sheet music to all the students. The audition song—“The Prince and I”—was one I had practiced forward and backward in hopes of getting the lead role. It was sung during the second act while the main characters, Prince Arthur Delafontaine VII and his starving servant, Angeline, professed their love for each other, and even though it was a bit beyond my vocal range, I’d rehearsed enough that I knew I could pull it off.

“Ladies and gentlemen, do we have any volunteers to sing first?” Mrs. Miller fluffed her bright red bob and tugged on her cardigan. She always wore cardigans, even if it was eighty degrees outside. Today’s was pink with too many frilly bows and a cat that looked more like a groundhog.

“I’ll go.” A guy sitting two rows in front of us raised his hand and sauntered onstage, his lean legs clad in a pair of dark jeans. When he turned around, Sarah pinched my arm so hard that she almost broke skin. Between his glittering green eyes and cheekbones that may as well have been carved from marble, this guy had the potential to put Sarah off Red Comet for life.

The only imperfection on his otherwise flawless face was a tiny bump on the bridge of his nose, like it had been broken once before. Thinking back to Rylan’s bloody nose, I wondered if someone clocked his guy by accident or on purpose.

“Hubba hubba.” Sarah sighed. “That guy *definitely* did not go here before.”

New Guy leaned against the microphone stand at the center of the stage. He started to speak, but the screech of feedback had him pulling away sheepishly.

“Try again,” Mrs. Miller encouraged. She was perched on the edge of her seat, eyeing up her prey, eerily similar to the kitten on her sweater.

New Guy tapped the microphone with his index finger. “Uh. Hi. I’m Isaac. I’ve never done this before, so . . . yeah. Here we go.”

“Very loquacious,” I muttered.

Sarah stomped on my foot.

“*Ouch.*”

“Shhh!” she hissed.

Verbose Isaac was not. But *holy hot sauce* could he sing. He belted out the audition piece, his rich baritone voice sliding through the

speakers like silk. His voice was every good and every pure thing in the universe. A shooting star. A mug of hot chocolate in front of a roaring fireplace. A deep swimming pool on a hot summer day.

And I was drowning.

“I’ll fight you for him,” I whispered to Sarah when Isaac stepped offstage to polite, somewhat nervous applause. He would be a tough one to beat.

“I feel like I’d be cheating on Red Comet.” She smirked. “But you’re on.”

“Who’s next?” Mrs. Miller asked, clapping her hands together.

Crickets. Everyone looked around the room anxiously, trying not to meet Mrs. Miller’s gaze lest she call them onstage to perform. If I didn’t do it, then no one would, and if I wanted the lead—and a chance to work alongside *that voice*—it would be best to start showing some initiative.

My hand shot into the air. “Mrs. Miller, I’d like to volunteer.”

---

The audition went better than expected. Meaning it went pretty darn awesome. I sang perfectly on pitch, Sarah sounded *somewhat* halfway decent, and Isaac and his voice of Orpheus offered me brief but still genuine congratulations before rushing out the door. I tried to push the thought of the impending cast list from my mind as I exited the school. There were four days before the results would be posted, but that was more than enough time for me to agonize over Mrs. Miller’s choices.

“Want to go eat?” Sarah asked. The invigorating chill of late September cut through me as we stood in the parking lot. “I think I developed acid reflux from that wing place in the mall, but we can get burgers or something.”



I hiked my backpack over my shoulder. “Actually, my dad wanted me home tonight. Rain check?”

“Sure thing.” She headed toward her tiny red car parked under a row of pine trees. More than once I wished I had one of my own, but after three failed attempts before finally passing my driver’s test, Dad didn’t exactly trust me. “Do you need a ride?”

“No, it’s fine. My dad’s coming. Apparently Connor is attempting to make us dinner.”

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “Good luck with that. And tell your brother to stop posting pictures of his toenail clippings on social media. I almost barfed up my breakfast today. Toodles!”

As soon as she sped out of the parking lot, nearly sideswiping another car in the process, my phone pinged with a text from my dad.

*Did the auditions go well? I’m working late, so I can’t pick you up. Sorry.*

Seriously? He’d told me last night he was planning on taking the afternoon off. Maybe it was stupid to admit, but I had kind of been looking forward to seeing him.

*Don’t worry about it, I replied. I’ll call Connor.*

*He’s working. Big burglary east of Market Street. You shouldn’t bother him.*

Oh. Of course. My thumbs tapped against the edge of my phone as I thought up a response, but another text came through before I had the chance.

*Can Sarah drop you off?*

Because he couldn’t have asked me two minutes ago when she was actually here? I thought about calling her; I doubted she would mind doubling back, but I knew she would ask questions and suddenly the absolute *last* thing I felt like doing was talking to someone.

*Sure, I told Dad. No problem.*

Dad didn't reply with another message. Instead he sent me a link to a video demonstrating how to execute the perfect roundhouse kick.

Like that would ever happen.

Shoving my phone in my bag, I set off on foot. The buses were long gone by the time auditions finished, but I could walk. I dug my nails into the straps of my backpack as I crossed the street. I'd been waiting all day to tell Dad and Connor about the auditions, to share my excitement over the thing that made me happy—the thing that I was good at. And now . . . nothing. I didn't even know if I would see them the rest of the night. This always happened. They always had another press briefing or another damsel to rescue. And I knew I shouldn't care; I knew what they were doing was more important than a school musical.

But it still stung.

My shoes squeaked through puddles of water on the sidewalks. This was a chance to show my dad and brother that I didn't need them. A forty-minute walk from school to home. No problem. I was fine and dandy on my own.

I hummed a few show tunes to pass the time, occasionally breaking into a little hop, skip, and jump for dramatic effect. Nothing and *no one* would bring me down after my audition.

Sneakers crunched on the sidewalk behind me.

For a minute, I didn't think anything of it. But when the footsteps continued, never veering off onto another street, my heart began to race. I breathed deeply, mimicking the exercises I usually did before singing. *It's fine*, I reassured myself. *You're just paranoid*.

The footsteps quickened.

I knew what to do in these situations. Connor and my dad drilled it into my head years ago. Keep walking. Don't panic. Find an open storefront and hide inside and everything will be fine.

Scanning the street, I cursed under my breath. There were no open

storefronts. Most places in Morriston—especially in the suburbs—shut down in the evenings. For good reason.

Feet pounded against the pavement.

Okay. Officially time to panic.

I took off, stumbling in my haste and trying to ignore the angry grunt of my pursuer as his size-fifteen footsteps gave chase. Fire burned in my throat while I struggled to fill my lungs.

I chanced a glance over my shoulder. The man was about ten yards away, closing in quickly. He was skeletal in appearance, wearing ripped jeans and a football jersey that hung beneath his worn coat. I reached for my backpack, groping through the outside pocket for the can of pepper spray that my dad had forced on me at the start of the school year. I didn't even know if it worked. Suddenly I realized how stupid I was for never testing it out.

Five yards away.

I rounded a corner at the end of the block, failing to dodge a puddle in the middle of the sidewalk. A splash of water filled my shoes, weighing down my socks. I looked back again. Three yards and . . .

The air left my lungs as the man collided with my back. I spun on my heel, firing off the pepper spray. A thin stream made contact with the side of the man's scruffy face, but most of it just dribbled down my hand.

The man grabbed the straps of my backpack, slamming me against the doorway of a closed consignment shop. My head ached, my ears were ringing, but when his hand reached for my throat, some type of primal instinct took over. I slammed both hands down on his forearm. His elbow buckled, and he toppled toward me, mouth agape like I'd actually managed to frighten him. Then, winding up, I punched him right in his lousy face.

The punch wasn't really part of my dad's attempt at Self-Defense 101, but I couldn't help myself.

“Take that, you jerk!” I should have stopped there. I definitely should have run. But I felt rather smug seeing the big dummy crippled by my fist, and so I couldn’t help but drive my point home. Raising my knee, I aimed at his groin. But halfway through my attack, I realized my punch hadn’t harmed him as much as I thought. The man’s hand shot out, yanking hard on my leg, sweeping my feet out from under me.

I hit the ground hard, my forehead smacking the sidewalk. *And this is why Sarah carries a Taser.*

The man recovered quickly. He crouched over me, knees braced on my forearms. My breath came out in quick pants when I noticed the gleam of a knife in his fist.

“Money. Now,” he growled.

Fear makes a person do some crazy things. For example, instead of bursting into tears, it made me think that this guy seriously needed a breath mint.

“Now,” he repeated, voice sharper this time.

“Oh. Um . . .” I ticked off the contents of my backpack. Student ID. Half a pack of gum. Fifty cents (three dimes, four nickels). Pretty dismal options if I hoped to make it out with my limbs still intact.

“I don’t have anything.” My voice came out far less firm than I intended.

He sneered. “Nice try.” His eyes looked crazed, and I noticed his fingers wouldn’t stop twitching. Drug addict maybe? I started to feel sorry for him, but those feelings disappeared immediately as he brought the knife to my throat.

*Oh no. Oh God. Oh no.* I tried bucking him off, but for a skinny guy, he was absurdly heavy.

“Please,” I whimpered. “Please just . . .” I didn’t know what. If there was any time for Connor to come to the rescue, it was now. But he was busy being someone else’s hero. He couldn’t possibly know I was in danger too.

I was utterly and horrifically alone.

I should have asked Sarah to drive me home. I shouldn't have cared that Dad and Connor weren't around to share in my excitement. A great audition wouldn't matter if I was dead.

The knife felt like a bolt of lightning as the man tapped it against my neck. One sharp pain straight through me as I imagined all the hideous things he could do with it. He leaned close, his nose nearly touching mine.

*Run on the count of three.*

A voice echoed in my head. I knew it wasn't my imagination. My conscience sounded distinctly female and this voice certainly wasn't.

*One.*

*Two.*

The man's arm moved. I felt the knife twitch.

*Three.*

The man was ripped violently away and a rush of air hit my face. I didn't think twice. I scrambled to my feet and bolted, ignoring the thuds and groans that signaled that my attacker finally got what he deserved. I knew only one thing.

My hero had arrived.

## CHAPTER THREE

I stopped running halfway down the next block and leaned against a streetlamp, waiting patiently until the moans of the man turned to silence. Connor had finally gotten his butt here. According to protocol, he would still need to call the police station for someone to retrieve the man, but then he could fly me home.

“Comet”—I never called my brother by his real name in public when he was in costume—“do you need my . . .” I trailed off, staring at the guy standing over the unconscious attacker. “Who are you?”

The stranger’s green eyes snapped to my own. He wore a black suit, his mask revealing only his eyes, his lips, and a portion of his jawline. Unlike Connor, this guy didn’t have a symbol plastered to his chest. My brother’s suit sported a shiny gold swoosh that looked mysteriously like a Nike symbol (but he insisted it was a comet). This guy didn’t have anything.

“I thought I told you to run,” he said, crossing his arms. He was

about as tall as my brother, easily clearing six feet, and possessed just as many, if not more, muscles bulging under the dark material of his costume.

“How did you—wait. That was your voice in my head?” I had to admit he had a nice voice—deep and smoky. I wondered if it was real or a disguise.

The super winked at me and tapped the side of his head with his index finger. I didn’t know mind-to-mind communication was a legitimate superpower. Connor frequently gushed at other supers’ powers and would have told me if someone had such a unique ability.

“Okay, well . . .” I didn’t know what else to say. I wished Connor were there to fly me home. I couldn’t ask this guy to escort me. I had no clue who he was. “I’ll just be going now.”

“Don’t I get a thank-you?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, a guy puts on a tight rubber suit that crushes his manhood to teleport down here and save a beautiful girl from getting mugged by a creep and he doesn’t even get a thank-you? It makes me not want to continue this line of work, to be completely honest.”

“Oh, uh . . .” I looked up at the masked stranger. He winked again when he caught my eye, and my stomach somersaulted. “Thanks, I guess.”

Turning my back on him, I set off in the direction of my house. If I was lucky, maybe I wouldn’t encounter anyone else. I only managed to take a few steps before the stranger began following me, black boots crunching on loose pieces of gravel.

“All right, so either you’re extremely prone to confrontational situations and frequently need a super to come save you, thus, you’re so used to saying thank you that it’s become too repetitive, so you decided to stop being polite, *or* this has never happened to you before, you’re rendered completely stupefied by my appearance, and you’re

so impressed by my lifesaving abilities that you simply forgot to say thank you. Which one is it?”

“Who *are* you?” This guy must have been new in town. Not even Connor was this annoying to civilians after he saved them.

The man—or boy, rather (I’d determined by his voice he was somewhere around my age)—scoffed. “I can’t tell you that. Rule numero uno and all.”

“I wasn’t asking for your real name. What’s your superhero name?”

“Oh, right. I can’t tell you that either.”

“Is it because you haven’t picked one yet?” This guy was definitely a newbie.

“Hey, maybe I’m still weighing my options. You know, determining what the public will best respond to.”

I glanced up at him. Superdork’s green eyes were still trained on me. Was I imagining it, or did he look a little hurt at my jabs to his legitimacy as a hero? It wasn’t my fault I was unimpressed by the supers. Living with Connor removed any coolness factor associated with fighting crime in spandex—not that there was any to begin with.

“That was a nice punch back there,” he continued. “But you want to keep your thumb on the outside of your fingers next time. You can break it if you clench it inside your fist.”

“Wow. Thanks for the critique. I didn’t know you were watching. How nice of you to wait to step in until *after* I had a knife pressed to my throat.” I sped up my pace, but he matched me step for step. “I had it all under control.”

The hair on the back of my neck bristled when he laughed. “Clearly,” he said. “That’s why you’re bleeding, am I right?”

“I am not.” I clutched at my neck, remembering only the feel of the knife, so cold that it almost burned. I sighed in relief to find the skin unmarred.



The super shook his head. “Not there.” He pointed to my forehead. “There.”

I lightly touched the skin, hissing in pain as I examined the slick blood coating my fingertips.

Superdork pulled me to a stop next to the entrance of a small playground around the corner from my house. “Here, let me,” he said, crouching to my level to get a closer look. He had long dark eyelashes, leading me to believe the hair hidden beneath his cowl was dark as well. His gloved hand brushed along my hairline, and I twitched away, not wanting another strange man to be anywhere near me again. “Just hold still a second.”

I held my breath as a strange heat emitted from his hand, seeping into my skin, making it feel warm and pliable like gelatin. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before gently rubbing his thumb over the cut.

“All better,” he finally said. “Feel free to say thanks for that too.”

“What did you . . . ?” I dabbed the place where the cut was moments before to find smooth, painless skin and only a few dry crusts of blood. “You healed it?”

He shrugged. Now I felt kind of bad. I had been a jerk to this guy when all he wanted to do was save me, walk me home, and heal my head. I blamed too many nights making fun of Connor in his super suit.

“Thank you. That was nice of you.” I ran my fingers over my healed skin again. “You can’t read minds by any chance, can you?”

“No, I can only project thoughts into others’ minds. Why?”

“No reason.” At least he wouldn’t know how embarrassed I felt. “So . . . you don’t need to walk me home. It’s only another few minutes.”

He surveyed the deserted streets. “Are you sure? It’s dark—”

“No, really, it’s fine. I can make it.”

“Okay, if you say so. Stay safe, then.”

He tapped the tip of my nose and stepped back, his silhouette blurring slightly and vanishing before my eyes.

The streets were finally silent, but as I hurried home, I got the sense that I was never truly alone.

---

“Connor, you don’t happen to know anyone with a black suit, do you?” I pressed my phone closer to my ear while navigating the pre-homeroom chaos of the hallway the next morning.

I hadn’t told my dad or brother about my near mugging or the mysterious super who saved me. I’d thrown my dirty clothes in the hamper, made sure to wash the remaining blood from my forehead, then hid in my room the rest of the night. Though I was still curious if Connor knew of a hero with a similar description. Odds were he would have crossed paths with the guy at a crime scene at some point—or at least heard about him through the rumor mill. There was nothing—well, nothing except my brush with danger—that happened in Morriston that Connor didn’t know about.

“What, like a super suit?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Where are you?”

“School. Homeroom hasn’t started yet. Where are you?”

Faint honks of car horns carried through the speaker, mixing with a loud screech of what sounded like a very large bird. “I’m downtown on top of the Steel Building.” Of course he was. Because where else would he go at 7:30 in the morning? The bird screeched again, and Connor muttered a string of profanities.

“The guy didn’t have a symbol on his chest if that helps,” I said, trying to stay quiet so I wasn’t overheard.

“Damn bird! Go pick on someone your own size. Just ’cause I know how to fly—” He cleared his throat. “Sorry. I really haven’t heard of anyone who wears a suit without a symbol. Why are you asking?”

“Well, I saw that video this morning. . . .” The video in question had been circulating around school like wildfire. Security camera footage time-stamped early this morning showed a guy who looked suspiciously like the super from last night, crouching in front of a homeless man on a sidewalk downtown. There was no audio, but the super could be seen gesturing animatedly to the man before disappearing and reappearing a minute later with two large bags of takeout and a few mugs of coffee. The wide grin on the elderly man’s face as he tore into his meal was enough to warm even the coldest of hearts.

It looked like Morriston had a new hero in town. If he kept it up, he could have his own fan club by lunchtime.

“Oh, *him*,” Connor said. “I saw that too. My competition.” He gagged loudly.

“Be nice,” I scolded. “I saw him yesterday after school. It looked like he was helping . . . someone.” Twisting the truth never hurt anyone, right?

“We’ll see,” Connor grumbled. Then he swore so loudly I flinched. “Oh my God! *Get off my roof, you ugly little*—sorry, Sis, I’m having a crow crisis, a herd of them.”

“It’s fine.” I walked farther down the hall and stopped in the doorway of my homeroom, squinting at the news coverage playing on the TV in the corner. “And, Connor, it’s a murder of crows, not a herd.”

“Who got murdered? Sorry, there’s another one attacking me. It nearly shit on my suit.”

“I said it’s a—”

I was interrupted from telling him the difference between a murder and a herd by the “breaking news” chime on the television.

The screen flashed to a shot of city hall downtown. A helicopter filmed overhead, and massive orange flames engulfed the building’s left side. Thick black smoke swirled into the air. As I watched, the flames transferred to the building next door, sprouting along the awning over the doorway, and the fire grew, spreading its germs like a disease.

“Connor—”

“Yeah, yeah, I see it. I have to go.” The line clicked and was dead.

I felt a pair of hands brush my shoulders. “Morning, Abby.” Sarah smiled, but her grin slipped away when she saw the morning news. “Is that city hall?”

I nodded mutely. Half the students in the room were watching diligently to see if city hall would really burn to the ground before the supers could save it, but the other half were staring at me, waiting to see how I would handle the news that my father’s workplace was crumbling to ash.

I looked at the clock hanging crooked above the whiteboard. It wasn’t even eight, so logically I knew my dad wasn’t in the building. But then I started second-guessing myself. What if he had to go in early today and I didn’t know? What if he died before Connor could save him? What if someone else in there died before Connor could save them? What if *Connor* died?

My stomach twisted violently. My heart weighed a million pounds.

I couldn’t lose another family member. I wouldn’t.

I was halfway through dialing my dad’s number, fingers shaking, when a reporter on the television began to speak.

“We have a new development in the act of arson at city hall,” the

female reporter explained to the camera. She stood downtown, about a block from the building. I caught a glimpse of red flash through the air, and the knot in my stomach lessened knowing my brother was still okay.

The television screen changed to a shaky cell phone video taken from an apartment across the street. “We have obtained video evidence of the criminal traipsing through Mayor Hamilton’s office before lighting the building on fire. Thankfully, the mayor and his staff were not in the building at the time—”

I slipped my phone into my backpack, relief flooding through me. I leaned against Sarah, and she wrapped her arms tightly around my shoulders.

The reporter continued. “The man committing the act of arson was dressed head to toe in some type of black suit, and authorities believe that a super is, in fact, the one to blame for the destruction.”

The video zoomed in, and even though the footage was grainy, I could still make out the familiar plain black suit and mask. It was clear he was the one standing in front of my father’s desk with his hands clasped tightly behind his back. The bright orange fire reflected off his dark clothes. He didn’t try to quell the flames; he didn’t do a thing. The super spent a few seconds admiring his work before disappearing, just as he had last night.

“The criminal is being called Iron Phantom due to the armored sheen of his suit and his ability to materialize and vanish at will, much like a ghost,” the reporter continued. “We are urging citizens to stay alert for any other suspicious activity possibly connected to Iron Phantom, and not to approach this dangerous man if encountered. Developments in this story will be brought to you as soon as they are available, until our supers are able to apprehend this threatening fugitive. Now, back to Robert in the studio.”

I didn't need the reporter to spell it out for me. The man who saved me last night was no hero.

He was a villain.

---

Morrison had never seen a supervillain before. Our supers used their powers for good; the only criminals were ordinary citizens. Thieves, gangs, drug dealers. Never a super. No one knew how to handle a criminal with both evil intentions *and* superpowers. I supposed there must have been supervillains in other parts of the country, but no one heard much about them. They were apprehended quickly, before the problem brought on by their presence could escalate.

The problem in Morrison had already escalated. Iron Phantom had done so much damage during his first official act of evil that the city was terrified to see what he would do next. Thankfully, no one was harmed in the city hall fire. Very few people were in the building, and those inside got out quickly with Connor's help. City hall, however, would be closed until further notice.

Classes continued as scheduled, but no one got much learning done. We were all glued to the televisions as footage of the fire played on a never-ending loop, the video of Iron Phantom's kindness toward the homeless man forgotten. Most students were addicted to the drama, eating up the chance to either gush about or condemn Morrison's first supervillain. For them, he was an excuse to skip out on class for a day. His actions were very real, but he was still a fantasy. For me . . . I didn't understand. Iron Phantom had proven himself to be worse than the criminal he rescued me from. Honestly, I couldn't figure out why he bothered to rescue me at all.

I headed to the library during my study hall, hoping for a quiet reprieve from the news. No such luck. By midafternoon, I'd seen the same clip of the same flames two dozen times, and each one made a golf-ball-sized lump form in the back of my throat.

Even in the library, it was everywhere. A group of girls from my gym class huddled around someone's cell phone, watching a replay at a study table. Gary Gunkle, Morriston's most flatulent member of the senior class, was hunched in front of a computer in the corner, bulky headphones covering his ears as he listened. Upstairs, a group of sophomores from the drama club traded their fears of Iron Phantom as they lounged near the newspaper racks. And in the back corner, near the bay window and the most comfortable squashy arm-chairs in the library, several stage crew kids hurled an imaginary torch at the wall, shouting Iron Phantom's name.

*Ridiculous. Childish*, I thought as I headed for an empty table near the stacks of spare history textbooks for rent. Only one other table was occupied. The boy that Sarah had knocked into before auditions—Rylan—sat with a laptop, watching the flames flicker on his screen.

I pulled my chair across the wooden floor with a loud screech that had Ms. Jacobson, the librarian, poking her head out of her office to shoot me the stink eye. I slumped down at the table, trying to ignore the plume of smoke covering Rylan's screen. My fingers rubbed circles into my temples as a stress headache started to form.

"That video is the same now as it was five hours ago," I snapped at Rylan's back. He jumped a little, causing his chair to creak, and pulled out one of his earbuds.

He turned around slowly, raising his eyebrows. His brown eyes blinked, but he didn't speak. When I first met him, his silence unnerved me a little, but after putting up with nonstop chatter all day long, I welcomed the quiet.

The news clip still played on his screen, and I couldn't help but stare, feeling queasy for the millionth time that day.

"Somehow those flames look taller every time I watch that," I said.

Rylan glanced at his laptop for just a moment. "Yeah," he said quietly. We stared at the clip as it played out and the screen went black. With nothing to look at, I started to feel a little awkward, so I watched as a freshman girl pushed through the library doors with tears in her eyes. I wondered if she knew someone who worked in one of the buildings downtown.

I thought back to last night, picturing the boy's bright eyes and the playful lilt to his voice. *Iron Phantom, what did you do?*

"Are you scared?" I asked Rylan. He blinked at me. Such a stupidly personal question, especially after just meeting a person. I tried to backtrack. "I mean, I guess no one likes admitting they're scared. . . ."

"I am," he said, using the half whisper that Sarah and I dubbed the "library voice." But for Rylan it just seemed to be his normal voice. "A little. Maybe even more than a little." He packed up his laptop, gently zipping it into a case before slipping it into his backpack. His shy eyes flicked to me before drifting to the window. The city was too far away to see the buildings, but smoke hung in the sky like a deadly storm cloud.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"No." That was a big fat lie. "I mean . . . yeah."

Rylan nodded. Gripping the straps of his backpack, he slung the heavy-looking bag over one shoulder. The corners of his lips lifted in an encouraging smile, and he left the library without another word.

---

"What do you think Dad's plan is?" I asked Connor while we watched our father's press conference from the comfort of our living room



couch. Dad was fielding questions from a roomful of reporters who were demanding details on the precautions being put in place to increase our safety from Iron Phantom. He wouldn't go into detail, but said more would be revealed soon. I wasn't even sure if *he* knew what to do. Because of his superpowers, Iron Phantom was quickly labeled as one of the nation's most dangerous criminals. How could my father possibly keep him at bay?

Connor shrugged. He had returned home briefly to make sure I was okay—he was still dressed as Red Comet.

"I don't know. I haven't talked to him yet. He'll probably try to bring in more supers to find this guy. What else can he do? I just don't get it." Connor sighed and started pacing in front of the TV. "We're given these powers for a reason. They're a gift. They help the less fortunate, like you." He pointed a finger at my face.

"Gee, thanks, Connor."

"You know what I mean. We help people. We don't destroy things. We . . ." He sat down again and stared at me. With his blue eyes narrowed and his face covered in sweat and ash, he looked much older than nineteen. "You saw him."

I gulped. "I what?"

Connor's eyes continued to narrow. "You said you saw some dude dressed all in black yesterday and then this happens? That's not a coincidence, Abby. You saw him—"

"Yeah, but he was different then. He was helping. And there was that video this morning—"

"A guy isn't suddenly a saint just because he decided on a whim to feed the homeless. He burned down a building, Abby!"

"Thanks. I wasn't aware." I leaned back into the couch, raking my fingers through the knots in my hair.

I couldn't find a good reason to defend Iron Phantom. He might have saved my life, but he ruined any gratitude I had when he burned down city hall. And yet, for some reason, I couldn't bring myself

to tell my own brother the truth about what really happened last night.

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“We? Nothing. You stay here. I have to get back out there in case something else happens.” Connor sighed and pulled his mask over his head, trudging toward the door. “Promise me something, Abby. If you do see him again, you have to let someone know. Me or Dad—let us know and we’ll take care of it.”

I felt my cheeks start to burn. “Connor, I’m not completely helpless—”

“Abby,” he stressed. “*Please.*” His voice cracked. Although I couldn’t see his eyes, I knew they had that watery sheen to them, the same look he got whenever we talked about our mom or any other victim for slightly too long. He was just trying to do the right thing. Even through his mask, I knew Connor was staring me down, silently begging me to agree. Because that’s what Connor did. You couldn’t help but listen to him and be on his side. It was the reason he was such a great superhero.

“Promise me,” he said again.

I knew the right thing to do. I had no obligation to Iron Phantom. He was nobody. I would always be on Connor’s side. He was one of the only family members I had left.

“I promise, Connor. I’ll let you know.”

When he flew back downtown, I took the steps two at a time to my bedroom. But it wasn’t until I pushed my door open and dropped my bag (and all the homework I didn’t want to think about) on my desk chair that I realized something was different. I hadn’t left my lights on this morning. I knew I hadn’t. All my belongings were undisturbed, but I couldn’t shake the unmistakable feeling that something was here that shouldn’t be.

If I hadn’t known that Connor was out of the house all day, then

I would have thought he was playing a stupid prank on me. But as I cautiously padded across the room, my toes sinking into the carpet, I knew that not even my doofus brother was to blame.

Goose bumps crawled up my arms. Placed on my mattress, directly in front of the pillows arranged meticulously against my headboard, was a chocolate bar sealed in a red wrapper and a note written in a messy scrawl:

*I've heard chocolate helps with head scrapes. I hope you're feeling better.*

*—IP*

*P.S. I'm going to need your help with something.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

**T**here was a knife under my pillow. I could say with absolute confidence that I had never slept with a knife under my pillow before.

Sure, it was only a butter knife, but I still felt like I needed some form of protection. He knew where I lived. He had been *in my room*. My promise to Connor played in my head like a scratchy broken record. *I'll let you know*. A load of good that promise did. Connor's cell phone was dead, and once he didn't return home after midnight, I assumed he took up his usual post on a skyscraper downtown, watching for trouble. I just had to hope that if something happened, if Iron Phantom showed up again, Connor would come.

Telling Dad should have been my next move, but after returning home from fifteen hours of dealing with a charred office and a frightened city, he passed out on top of his blankets with his shoes and tie still on. I wasn't about to bother him. I changed my clothes,

got my knife, and went to bed. It was just one night. I could take care of myself.

But I had overlooked the fact that it was impossible to sleep when your mind was somewhere else. I rolled onto my side, my back facing the window, while I plumped my pillows and attempted to count sheep in desperation. I had just reached twenty, and was no closer to falling asleep, when I heard a dull thump on my carpet followed by a gravelly voice.

“You should really lock your window. Dangerous criminals are running rampant around this city, you know.”

Right, like the window mattered. The guy could teleport. The fingers of my right hand inched under my pillow. I took the knife in my fist, the steel handle freezing against my sweaty skin. Maybe if I didn’t move, he would leave. Like an animal playing dead as a defense mechanism. I watched an entire special on opossums doing that on Animal Planet once. If I held my breath and started drooling a little, he would grow bored and walk away.

“Psst. I know you’re not sleeping.”

The floor creaked as the thumps moved closer. *Be the opossum, Abby. Just be the opossum.*

“Hey.” A gloved hand touched my bare shoulder, and I whipped my head around, coming face-to-mask with the guy who’d haunted my thoughts for the past twenty-four hours.

“Get away from me!” I hissed, rolling out of bed. My mattress was the only thing between us. I couldn’t work up the courage to throw the butter knife, so I dove for a thick anatomy textbook on the floor instead, hurling it through the room, aiming straight for his dumb, evil face. With a shake of his head, Iron Phantom disappeared, winking back into existence a few feet over. The textbook spun through the empty air, smacked the wall, and hit the carpet. Iron Phantom stepped on it with his boot, and my weapon was rendered useless.

“Easy there, Bazooka.” He sounded like he was trying to hold back a laugh, and I hated him for it. In the darkness of my room, I could hardly see him in his black suit, just barely make out the occasional glint of his eyes as they caught the glow from my alarm clock. “I’m not allowed to pay a visit to the damsel in distress I rescued?”

“No. Why don’t you pay a visit to one of the people who almost burned alive today in the fire that *you* set instead?” I snatched his note off my bedside table, waving it through the air. “And how do you know where I live?”

“Oh, good. You got it.” He noticed the unopened chocolate bar. “You didn’t eat it? It’s not poisoned.”

I blinked. I didn’t eat it because I wasn’t hungry; I hadn’t even thought that it might be poisoned, but now I was starting to reconsider.

“It’s *not* poisoned,” he repeated. “And maybe I know where you live because maybe I followed you here last night to make sure you got back safe.”

I knew I hadn’t been alone. I clutched my knife tighter. He knew where I lived. Where I slept. What else did he know?

Connor’s plea echoed through my head. *Let me know*. He had to be aware that something was up, right? He had to realize I was in danger.

Iron Phantom leaned against the wall, crossing his feet at the ankles. He looked almost . . . bored.

No. He was messing with me. Trying to get me to let my guard down.

I’d vowed not to wake my dad up, but that was before Morriston’s new supervillain made an appearance in my room. Dad was on the other side of the house, but maybe if I screamed loud enough. . . .

“Da—”

Iron Phantom's eyes widened. He snatched one of the pillows from my bed, chucking it at me. It smacked my stomach, then fell to the floor.

"Shh! What are you doing?"

"Getting help. What are *you* doing?"

"Getting you to shut up. If you were really in danger, wouldn't a super have come to rescue you already?"

"I . . ." He had me there. But Connor could just be busy. Wouldn't be the first time.

"Wave that butter knife around all you want," he said, "but if you were really scared, you would have thrown that at me, not the book. Actually, if you were really scared, you would have grabbed a larger knife."

I didn't lower my arm.

"Fine." He hung his head. "You don't like me. I get it. But I wasn't trying to hurt anyone today. You don't understand why I did it." His voice softened as he toyed with the edge of his mask around his jaw. His green eyes were fixed on the collection of photos scattered across my desk, not on me. I could have run out of the room and gotten my dad. Maybe I should have. What if this was some kind of trap?

But looking at Iron Phantom tentatively examining a picture of me and Sarah at the beach last year, a small smile on his face, it didn't seem very urgent that I let someone know of his presence.

"Make me understand," I said.

He dropped the picture frame, pressing his palms against his eyes. "Look, I didn't want to hurt anyone. I was trying to send a message."

"To who?" I glanced at my door. I could still make a run for it. Iron Phantom noticed, but he didn't try to stop me. Instead of stepping closer to the door, or to me, he took a step back, toward my window.

He didn't answer my question, but he did hold out his palm. There was something small and shiny resting on his glove, but with my bed filling the space between us, I couldn't figure out exactly what I was looking at.

Iron Phantom took one small step forward. My muscles tensed, but I didn't move. Then he took another, and another, until his knees were resting against the edge of my bed and his body was leaning over the mattress toward me.

He held up the object between his thumb and index finger. A silver rectangle half the size of my thumbnail.

"What do you know about microchips?" he asked.

"Pretty much nothing. Why?"

Iron Phantom hummed, watching me. What I could see of his face under his mask looked completely blank, emotionless.

"Here's the issue," he said. "I've seen microchips like this before. This looks like a tracking device, the kind that can be implanted under a person's skin, and believe me, there are plenty more where this one came from. But whether they're for people like you or for people like me, I can't say."

"People like you? Supers?"

My heart skipped a beat. *Connor?*

"Someone wants to follow the supers . . . to find out who they are?" I asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"Maybe more," he said. "To capture them, to control them, to test them. Use your imagination, Bazooka. Or *maybe* they're to spy on the rest of Morriston for some inane reason. I don't know. I'm really just spitballing here. You see, this particular microchip is actually empty on the inside." He popped the tiny box open, showing me smooth metal walls and not much else. "From my experience, that's not normal. I want to know what should be there and why it's not. That's where you come in. Think of it as your . . . supersecret



mission.” He wiggled his fingers, like the whole thing was supposed to be really grand—an honor or something.

“I don’t want a supersecret mission,” I said.

“Too bad. I need you to find out what’s up. But don’t ask your dad outright. Be sneaky about it, because if someone catches on, I’m not sure it would be a good thing.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Hold up. My father?”

“Yeah, your father. I may be new to the whole superhero gig, but I’m not stupid. I knew last night you were the mayor’s daughter.” He slipped the chip back into his suit, patting his pocket for good measure. “And I also stole this little guy from his office this morning.”

I almost threw the butter knife at him. The only thing stopping me was the knowledge that if I let it out of my grasp, I would officially be weaponless. The memory of the flames flitted through my mind. The fluorescent orange that turned city hall completely black. The smoke. The tears dripping from the freshman girl’s eyes as she entered the library this afternoon. Forget the knife. Maybe I would try punching him instead.

“You are no hero,” I spit out, my voice wavering in anger.

Iron Phantom looked down at his suit, full lips curling into a smirk. “Is that so? The costume begs to differ.”

I clenched my fists as a surge of annoyance bubbled through me. Heroes didn’t destroy things—they helped. Connor was a hero. Not this guy. “A hero wouldn’t have burned down city hall. You’re a villain.”

He rolled his eyes and quickly disappeared into the breeze of the air conditioner. I slumped against the wall in relief. He was gone; he’d had enough of me.

“Listen to me.” Before I could blink, he was back, one hand holding my shoulder against the wall while the other clamped over my

mouth. So this was how it would end. I would die in my bedroom at the hands of the world's most annoying supervillain.

"Abigail," he whispered, his voice so low it nearly got lost amid the hum of the AC unit. "I'm not the bad guy. I'm not a villain. If I wanted to hurt you, I would have done it already."

I didn't register much after his use of my full name. No one called me Abigail. Not because I didn't like my name, but because everyone thought my fair hair and soft bone structure made me look younger—more like an Abby. I guess I wasn't beautiful or sophisticated enough to be an *Abigail*.

Eventually, he realized I wasn't going to fight him and removed his hand from my mouth, resting it on my shoulder.

"Someone in city hall is clearly up to something." He paused, sighing. "I need you to help me."

"Absolutely not." I couldn't believe that after he set my father's workplace ablaze he still had the audacity to ask for my help.

"Please." His fingers dug into my shoulders but lessened their grip when I flinched. "Please, I need you to see if you can find out anything about the microchips. I'll be back again in a few days."

"Why should I help you? You could have killed somebody today."

"You should help me," he said, "because as much as you hate to admit it, you already trust me."

I seethed. "I do not—"

"You do." His words were tentative and quiet, even in the deafening silence of my bedroom, not cocky like he often came across. "You haven't stabbed me with that knife yet." He chuckled. "You didn't run for help or try to force me to leave. Instead, you listened to what I had to say. You trust me." He nodded toward my nightstand. "You should try the chocolate. I've had, like, three bars today. It's really good."

With those final parting words, he vanished before my eyes for

a third time, leaving me with a knot of rage in my chest and more questions than answers.

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Despite the media frenzy surrounding the city hall fire, I managed to block Iron Phantom from my thoughts almost all weekend. However, in the brief, though irritating, moments he crossed my mind, I couldn't help wondering if he told me the truth when he snuck into my room. Was someone really causing problems inside city hall? Did they put the microchip on my dad's desk and Iron Phantom just happened to find it first, or did my dad know about it? Was it really a tracking device? I wanted to ask, but my tongue felt useless in my mouth. Dad was already so stressed, and for all I knew, Iron Phantom—whoever he was—was just plain crazy and that microchip wasn't even real.

Even though I walked into school on Monday ignoring all traces of Iron Phantom's existence, my nerves were still raging. Sure, I had both a test in statistics and an essay due in English, but my biggest concern was for the sheet of paper tacked up on the theater arts bulletin board.

"I made the chorus!" Sarah elbowed her way past the crowd of students reading the *Hall of Horrors* cast list to reach me when I came through the door. She threw her arms around me, a curl of her hair momentarily getting stuck in my mouth while she squeezed my shoulders. "If my singing managed to get me in the chorus, you definitely got the lead."

"You didn't look to see my name?" Now free from Sarah's iron grip, I eyed the crowd swarming the cast list with trepidation. If Sarah didn't see my name, did that mean I didn't make it? I didn't

want to be doomed to spend the next few weeks working in the costume closet.

My best friend shook her head and began towing me toward the list. No. Now I didn't want to see. I tried to dig my heels into the floor, which only resulted in a loud *screeeech* alerting my (possible) castmates of my presence as my shoes skidded along the tile.

"It's not that I didn't see your name," Sarah said. "I was just too busy looking for my own. Here you go!"

Sarah and I came to a halt before the bulletin board. It was decorated with yellow and pink paper and music notes, as if happy colors would somehow make the list showing which part would claim my soul for the next six weeks any less daunting.

"I can read it to you if you want." Sarah laughed and I groaned. Might as well just get it over with. Except . . . Courtney McGuire's audition was just as good as mine. Not to mention her feet fit the extra pair of character shoes backstage whereas mine were much too small. Surely she got the female lead.

All because of her damn huge feet.

But Courtney didn't get it. Her name jumped out to me instantly, and she was in the chorus with Sarah. Which meant . . .

Abby Hamilton. . . . . Angeline

I couldn't believe it. I actually got a lead role in the musical.

Sarah screamed, because that's what Sarah does best, while I stared dumbstruck at the piece of paper fluttering on the board. Suddenly, it didn't seem so frightening. I actually did it. For once I was actually good enough to shine.

*Take that, Connor.*

"I'm so happy for you!" Sarah twirled me around the hall. "I'm so happy! Wait, why aren't you happy, Abby?"

“What? I am happy.” And I was. The news just hadn’t hit me yet. I felt like I was walking through a fog.

“You are?” she asked. I nodded. Sarah sighed and began reading more names on the cast list. “Well, then we need to work on your acting skills. You look like I did that time I realized I would never see Red Comet without his mask.”

“Hey, that’s hardly fair.” Sarah moped for days when she reached that not-so-true conclusion. She even whined to Connor. He laughed in her face, then walked away.

The great Red Comet, everyone.

“Fine, maybe you don’t look *that* sad, but you look sad. Cheer up, buttercup, who’s your sexy leading man going to be?”

I squinted at the fine print under the fluorescent lights and glanced at the name directly above mine. *Isaac Jackson*. The voice of God’s most heavenly angel.

“Oooh! New kid!” Sarah squealed. “He might just become my new fan fiction project. I mean that voice and that hair and *those eyes*.” She tilted her head to the ceiling. “Is it just me, or is it getting a little toasty in here?”

I scanned the remainder of the list, but my eyes were drawn to the top of the page again and again, landing always on the same name. *Isaac Jackson*. Thinking about how incredible his performance was at auditions was making my palms sweat and my toes curl and . . . I just wouldn’t think about him. That was the key. I wouldn’t think about him until rehearsals started. I had enough on my mind anyway.

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My plan was foiled almost immediately.

As much as I tried to ignore Isaac Jackson until our first rehearsal,

he managed to track me down during study hall later that afternoon. He approached me and Sarah at our usual table in the cafeteria—the one closest to the window and civilization—his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans, looking wary.

“Abby Hamilton, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Isaac Jackson.” *Good Lord*. His voice could melt butter. Isaac held out a hand, and I shook it, his fingers cool against my skin. “Nice to officially meet you. I guess I’ll be playing the Arthur to your Angeline this fall.”

Sarah’s classic Fangirl Squeal of Excitement escaped her lips, and she immediately ran toward the bathrooms, a few girls in our study hall snickering at her unbridled enthusiasm. Sarah was a hopeless romantic. In her mind, because Isaac and I were now starring in a musical, we would obviously end up married with tons of babies and she needed to give us some privacy.

“She’s more excited about cannibalistic royals than I am,” Isaac said. He took a seat in the chair Sarah had vacated, glancing at her “homework” spread out on the table.

Sarah wasn’t doing homework. She was in the process of making a new Red Comet collage for her locker shrine because she claimed the old one was “dated.” “Dated” in Sarah’s mind meant the pictures of Connor in her locker were from July, and it was now the end of September. Not that anything changed when the public couldn’t see Connor’s face under his mask. Red Comet could look old and gray as far as anyone knew.

“Are you into superheroes?” I asked, noticing Isaac shuffle through Sarah’s Red Comet pictures.

Isaac shrugged. “I don’t know much about them. We don’t have them where I come from.”

I eyed him incredulously. “Where are you from?” I found it difficult to believe there were places in the United States without supers.

“Small town,” Isaac said. “Idaho.”

“That’s far. Why come to Pennsylvania?”

“Oh, uh.” He suddenly looked nervous. Isaac played with the corner of a picture of Connor flying over the city. I noticed his fingernails were bitten down to the quick. “I came to live with my uncle,” was all he said.

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.” The last thing I wanted was to make him uncomfortable if we were going to spend hours together in rehearsals.

Isaac ran a hand through his dark hair, causing it to stick straight up from his forehead. “No, don’t worry about it. It’s no problem.” He didn’t elaborate on his living situation or hometown any further. “So . . . do you like superheroes?” He gestured to Sarah’s Red Comet photos.

The award for World’s Most Unladylike Sound in a Cafeteria went to me as a snort erupted from my nose. Isaac raised an eyebrow while my face turned red. “Sure, I guess you could say that. They have their moments.” All I could think about was the five bucks Connor gave me to get a mustard stain out of his super suit last night.

“You must meet a lot of them with your dad being the mayor and all.” Isaac leaned closer in his chair. None of my classmates ever bothered to ask about my connection with Morriston’s supers. Rightly so because I had never met any of them besides Red Comet.

“I haven’t, actually,” I said. “Only Red Comet the other week during the school assembly.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Isaac stared at me intently, his bright green eyes barely blinking. Almost as if he was egging me on to express more about my super encounters and was disappointed by my lack of information.

Realizing I had nothing interesting to contribute to our conversation, Isaac stood. “Well, I guess I’ll see you in rehearsals, Abigail.”

No one called me Abigail except . . .

I squeezed my eyes shut tight as Isaac walked away, strengthening my resolve not to think about his dark brown hair or bright green eyes if I could help it. Because if I thought too much, I would start to wonder if it was more than a coincidence that Morriston got a new student right before the first appearance of Iron Phantom. But many guys had brown hair and green eyes, and I reminded myself I had never even seen Iron Phantom's hair—only his eyelashes.

His dark lashes meant nothing.

"How did it go, Abby?" Sarah bounded back to her seat after Isaac left, a fresh glue stick in hand for her collage. She applied a generous amount to the back of Connor's head and smoothed it down with her thumb.

*How did it go?* was a loaded question. Isaac was more inquisitive than most Morriston citizens, who had grown up around supers. He seemed harmless, but I wasn't sure. I had known most of my classmates since we were five. I knew who dated who, who had food allergies, who was afraid of butterflies. I knew virtually nothing about Isaac Jackson, and considering everything that happened over the past few days, that made me incredibly uneasy.

"I'm not sure," I said as I watched Sarah glue cutouts of her and Red Comet atop a skyscraper beneath the sunset. The answer to her question depended on how much I believed in coincidence.



## CHAPTER FIVE

**T**he subway was packed to capacity as Sarah and I hopped on the express line from the suburbs into the city center. A new chick-flick was opening at the theater, and Sarah had managed to score us the last two tickets for the evening showtime. There was also an indie rock band playing at the newest venue on Morriston's north shore and a celebrity chef opening a new restaurant in the cultural district. Despite Iron Phantom's recent appearance, it felt like the entire city was out tonight.

The train lurched as it took off from the platform. Sarah nudged me in the back, pointing to a few empty seats in the rear corner of the car. We squeezed through the crowd, collapsing on the plastic bench.

"Is it just me," Sarah asked, "or does this thing smell like BO more and more every time we ride it?"

A group of tourists armed with brochures and thick foreign accents stopped speaking to stare down their noses at us.