

CHAPTER ONE

SOMETIMES, I WISHED THAT I had gotten super speed or flight as powers instead of eye beams. That way, I wouldn't be late for my first day at work at my first job as the sidekick of a famous superhero.

Of course, Dad had told me to get to bed at a decent time the night before so I could get up early enough to prepare for work. Mom had agreed and even tried to set my alarm for me, but I told her I would set it myself before I went to bed last night. It was just too embarrassing to have my mom set my alarm for me; I was 16-years-old, after all, I could set my own alarm. And I didn't like Dad telling me to get to bed at a decent time, either, even though I respected Dad a lot.

But now, as I rode my bicycle through the streets of Golden City, trying desperately to not be late to work, I was starting to realize that my parents had been right to worry about me. Not that I would ever admit it, but my parents were usually more right than wrong about these things.

Not that that realization helped me right now. I had slept in this morning; I was supposed to get up at seven, shower and have breakfast, and then bike to the location where I was supposed to meet the representative that Rubberman—a local superhero and my new boss—had sent to get me at eight. Then I would be transported to Rubberman's base, secretly, of course, so no bystanders would see me and find out my secret identity, which would result in me losing my sidekick license if that were to happen.

Not that it would really matter if someone saw me, though, because I was pretty damn sure that I was going to be fired on my first day for being late. I was so used to sleeping in on Saturdays that I had totally forgotten to set an alarm the night before so I could wake up in time to get ready. The only reason I woke up at all was because I smelled the bacon Mom cooked for breakfast; by then, it was seven thirty, which meant I'd had to rush like the Blur to shower and leave. I only ate a few slices of bacon for breakfast, plus half a cup of coffee, but I still felt tired and draggy. Still, if I kept up the pace, I would reach the meeting spot by eight, although it was now seven fifty and I was getting increasingly nervous about my chances of getting there in time.

And I couldn't be late. Rubberman had made it pretty clear that I had to be at work at eight. He didn't exactly say that he would fire me if I didn't show up on time, but Rubberman had earned a reputation for being a superhero concerned with excellence and professionalism, to the point where he'd fired his first sidekick due to his constant laziness and unprofessional attitude. Rubberman seemed like a pretty chill guy when I spoke to him at the job interview, but I was not going to risk inciting his wrath by messing up his schedule by being late.

Thankfully, Golden City was still half-asleep so early in the morning. The city buses were already moving up and down the streets, while a few pedestrians made their way to work, pulling up the collars of their coats to keep the cold wind from biting their faces. I rode past an open cafe and caught a whiff of fresh coffee and donuts from within, which made my stomach growl, but I didn't stop because I didn't have time to eat and drink. I rode past an elderly woman walking her small poodle, which yapped at me as I passed, but I just ignored it. My focus was strictly on the street ahead of me and I could not allow my attention to be diverted by anything. Even if Apparition himself were to suddenly appear in front of me, I would just keep going.

But just as I turned the corner, I caught a flash of blonde in front of me and saw a teenage girl about my age directly in my path. I was going too fast to stop, so I swerved out of the way, avoiding her just in the nick of time. Unfortunately, my bike went off the sidewalk and it crashed, causing me to fall onto the street and bump my head against the road. Thankfully, I was wearing my helmet; however,

my glasses had fallen off and now my vision was blurry. Not only that, but I felt my elbow scrape against the street, although it didn't hurt that much. Still, I grabbed it anyway and let out an involuntary moan of pain.

"Oh my gosh!" said a female voice above me that I instantly recognized. "Are you okay?"

I quickly looked up and now felt like even more of an idiot when I saw who, exactly, the girl was: Greta Hammond, one of my classmates and a sort of friend of mine.

I say 'sort of' friend because we were on good terms with each other, but didn't hang out or talk much except in class. That wasn't because I disliked her or anything; it was because I was too intimidated by her good looks to approach her.

Greta was blonde and had the clearest and most beautiful blue eyes I'd ever seen in a girl. She wore a cute pink skirt and a white coat to go along with it today; even though her family wasn't super rich, she still somehow always managed to look good. Or, at least, I thought she did, though based on some of the envious comments I'd heard from some of the other girls in class, I definitely wasn't the only person to hold that opinion.

Those beautiful blue eyes of hers were looking down at me with real concern, but that didn't make me feel better. Actually, I felt like a complete idiot, lying in the street with my glasses missing and my helmet askew. My clothes were probably dirtied up, too, and I probably looked like a real loser to Greta at the moment.

But I said, as I sat up and started feeling along the street for my glasses, "Oh, it's nothing, Greta. I'm totally fine. I fall down all the time. This is nothing."

Even though I said that pretty casually, I immediately punched myself internally when I said that. What kind of idiot says that? I bet Greta thought I looked like a retard at the moment, which certainly wouldn't help my chances with her.

But I guess Greta was more polite than I thought, because she just giggled a little and said, "Alex, do you need me to help you find your glasses? It's my fault you crashed like that and I should help."

"No, no, no, I got this," I said, although I couldn't help but beam internally when she said my name with such concern. "I lose my glasses all the time. It's nothing."

Again, I punched myself internally for saying such a stupid thing, but Greta either didn't notice or maybe was too polite to mention it. She just bent over, picked up something off the street, and held it out to me. "Here they are. They're a little cracked, though."

I immediately took the glasses and put them on. A 'little' cracked was an understatement; there was a large crack running right through the middle of the right lens, while the left was scratched up near the lower left corner. I could still see out of them, but it was harder than usual and I was sure that it made me look like even more of an idiot than I normally did.

Still, it would have to do, so I said, "Thanks, Greta," and jumped back to my feet and pulled my bike back up with me. I got back on it, but before I could resume my quest, Greta grabbed my arm and said, "Where are you going?"

An electric thrill ran through my arm when Greta touched me, almost making me jump, but instead I just looked at Greta and said, "Somewhere important. Where are *you* going?"

"I'm going to get breakfast," said Greta. "My dad is in town from his work and he's going to meet me at our favorite cafe this morning."

"Huh, really?" I said, although I could feel time ticking away even as I stood there. But getting a chance to talk to Greta was too tempting for me to ignore, so I didn't pull my arm out of her hand. "That's, uh, nice."

"It is," said Greta with a smile. But then she suddenly frowned. "Are you in a hurry? And what's this card you dropped? Is it your driver's license?"

I looked down at the street and saw my sidekick license lying face down on the street near the front wheel of my bicycle. Somehow, it had fallen out of my coat pocket when I fell, although I hadn't felt it fall out.

But that was irrelevant, because Greta was bending down to pick it up and I couldn't let her look at it otherwise she would know my secret identity and the government would revoke my license.

I quickly snatched it off the street just as her fingers brushed against its surface, causing Greta to look at me in surprise as I sat back up in my bicycle and stuffed my license back into my coat pocket. I now understood why Dad had wanted me to get a wallet when I got my license last week; it was starting to feel like today was the day I'd learn the truth behind everything my parents told me to do.

"Thanks for pointing that out," I said. "But I really gotta go. Have fun with your dad!"

Before Greta could say anything else, I immediately took off, pedaling down the street faster than ever. I felt incredibly guilty for just blowing her off like that and I was sure that she would never want to go out with me after this. Not that I had the courage to ask her out anyway, but at least me going out with her was within the theoretical realm before; now, it was firmly in the fictional realm, along with the possibility of me getting to work on time and not getting fired by my boss on my first day of work. A glance at my wristwatch showed that it was only two minutes before eight; there was no way I would get there on time.

Nonetheless, I pedaled fast, heedless of the danger of biking along a street with my cracked and scratched glasses. Just the thought of getting fired before I even started was enough to terrify me into pedaling faster than I normally would ever go. My older brother, James, would never let this down if I got fired on my first day of work.

Turning into an abandoned alleyway, I saw the meeting spot up ahead: An old grocery store, which, as far as I can tell, was completely devoid of people. The GPS app on my watch told me that that was the place, so I gave myself a boost of speed in a final bid to reach it on time.

Finally, I came to a stop in front of the store, the tires of my bike screeching along the pavement as I came to a halt. Panting and sweating even in the cool morning air, I looked to the left and to the right for the representative that Rubberman said was supposed to meet me here. But the alleyway was completely empty; I didn't see any sign that anyone had been here at all. This part of the city felt forgotten.

I looked down at my watch.

It was one minute past eight. Eight o' one.

Which meant that I was going to be fired and that Rubberman was likely already calling up the government to have them revoke my sidekick license.

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