

CHAPTER ONE

YOU KNOW YOUR JOB is weird when foiling a bank robbery is considered a *slow* day. Most of the kids at my school who have part-time jobs would think that a slow day is when you have few or no customers, but for me, as the sidekick of local superhero Rubberman, foiling a bank robbery is what we consider pretty ordinary, at least in comparison to fighting the kinds of supervillain freaks you deal with on a regular basis in this business. At least it happened after I got off school.

Of course, just because a bank robbery was *ordinary* doesn't mean it was *easy*. I dodged a punch from a man at least twice my size, who wore a hood which obscured his features. I lashed out with a kick aimed at his knees, but when my foot connected, a loud *ding* sound could be heard, which was how I discovered that the robber in question had metal kneepads. By the time I realized that, the robber grabbed and threw me away like a ball.

I crashed into one of the lobby's couches, tipping it over and leaving me lying on my back, dazed from the impact. My helmet and costume managed to protect me from the worst of the crash, but I still found it hard to regain my thoughts until the huge bank robber grabbed me by the throat, lifted me off my feet with one meaty hand, and squeezed my neck.

I gasped for air, but with the robber's hand around my throat, I couldn't breathe. I tried to punch and kick him, but my hands and feet were useless against his huge body. His dark eyes gleamed with triumph from under his hood and I realized I had only a few minutes at most before he choked the life out of me and knocked me out, if not outright kill me.

With a grunt, I fired two small, burning hot lasers at his wrist. My lasers struck his hand, frying his flesh and making him cry out in pain. He dropped me and I landed on the marble floor expertly. Without even thinking, I kicked him in the groin, causing him to fall down, and then kicked him in the chin even before he finished falling to the floor. The huge robber fell over backwards with a crash, where he lay, probably unconscious from the blow, while the skin on his right hand continued to smoke from where my lasers had burned it.

Panting and sweating, I looked around the lobby of the Emerald National Bank. It was a pretty fancy place, with beautiful fancy marble flooring, columns made of the same stuff except colored white, and all of the other things you'd expect to see in a bank. Yet I paid little to no attention to that, because I was more concerned with finding Rubberman.

I spotted him on the other side of the bank. He was fighting another one of the robbers, a man who was thinner than the one I just beat, but perhaps even more bloodthirsty, because he kept trying to slash Rubberman apart. Rubberman, however, dodged each blow, using his rubber-based powers to twist and turn his body in ways that a normal man couldn't hope to do without breaking his bones.

I probably should have run to Rubberman's aid, but I still needed to catch my breath. Besides, Rubberman seemed to have the knife man covered, but that knife man and the huge guy I just took out certainly weren't the only members of the Three Finger Gang who had chosen this day—two weeks before Christmas—to rob the largest bank in the city.

The attack had started earlier today. When I got off from school earlier, I'd received a message from Rubberman informing me of a bank robbery in progress at the Emerald National Bank by the Three Fingers Gang. The Three Fingers Gang was an infamous gang from Golden City, founded and led by Johnny 'Three Fingers' Diamond, one of Golden City's most infamous criminals. The gang was known for committing all sorts of crimes, ranging from theft to drug dealing to murder and everything in between, but this was the first time they tried robbing a bank, to my knowledge. Three Fingers himself

was known for his caution, but it seemed to me that he miscalculated his chances of success, given how Rubberman and I had already beaten half of the gang who were involved in the heist.

Thankfully, Rubberman and I had managed to evacuate the bank tellers and other employees before the Three Fingers Gang could harm them, but that didn't mean that the robbery was foiled yet. While unconscious or injured gang members lay scattered across the floor like discarded toys, I could hear noise coming from inside the nearest vault, whose door stood open, which was how I could see bags of money and bars of gold on its shelves. Because Rubberman had the knife man covered, I decided to go and stop whoever was inside the vault itself.

I ran into the vault, but at that moment, two members of the Three Finger Gang stepped out of the vault with two huge bags of money swung around their shoulders on each member. They stopped when they saw me, clearly surprised to see that most of their fellow gang members were already down, but that didn't matter to me, because with those heavy bags of money on their shoulders, these two were not able to defend themselves or fight me.

But then the two robbers rushed me, moving faster than I expected, and knocked me down, temporarily jarring my senses when I hit my head against the floor. Then they fled past me, running pretty quickly despite the weight of the bags on their shoulders. I scrambled to my feet just in time to see the two robbers exit through the front doors.

I looked over at Rubberman and shouted, "Rubberman, they're getting away with the money!"

Rubberman—who was still dodging the knife man's attacks—said, "I'm a little busy at the moment, Beams! Go after them and try to stop them. I'll follow as soon as I deal with this guy."

With a nod, I ran toward the exit and burst through the doors just in time to see the two robbers halfway down the steps. They were heading to a van parked on the curb, its back doors opened and a couple of fellow Three Fingers crouching inside with their arms out. That must have been their getaway vehicle. If they got in there, there's no way I would be able to catch them.

I fired twin laser beams at the steps under their feet. I missed, but the robbers did stagger slightly and even dropped one of the bags, which burst open and sent hundred dollar bills flying everywhere in the cold December air. But then one of the robbers in the back of the van pulled out a gun and fired at me, forcing me to drop to the ground to avoid getting shot. Meanwhile, the other two robbers had reached the bottom of the steps and threw their bags of money into the van, getting some help from the members already in the back.

Damn it. That had to be several thousand dollars in those three bags alone, if not more. I scrambled to my feet, but had to dive behind one of the columns in front of the entrance to avoid another gun shot. Crouching low, I looked around the side of the column just in time to see them close the van doors and hear the van's engine roar to life. They were about to get away and, because we didn't know where their hideout was, that meant if they got away today, we would never find them again.

Desperately, I fired more lasers at the van, but it sped off before my eye beams could hit its back tires. I dashed out from behind the column and ran down the steps, but it was a pointless move on my part, because the van was already speeding down the street. There was no way I could catch them on foot, and they were almost out of the range of my eye beams now. Yet I couldn't let them get away, because Rubberman was depending on me to stop them.

That was when I looked over at the Rubbermobile, which stood at the end of the street. It was currently off, but I knew how fast it could go. If I drove the Rubbermobile, I might be able to catch up with the van and stop it. The problem was that I still didn't have my driver's license and Rubberman had not given me permission to drive it; however, I figured that this was such a dire situation that Rubberman would understand if I used the Rubbermobile to go after me. Besides, my Dad had been

teaching me how to drive recently and I was learning quickly, so I figured that I could drive it safely, especially because the Three Fingers van was still in sight.

Without further thought, I dashed over to the Rubbermobile. I threw open the door on the driver's side and sat down in the driver's seat behind the wheel.

As soon as I closed the door, a robotic voice suddenly spoke, saying, "Unauthorized driver detected in driver's seat. Wheel locked."

A *click* from the wheel indicated that the wheel was indeed locked, causing me to groan. "Rubberband, it's me, Beams. Unlock the wheel and let me drive this damn thing."

"Access denied," said Rubberband, the Rubbermobile's AI. "Please exit the vehicle."

"But a whole bunch of criminals are getting away with stolen money in that van," I said, gesturing wildly at the van fleeing down the street. "It's an emergency. If we don't move now, the criminals will get away with the money."

"Access denied," said Rubberband again. "Please exit the vehicle."

I forgot just how simpleminded Rubberband was. "Come on, man. Uh, Rubberman gave me permission to drive the vehicle in order to catch the fleeing criminals."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed," I said frantically. "I mean, Rubberband, why would I ever lie about something like that? Do you think Rubberman would let me sit in the driver's seat if he didn't want me to?"

Rubberband was silent for a moment, which made me think that he didn't believe me and was going to eject me from the car until he said, "He would not. Wheel unlocked."

His words were followed by another *click* from the wheel. Without hesitation, I turned the key and felt the Rubbermobile's engine come to life. I slammed my foot on the acceleration and the Rubbermobile zoomed down the street as fast as lightning.

I'll admit, its speed shocked me. I had spent the last couple of months practicing on Dad's old Impala which, while not slow, was no faster than the average car. The Rubbermobile, on the other hand, felt as fast as lightning, maybe even faster. I could barely control it. In fact, I accidentally smashed a street side trash can and nearly ran over a stray cat crossing the street. I glanced at the speedometer and saw that the car was going at 100 miles an hour.

"Object collision detected," said Rubberband. "Automatically slowing down vehicle's speed to city speed limit."

"What?" I said. "No, don't slow down! Speed up! We still haven't caught the van!"

"Speeding up," said Rubberband. "Faster."

The sudden increase in speed caused me to slam back into the seat. Another glance at the speedometer showed me that we were going 150 miles an hour, and rising fast. Not that I paid much attention to that, however. I was too busy trying not to crash the Rubbermobile. My hands gripped the wheel so tightly that I was pretty sure they were going to fuse with the wheel, yet I couldn't let go.

I was now rapidly gaining on the van, despite its major head start. That was the good news. The bad news was that I didn't know how to stop the Rubbermobile or slow it down in time to avoid crashing into the van's bumper.

All of a sudden, the back doors of the van burst open and the robbers began firing at the Rubbermobile. The bullets struck the Rubbermobile's windshield and hood head on, but the windshield was made of bulletproof glass, meaning that the bullets just made thudding sounds every time they hit it. I still winced every time a bullet struck, however, which made it even harder to drive the car. I instinctively tried to swerve to dodge the bullets, but the street was too narrow for the Rubbermobile to do anything except wobble awkwardly and also scrap against a lamppost, which I

figured would leave a mark on the car's door, but I didn't care because I was too busy trying not to die.

The Rubbermobile was getting closer and closer to the van's bumper, despite the hail of bullets striking the windshield. I realize that if the Rubbermobile kept going this fast, it would crash into the back of this van and probably kill me and the robbers in the process.

"Rubberband! Slow down the car to a more reasonable speed!" I cried out.

"Slowing down Rubbermobile," said Rubberband. "Going down to—"

I didn't get to hear what speed the car was slowing down to, because at that moment, the Rubbermobile rammed directly into the back of the van.

And it wasn't just a small bump, either. The men in the van were thrown back somewhere into the van itself, while the van steered uncontrollably into a street lamp. The Rubbermobile, meanwhile, spun across the street, with me screaming my head off and grasping the seat as hard as I could, until without warning the Rubbermobile slammed into a fire hydrant hard enough to cause a fountain of water to shoot out of it. The impact of the crash made my head snap forward, but then the airbag exploded out of the steering wheel and pinned me against the seat.

"Airbag deployed," said Rubberband unhelpfully.

"Yeah, I noticed," I said. "Can you deflate it so I can get out of the car?"

The airbag suddenly deflated, allowing me to breathe. I tried to open the door, but unfortunately, it was blocked by the fire hydrant, which was still spraying water into the air, making the windshield blurry and wet. So I had to crawl out through the passenger's side, which was somewhat awkward due to how little room there was for me to move. I pushed open the door and jumped out onto the street, only to be instantly doused by the spraying water from the hydrant and getting water on my visor.

I retreated several feet away until I was outside of the range of the water and looked back to see what damage I'd caused to the Rubbermobile. I wish I hadn't.

The Rubbermobile, miraculously enough, was largely still in one piece. But the driver's door was bashed in, while smoke was rising from under the hood. Ugly tire marks from where the Rubbermobile had skid across the street covered the street, while one of its tires appeared to have popped and one of its headlights had been smashed in. It probably still drove, but I wondered if it was still possible for me to skip town and change my name, because I figured that was the only way I would be able to escape Rubberman's wrath once he saw what I did to his car.

I forgot all about running away when I heard groaning and looked over at the Three Fingers van. It was in even worse condition than the Rubbermobile. The front was completely smashed in and parts of the engine even lay on the sidewalk near the street lamp it had crashed into. I couldn't see the driver, but it was safe to assume that he was probably unconscious or too injured to escape. The back doors of the van were still open, but it was too dark inside for me to see whether the robbers were conscious or not. I did notice, however, that one of the money bags had launched out of the van and lay in the middle of the street, its top opened, allowing the wind to blow hundred dollar bills out of it.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I carefully walked up to the van, readying my eye beams in case any of the robbers were waiting for me. When I reached the back of the van, I turned on my helmet flashlight and peered inside.

The van was a mess. All of the robbers lay on the floor of the van, clearly knocked unconscious from the crash. One of them, a black man, had a cut on his forehead which was bleeding slightly, while the white man lying next to him had somehow gotten crushed by one of the money bags. All in all, it looked like these Three Fingers members would not be robbing another bank anytime soon.

I tapped the side of my helmet and said, "Rubberman, I stopped the van. The robbers are all unconscious. I—"

A large shadow appeared over me, causing me to look over my shoulder in time to see a large, bulky man with a scarred face standing over me. Based on the hood he wore, I realized he was one of the Three Fingers members, possibly even the driver of the van, but before I could do anything, he grabbed me by the back of my neck and hurled me over his head like a rag doll.

I slammed into the street hard. The impact of the fall briefly rattled my senses. By the time they recovered, the huge Three Fingers member was upon me. His foot was coming toward my face, but I managed to roll out of the way in time to avoid getting my face squashed in.

Rolling to a crouch, I fired two laser blasts at the man, but he dodged the lasers with startling ease, moving as smoothly as a ballerina despite his immense size. As he dodged, he pulled out a gun from his coat, aimed, and fired.

I tried to dodge it, but the bullet grazed me anyway, cutting through my right arm and causing me to grunt in pain and cover my arm with my hand. I fired my lasers again, but as before, the man dodged them with ease. He pointed his gun at me again and, even before he pulled the trigger, I knew I couldn't dodge this one, because the man was a lot closer now and there was no way I could move fast enough to avoid getting shot.

The Three Fingers man pulled the trigger and the gunshot echoed through the street. At the same time, however, a blue energy barrier appeared between me and the man, which the bullet bounced harmlessly off of.

"What?" said the man in a deep, slow voice. "I didn't know you could make barriers."

"He cannot, villain," said a voice above us. "I, on the other hand, can."

Both the Three Fingers member and I looked up. Standing atop a nearby storefront was a superhero I had never seen before. He was tall and strapping, wearing black, shell-like armor around his body. His face was obscured by a cool-looking knight helmet, but through the eye holes of his helmet, smug green eyes looked down at us, like a god looking down upon foolish mortals.

"Who the heck are you?" said the man. "You ain't Rubberman."

"I should think not, villain," said the superhero. He jerked a thumb at his chest. "I am Barriers, one of the greatest superheroes of all time! I defend the defenseless and aid the weak, as well as putting lawbreakers like you behind bars for your willful disregard of the laws which keep the tides of chaos from engulfing all of society!"

"I don't understand a thing you just said, but you're annoying, so I'm going to shoot you," said the robber.

He pointed his gun at Barriers, but I shot my lasers at his hand. The lasers struck the member's hand, causing him to cry out in pain and drop his gun. The man grabbed his hand and doubled over, while I ran over and kicked him in the chin with a kick I had practiced in the Rubber Room loads of times.

The man fell over onto the street with a *crash* and lay there, as still as a rock, as water from the nearby spraying fire hydrant gradually soaked his hair. He was out for the count.

Panting, I stood up and looked back at the van. It looked like the man's fellow Three Fingers were still unconscious, which meant that Rubberman and I had managed to foil the robbery. That thought should have filled me with satisfaction, but when I looked at the damaged Rubbermobile, the destroyed fire hydrant, the crashed van, and all of the hundred dollar bills floating aimlessly through the air, I wondered if I had caused more harm than good. Not to mention every bone in my body ached from being thrown like a rag doll earlier.

That was when I heard footsteps above me. I looked up to see Barriers walking down from the building toward me, but he was not walking on a preexisting staircase. No, he was walking on short, narrow blue energy barriers, which appeared one after another to catch his every step. Despite being at least a story above the ground, Barriers showed no hesitation whatsoever in walking down toward me; actually, he was clapping, like I'd impressed him.

"Bravo, young Beams, bravo!" said Barriers as he descended to the street where I stood. "You displayed true bravery in chasing down these evil criminals! Rubberman is lucky to have a sidekick such as you working for him."

"Uh, thanks," I said. "But, um, who are you, again?"

"Barriers," said Barriers. He jumped the last few feet and landed on the street before me. When he stood upright, he was a foot taller than me. "I defeated the villain Hammerhead five years ago and can create energy barriers that cannot be broken by anything. Ever heard of me?"

Barriers asked me that like I was supposed to say yes, but instead I shrugged and said, "Sorry, Mr. Barriers, I was probably, like, eleven when you beat that Hammerhead guy and I wasn't paying attention to the news when I was that age. I don't know who you are, sorry."

A flash of irritation appeared in Barriers' eyes, but then it was replaced by his normal friendliness and he chuckled. "Never mind that, young Beams. It is irrelevant. I am just glad that I managed to find you, as I have been looking forward to meeting you for a very long time."

"You have?" I said, tilting my head to the side. "Are you a fan of me, too?"

"Not precisely," said Barriers, shaking his head. "Instead, I would like to make you an offer."

I frowned. "What kind of offer? You aren't trying to sell me something, are you?"

"Of course not," said Barriers. "I should have been clearer. I mean I would like to make you a *job* offer, one I doubt you would refuse."

"A job offer?" I repeated. "What are you talking about?"

Barriers held out a hand toward me. "I would like for you to quit working for Rubberman and become my sidekick."