

CHAPTER ONE

I WALKED THROUGH THE empty hallways of my John Smith High School, keeping my eyes and ears open for any traps or ambushes. I didn't hear anything, aside from the sounds of my own footsteps echoing off the smooth floor. It was actually really eerie, because just moments ago, when I entered the school, I had been among the loud police cars, news reporters reporting on the kidnapping, and my own team mates, who I wished were with me right now.

Then again, it wasn't like I was defenseless. As Bolt, the leader of the Young Neos and a strong superhero in my own right, I had super strength, super speed, and the ability to fly. That kept me safe from most things that would kill an ordinary person, but when those failed me, I had my costume, which was bullet and fireproof.

But it wasn't really me I was worried about. I was actually worried about my friend, Malcolm Rayner, who was somewhere in the school, held hostage by my old school bully and enemy, Robert Candle. Malcolm was just a normal person with no powers of his own whatsoever, while Robert, also a normal person, was reported to have a gun and was threatening to shoot Malcolm if anyone other than me entered the school. That was why I went in alone; I didn't want to risk Robert killing Malcolm.

As I turned the corner down the hallway to the cafeteria, I thought about the events leading up to this. According to the police, Robert had kidnapped Malcolm three hours ago and was threatening to kill him if I didn't show up in person at the school. It had happened during the last hours of the school day when everyone was leaving, but Robert had allowed the rest of the students and faculty to leave unharmed. He said that he just wanted to face me alone and would kill Malcolm if any police or other superheroes entered the school.

When I first heard the news, I was shocked. I knew Robert was somewhat unstable, given that he had lost both of his parents over the last five months and was a cruel person even before then, but I had never imagined that he would actually kidnap Malcolm and threaten to kill him. The police had told me that no one knew why Robert snapped, but I guessed that he was so overcome with grief at the loss of both of his parents (whose deaths I had had a hand in) that he was no longer thinking rationally. He was probably hoping to kill me, but, of course, there was no way he could, because even with a gun at his side, I was still much stronger and faster than him. I could dodge any bullets he shot at me and disarm him faster than I could think.

But that didn't mean I was just going to barge in and take him down immediately. I was worried that Robert expected me to do that and would just shoot Malcolm right away if I used my powers to enter. Besides, I suspected that Robert probably set up some kind of trap to catch me, although so far the school's hallways were pretty empty and normal.

As worried as I was for Malcolm's safety, I felt confident that I could beat Robert. Whatever his plan was—if he had a plan at all, because it sure didn't seem like he had one—I knew it wouldn't take much effort on my part to take him down. My plan was simple: Enter the cafeteria, distract Robert with some conversation, and then zoom over to him with my super speed and knock the gun out of his hands

before he could react. Then knock him out with one punch, free Malcolm, and let the police handle the rest. Easy peasy.

The only thing I didn't understand was that Robert said he would 'know' if someone other than me entered the school, which meant that the police couldn't send in a SWAT team as backup or help my teammates enter the school secretly. I thought it was a meaningless threat, given how Robert was not known to have any cameras on him or anything, but the police understandably didn't want to take any chances. Not that I cared either way, since I was confident I could take out Robert on my own anyway.

I stopped in front of the doors to the cafeteria. I listened for any sounds on the other side, anything that could indicate that Robert had set a trap or ambush for me, but I heard nothing. I didn't even hear Robert or Malcolm breathing, but because that was where Robert was reported to be holding Malcolm hostage, I pushed open the doors and stepped inside.

Ah, the cafeteria. I had so many fond memories here, like the time I punched Robert through the wall on the other side of the room, which I noticed was still hastily plastered over. The lights were on, but the cafeteria still felt dim and dreary, maybe because the windows were closed. It also smelled of the slop they gave here, which made me grimace.

At first, I didn't see Robert or Malcolm anywhere. Then I looked over at the table where me, Malcolm, and Tara used to sit for lunch and saw two people sitting there.

One was Malcolm. He was bound with thick rope, while duct tape had been slapped over his mouth to make it impossible for him to speak. He didn't look injured, but when he saw me, I saw fear and terror in his eyes. He tried to speak, but I couldn't understand a word he said due to the tape covering his mouth.

Sitting next to Malcolm, looking as relaxed as if he was sitting in a hot tub surrounded by beautiful girls, was Robert. He was aiming a handgun at Malcolm's chest, smirking in an irritating way. He wore jeans, a black t-shirt, and a leather jacket, but otherwise looked pretty much the same as he had the last time I saw him. He looked a lot more confident, though, but maybe he just didn't want to show any weakness to my face.

"Robert," I said, not bothering to hide the contempt in my voice. "Let Malcolm go."

Robert raised an eyebrow. I noticed he had his finger on the gun's trigger. "Just as bossy and entitled as I remembered. But I guess you've become more spoiled, what with you now being the leader of the most famous young superhero team in the country and whatnot."

"I said, let Malcolm go," I said. I stepped toward them. "No one needs to die today, Robert. No one even needs to get hurt. Just put your gun on the floor and kick it toward me. We can end this peacefully."

Robert pressed the barrel of the gun directly against the side of Malcolm's head, causing Malcolm to make muffled whining noises.

But Robert didn't pay any attention to Malcolm. He just looked at me, his smirk never leaving his face. "You're even stupider than I remembered, Kevin. Acting like *you're* in control of this situation. Tell me, are all you neoheroes this arrogant or is it just you?"

"I could end this all right now if I wanted," I said. "But I'd rather not use my powers on a normal human like you. I could kill you."

Robert chuckled bitterly. “Really? You mean like how you refused to use your powers on my mother? Don't play dumb with me. I know you'd like to bash my skull in. I know you'd like to kill me. The only reason you haven't yet is because you don't think you're faster than my trigger finger.”

“You're annoying as hell, Robert, but I really don't want to kill you,” I said. “I just want to save Malcolm. You know that there's no way you could beat me, even with a gun. We're not equal.”

“You're right,” said Robert. “We're *not* equal. For one, you've still got your parents. Both of mine are dead and *you're* responsible for their deaths.”

I internally winced at Robert's biting words, but I said, showing no fear, “Robert, your parents were dangerous and insane. Both of them tried to kill me. They would have caused a lot of trouble for the rest of the world, too, if they hadn't died.”

“So?” said Robert. “What do I care about the rest of the world? It's never cared about me. Besides, you still have *your* parents, so I doubt you understand me. But you will soon enough.”

“That sounds like a threat,” I said.

“It is,” said Robert. He pressed the barrel of his gun against Malcolm's head harder. “Now I am going to give you a choice here: Either let me shoot and kill you or I shoot and kill your friend instead.”

“That's what you want?” I said. “My death?”

“Yes,” said Robert. “I don't really care about your friend here. He was just bait, though I'll kill you if you try anything.”

“Why should I believe that you will spare Malcolm even if I agree to your demands?” I said. “How do I know you won't just kill Malcolm, too?”

“Because, like I said, I don't really care about him,” said Robert with a shrug. “He could live or die and it wouldn't make any difference to me. He's an annoying little twerp, but he hasn't hurt me the way you have.”

I tried to calculate how long it would take me to zoom over to the table and disarm and knock out Robert before he could pull the trigger. But even at my fastest speed, I didn't think I could do it. The barrel of the gun was right up against Malcolm's head and Robert's finger was still on the trigger. He just needed to pull it once and Malcolm would be dead.

But I couldn't let him kill me, either. I didn't want to die. I had a whole future ahead of me, after all. Besides, I still didn't trust Robert to spare Malcolm. He was clearly unhinged and likely would just kill Malcolm for the hell of it, since he would be going to jail no matter what.

Unfortunately, I couldn't see any way out of this situation that would leave me and Malcolm alive. Either way, one of us was going to die ... and I decided that it was going to be me.

So I said, “Okay, Robert. You win. I'll let you shoot me in exchange for Malcolm's life.”

“Really?” said Robert. “That didn't take long. But anyway, I want you to come over here. I'm not going to come over to you because I don't want to give you a chance to save your friend.”

Reluctantly, I walked across the cafeteria to Robert, who didn't pull the gun away from Malcolm's head. But as I walked, a plan occurred to me, one that would allow me to save both of us and take down Robert, too. It depended on the speed of my reflexes, but I was sure it would work as long as I was quick and smart.

I stopped in front of Robert and Malcolm. Malcolm was still looking at me with fear in his eyes and was still trying to talk to me, but the tape made it impossible to tell what he was saying. I guessed that

he was probably trying to tell me that I shouldn't do this, but Malcolm didn't know my plan, so, of course, he would be against it, though he wouldn't be once I saved us both.

As for Robert, he just smirked even wider and aimed his gun directly at my face.

Moving as quickly as I could, I slapped Robert's gun out of his hand. Robert let out a surprised cry before I grabbed him by the neck and lifted him off the table's bench. I was choking him enough to keep him from fighting back, but not enough to actually kill him.

Keeping my tone level, I said, "All right, Robert. Looks like this hostage situation is over. You're going to the same place as your dad: Prison, which is where you belong and where you won't be able to harm me or Malcolm or anyone else."

I expected Robert to scowl in anger or flail his arms and legs around to get me to let go of him. I expected Robert to glare at me in pointless defiance.

What I did not expect was for Robert to smile the vilest smile I had ever seen someone smile and say, in a choked voice, "Got you."

Robert grabbed my arm with both of his hands. But instead of trying to make me let go of him, he tightened his grip on my arm like a steel clamp.

Before I could figure out what was happening, I immediately started feeling drained. It felt like something was being drained out of me and into Robert. It kind of felt like Robert had poked my arm with a needle and was draining blood from my body. I even started to feel dizzy and disoriented, but I didn't let go of him because I couldn't. My hand felt locked around his throat.

I was growing ... weaker. Even though I was just standing there, I was starting to feel like I had run a marathon. Even worse, there was nothing I could do about it except stand there and watch as Robert's grin grew larger and eviler with each passing second.

Then the draining feeling stopped, but I couldn't hold Robert up anymore. I dropped him, but he landed on his feet, while I dropped to my hands and knees. I felt so weak that I could barely even stand.

But I had to beat Robert, so I forced myself to stand up. Robert, to my confusion, just watched me with amusement in his eyes, his hands on his hips as I struggled back to my feet.

"What ... did ... you ... do?" I said.

Robert didn't answer. He was just grinning at me, which annoyed me. I decided that I was just going to knock him out with one punch.

So I pulled back my fist and hurled it at him, aiming directly for his smug grin. I intended to take him out in one hit and then maybe go home and take a nap, because I felt too tired to do anything else.

But then Robert caught my fist without even flinching. He wasn't even sent stumbling backwards. He just caught my fist like I was a normal person and not a superhuman.

"Huh?" I said. I tried to pull my fist out of his hand, but his grip was too tight. "How did you do that? Your hand should be broken."

"Broken?" Robert repeated. "You mean like your whole body is about to be?"

Before I could ask what he meant, Robert reared back and punched me in the chest.

The blow sent me flying. I hurtled through the air uncontrollably, spinning head over heels as my whole world went upside down. I couldn't see anything until I crashed into the wall so hard that I smashed through it and into the wiring and plaster behind it.

For a moment, I was too jarred by the impact to feel anything. But then, after a few moments, my body started hurting. My entire body felt like it had been crushed underneath a huge rock. My bones felt as brittle as ice and maybe even completely broken in some places, but it was impossible to tell for sure because I was in so much pain that I could barely think.

Then my earcom crackled to life in my ear and I heard the voice of Blizzard—one of my teammates—say worriedly, “Bolt, what's going on in there? Are you okay? We heard something get smashed through a wall.”

I tried to speak, but just moving my mouth hurt like hell. Still, I managed to utter a few words, “Send ... help ...”

“Help?” Blizzard repeated. Her voice became even more worried. “Bolt, you sound injured. What did Robert do to you? Bolt?”

I couldn't answer her, mostly because I was in too much pain. I had taken some serious hits before, but this was easily the worst attack I had ever suffered in my life. Even just blinking sent agonizing pain through my body.

Nonetheless, I raised my head to look out the hole in the wall, which was immediately blocked by Robert. The light from the cafeteria made it impossible to see his face, but I knew he was probably smirking in triumph.

“How does it feel, Kevin?” said Robert. His voice was full of gleeful insanity now. “To be punched through a wall like that and have every bone in your body broken ... it hurts, doesn't it? But I can tell you that it is *nothing* compared to the pain of losing your parents that I have had to suffer every day of my life since last year.”

I heard the *click* of a gun and saw that Robert was now aiming his gun directly at me, his finger on the trigger.

“But now, I think I will put you out of your misery,” said Robert. “I don't know if heaven or hell exist, but if you see my parents on the other side, I hope they torture you for eternity.”