

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty years ago ...

DAD! COME ON! WE'RE gonna miss him if we don't get up there fast!"

"I'm coming, Dennis, I'm coming. I had a long day at work today, you know, and don't have all of your youthful spontaneity and energy."

Ten-year-old Dennis Pullman—a short, scrawny boy with smooth black hair—stopped and looked down the ladder at Dad. "My youthful sponta what?"

Dad—who looked a lot like Dennis, except taller and older—smiled his tired smile. "Spontaneity. That means your ability to get up and do things without warning. It's a good word to describe you."

Dennis frowned. Dad always used big words like that, mostly because he was an English professor at a nearby university. It usually bothered Dennis whenever Dad used big words, but Dennis was in such a hurry to get to the roof of the house that he didn't care this time. "Okay, Dad, whatever. Look, Iron Angel is going to be by any minute and I want to see him so I can tell all of my friends at school that I saw him."

"All right, Dennis, all right," said Dad. "I'll be up to join you. I just need to go a little slower than you so I don't get too worn out."

Dennis nodded quickly and climbed the rest of the way up the ladder onto the roof of their suburban home. Stepping onto the roof tiles still warm from the day's sun, he carefully made his way over to the chimney and looked out over the neighborhood of houses with roofs similar to his. It was late at night, about ten or so, but the full moon was out, which made it easier to see the surrounding neighborhood. He was satisfied to see that he was the only person on the roof of his house tonight. It meant that he would be the only kid in his school who would see Iron Angel. That filled him with a strong sense of satisfaction.

Everyone is going to want to talk to me tomorrow, Dennis thought, putting a hand on the chimney for support. Maybe even Sally Davis will want to talk to me. I know she won't ignore me, because she's almost as big a fan of Iron Angel as I am.

Eagerly, Dennis scanned the sky above. He saw the stars and the moon, as well as what looked like an airplane high above him in the distance, but to his disappointment, he did not yet spy Iron Angel himself. But Dennis figured he would just need to wait a little while longer. Just a few more minutes and he was sure that his favorite superhero of all time would fly by.

"Seen him yet?" asked Dad, who Dennis had not heard climb up the ladder behind him. Dad sat down on the roof next to him, but even sitting down, Dad was still taller than Dennis.

Dennis shook his head. "Not yet."

"Are you sure he will be by?" asked Dad as he scanned the sky. "He's an important superhero, after all. Maybe he will take another route to get back to his base."

Dennis shook his head again, this time more rigorously than before. "No way. My friend Joe's dad is Iron Angel's janitor. He said that Iron Angel was going to fly by our neighborhood at this time as part of his daily patrols. He should be here any minute."

"If your friend's dad says so," said Dad with a shrug. He yawned. "But it sure is late. I'd think that anyone, superhero or otherwise, would be in bed tonight."

"Justice never rests, Dad," said Dennis. "That's what Iron Angel always says. So he never rests, either."

"He has to rest sometime, though, doesn't he?" asked Dad. He gave an amused smirk. "He's still human, after all. He can't fight crime if he's sleep-deprived."

"Still human?" Dennis repeated in horror. "Dad, you don't understand. Iron Angel is the greatest superhero ever. He beat the Lord of the Moon, the Trinity Gang, and Master Vice."

"That's all very impressive, Dennis," said Dad. "But it doesn't change the fact that he still needs a good night's sleep like the rest of us." He yawned again. "If he doesn't show up in the next few minutes, we're both going back to bed. I've got work tomorrow and you've got school. You don't want to fall asleep in the middle of class tomorrow, do you?"

Dennis wanted to say that he usually fell asleep in class even when he got a good night's sleep, but then he heard the sound of engines and looked up wildly. At first, he saw nothing but the usual night sky, but then, in the distance, he saw something flying toward them from the city. It looked kind of like a huge bird at first, but Dennis knew it was no bird. He walked closer to the edge of the roof, hoping that the extra foot or two would let him see the legendary Iron Angel before Dad.

The large, bird-like creature became clearer and clearer with every passing second. First Dennis noticed the huge, rocket-powered metal wings extending from Iron Angel's back like the wings of an eagle; then he noticed Iron Angel's sleek red and black armor, which looked like something straight out of a science fiction novel; and finally, he noticed Iron Angel's claws on his hands and feet. Even from a distance, Dennis could not help but feel in awe of the legendary superhero and watched Iron Angel's movements as carefully as a cat watched a mouse.

Iron Angel was not flying in a straight line, like Dennis originally thought. Instead, Iron Angel was making quick, short circles above the roofs of the houses, each circle leading directly into the next. Dennis understood that this was probably meant to be a way to efficiently patrol the entire neighborhood without spending too much time on any individual house, but it was also mesmerizing. Dennis could have spent all night just watching Iron Angel fly around like that, and he would have, if Dad would have let him.

"Is that him?" asked Dad, his ordinary voice snapping Dennis out of his reverie.

Dennis looked over his shoulder at Dad. Unlike Dennis, Dad did not seem nearly as fascinated or interested in watching Iron Angel's patrol as him. He looked a little sleepy and even bored, yawning once again like they were watching a boring movie that lost his attention a while ago.

"Of course that's him, Dad," said Dennis. "Everyone knows how Iron Angel looks. I thought you'd recognize him."

Dad shrugged. "Iron Angel came after my time. When I was your age, my favorite superhero was Nightbolt. Do you know who he is?"

"Yeah, I've heard of him, but Iron Angel is way cooler," Dennis said. "He's everything a hero should be: Brave, willing to help others, and not afraid to fight even the scariest supervillains. He's awesome."

Dennis looked back at Iron Angel. The superhero was much closer now; it wouldn't be long before he was flying above them. Perhaps Dennis would wave at him or even say hi. Iron Angel was one of the most popular superheroes in the world. It was hard to meet him, even if you were an important or powerful person yourself. That was why Dennis was up past his bedtime. He knew this might be his only chance to meet Iron Angel up close and he was determined not to miss it.

So caught up in his thoughts was Dennis that he didn't notice the large, dark object which vaulted itself over the fence separating his yard from his neighbors' below. Neither did Dad, because he was also watching Iron Angel, despite his own exhaustion.

Soon—although it felt like an eternity—Iron Angel came close enough to their house that Dennis could see him in far more detail than before. Iron Angel looked even taller than Dad, his armor sculpted to show his abs and toned arms. The sound of his wing engines was surprisingly quiet and he flew with grace and precision. He looked just like the poster in Dennis' room, except even better. Dennis wished he had remembered to get Grandfather's old camera from out of the basement, because then he would be able to take a picture of him.

And then Iron Angel flew over Dennis' house. Iron Angel was not close enough for Dennis to touch; however, Dennis waved up at him anyway. He would have said something, but he was in such awe at seeing Iron Angel and the way the moonlight reflected off of his metallic wings that all he could do was wave. Even Dad, despite his earlier disinterest, waved rather enthusiastically at Iron Angel.

At first, it seemed like Iron Angel didn't notice them at all. But then he gave them what was unmistakably a clear wave of his right hand. He might have even been smiling, although his helmet made it impossible to see his face and know for sure. But Dennis liked to think that he was smiling, because that's what he would do if he was a superhero and he saw ordinary people waving at him, people who trusted him to do the right thing.

But then something large flew up past Dennis, the rush of wind sending Dennis falling off the side of the roof. With a cry, Dennis caught the edge of the roof with one hand, causing his fall to stop abruptly, his feet dangling several feet off the ground below.

At the same time, Dennis heard the sound of metal crunching and a shout above. He looked up just in time to see Iron Angel—his right wing a burning mess—hurtling toward the ground out of sight. Dennis heard Iron Angel crash into his backyard. Based on the sounds, it sounded like Iron Angel had crashed into either the apple tree or the grill. In any case, Dennis had no idea what could have knocked Iron Angel out of the air. All he could remember was seeing something large fly past him, but it had happened too fast for him to tell for sure.

"Dennis!" Dad's face appeared over the side of the roof. "Dennis, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Dad," said Dennis. "My arms hurts a little from holding my whole body, but I think I'll be okay. What about Iron Angel, though?"

"I think he crashed into the backyard," said Dad, running a hand through his hair. "But that doesn't matter. Take my hand and I'll pull you up."

"But is he okay?" asked Dennis. "Is he hurt? Is he dead?"

"I don't know," said Dad, a note of irritation in his voice. He extended his hand. "Once I get you to safety, I'll go check on him, okay?"

Dennis bit his lower lip and looked down. The drop didn't look very far, especially with the bushes underneath. "Iron Angel is more important. I need to make sure he's okay."

With that, Dennis let go of the edge of the roof and fell down onto the bushes below, bottom first, as Dad desperately tried to catch him and failed. The fall was more jarring than he expected, but none of his bones seemed broken, so Dennis rose to his feet and, dashing out of the bushes, ran around the side of the house to the backyard, ignoring Dad's calls to go back into the house where it was safe. He also ignored the twigs and leaves in his hair from the bushes, because all he cared about was making sure that Iron Angel was okay.

Upon turning around the corner of the house, Dennis stopped and stared at the scene before him. Lit up by the back door light was a scene he had never expected to see even in his wildest dreams: Iron Angel, lying in his backyard, looking so real that Dennis could hardly believe his eyes.

But Iron Angel was clearly hurt. His right wing was little more than smoking, blackened metal. As Dennis suspected, Iron Angel had crashed into the grill, completely destroying it, as well as tearing

apart a nearby lounge chair. The apple tree was okay, but the grass underneath Iron Angel was slightly burnt, probably from the explosion. Dennis was glad that the grill didn't have any propane in it. If it had, Iron Angel's crash likely would have made it blow up and kill him.

Dennis saw no sign of whoever might have knocked Iron Angel out of the sky, but he didn't care. He stepped forward and said, "Iron Angel? Are you okay?"

A loud groan came from Iron Angel, who sat up and shook his head. He sat up somewhat awkwardly, because his right wing hung limply off his back, while his left wing stood up as perfectly as ever. Dennis noticed that Iron Angel's armor was scraped and dirty in a lot of places, although he himself didn't seem to be hurt.

"Ugh," said Iron Angel, his voice slightly muffled by his helmet. "What was that ..."

Dennis sighed in relief. "Oh, Mr. Iron Angel, I thought you were dead. Glad to hear you're all right."

Iron Angel suddenly looked over at Dennis in alarm. "Kid, stay away. Don't come even one step closer."

Dennis froze, one foot out, because he had been about to walk over to Iron Angel and try to help him. "Why? Are you hurt? Don't you need help?"

"Because whoever shot me out of the sky is probably still around here," said Iron Angel as he struggled to his feet. His wings must have been heavier than they looked, because he seemed to be having trouble standing because of his right wing. "And if they're willing to attack me, then they are probably more than willing to attack a kid like you."

"Got that right, Angel," came a deep, yet scratchy, voice from the apple tree. "One of the few things you have ever gotten right in your life, you rotten bastard."

Something fell down from the apple tree and then stood up. It was a person; at least, Dennis thought it was, but it looked like no person he'd ever seen in his life. It was humanoid in shape, but in appearance, it looked more like a plant creature than a person. Its limbs were like tree trunks, topped with branch-like hands and feet. It had strangely human eyes, while weird, multicolor flowers stood on its head like a crown. Dennis had never seen anything like it before and he wished he never had, because there was something creepy in the way it moved.

Iron Angel, however, did not seem confused at the appearance of the plant person. He did, however, seem displeased to see him. "Killer Plant. I didn't expect to see you of all people here tonight."

Killer Plant folded his arms in front of his chest, an amused look on his face. "Ah, but I've been expecting to see *you* tonight, have been expecting this moment for weeks, even planning it. For tonight is the night that the brave Iron Angel will die and all the world shall know the name of Killer Plant."

Dennis gasped. He recalled having heard about this supervillain once. Killer Plant was one of Iron Angel's regular foes. If Dennis remembered correctly, Killer Plant had the ability to control plants, a power he had used time and again to escape even the toughest of prisons. That such a terrible supervillain—who had once poisoned over 100 people in a day—was here, in Dennis' own backyard, was even more unreal than Iron Angel's crashing into his backyard like this.

"You say that every time we've ever fought, Killer," said Iron Angel with a grunt. "Yet every time we fight, I always come away alive, while you usually have to slink back into whatever hole you've crawled out from to lick your wounds. Color me unimpressed by your empty rhetoric."

"Ah, but tonight will be different," said Killer. He gestured at their surroundings. "Not only have I disabled one of your wings, but I've also separated you from your sidekick, Winged Gal, and from the police. It is just you and me tonight."

"That's fine by me," said Iron Angel. He stood up straight, but had to bend over slightly thanks to his ruined wing. "I can beat you even by myself."

Killer smirked. "When did I ever say that I would fight you alone?"

Without warning, tree roots burst out of the ground around Iron Angel on all sides. But they weren't just tree roots. They were wooden hands, which rested themselves on the ground and pulled out bizarre, monstrous plant creatures the likes of which Dennis had never seen before. The plant creatures looked even less human than Killer, like orcs from that *Lord of the Rings* book Dennis' Dad loved to read. They surrounded Iron Angel on all sides, their joints creaking like tree branches in a powerful wind as they cut off every possible escape route.

"Do you like my minions?" asked Killer with a smirk on his face. "I call them Tree Golems. Not that it matters, because you're going to be dead soon enough, but I thought you should know just the same. After all, not everyone gets the luxury of knowing the name of that which will ultimately kill them."

Iron Angel looked around in alarm. He raised his hands, most likely to shoot missiles from his wrist-mounted cannons, but two of the Tree Golems grabbed his wings and pulled. The sudden movement caused Iron Angel to jerk back and lose his balance, while the rest of the Tree Golems moved in for the kill.

Dennis couldn't take his eyes off the scene, but neither could he move. He saw the lights going on in his neighbors' houses, but he somehow doubted that Killer would cease his attack just because he woke up cranky old Mr. Forrest or annoying Miss Sue. Yet as long as no one did anything, Iron Angel would die tonight in Dennis' own backyard.

That thought compelled Dennis to step forward, even though he didn't know what to do, but before he could do anything else, he heard a voice scream, "Dennis! Get back in the house!" and he looked up to see Dad peering over the side of the roof at him, an urgency on his face that Dennis had never seen before in his life.

"But Dad, Iron Angel is going to get killed!" Dennis called back.

"I don't care!" Dad shouted. "Get *back* in the house *now* before you get yourself killed!"

Dennis hesitated. He knew that Dad was probably right, but at the same time, he couldn't stand the thought of letting Iron Angel die. Iron Angel had no friends or allies. It would be a while before his sidekick or the police showed up to help, and by the time they did, Iron Angel would probably be dead and Killer would be long gone. Yet what could Dennis, a ten-year-old boy, do against a supervillain like Killer or any of his Tree Golems?

That was when Dennis noticed the spade in Mom's flower garden next to the house. He looked from the spade to Killer—who seemed to have forgotten all about him in his zeal to kill Iron Angel—and made his decision.

With Dad still screaming at him to come back, Dennis yanked the spade out of the dirt and ran at Killer. Being part of his school's track team, Dennis was able to cross the backyard in less than five seconds. Again, Killer did not seem to notice him, because the supervillain's eyes were focused solely on his Tree Golems, who were punching a largely defenseless Iron Angel like a punching bag. Killer was actually smiling, like he was watching an entertaining movie.

Seeing Killer smile filled Dennis with so much rage that he didn't even think about his next move. With a roar of rage, Dennis stabbed his spade into Killer's right thigh, burying it as deeply as he could into Killer's wood-like flesh.

Killer suddenly screamed in pain and backhanded Dennis so hard that Dennis was briefly knocked unconscious. When he came back to consciousness, he saw Killer yank the spade out of his thigh and toss it away before turning to focus on Dennis, his eyes burning with hatred. Some strange green

liquid was seeping out of Killer's thigh, though whether it was blood or something else, Dennis didn't know.

"You dumb brat," Killer hissed. "Trying to play the hero when your balls haven't even dropped yet. I only intended to kill Iron Angel tonight, but I've never been one to turn the other cheek. Die with your hero, brat."

Killer took a step toward Denis, but before he could get close enough to harm Dennis, the sound of metal boots clanking against the earth made Dennis look over to see Iron Angel running toward them. Iron Angel's right wing was missing; as for the Tree Golems, they lay on the ground as still as Dennis' toys. Dennis realized, in a vague sort of way, that his stabbing Killer must have broken Killer's connection with the Tree Golems, thus allowing Iron Angel to come to his rescue.

Killer must have realized the same thing, because he looked at Dennis again and snarled, "Die!"

He lunged toward Dennis. There was no time for Dennis to dodge. Paralyzed by fear, he could only watch as Killer's outstretched hands drew closer and closer to him.

But Killer never reached him, because in the the next instant, Iron Angel's good left wing came out of nowhere and slashed straight through Killer's waist like a sword. Killer didn't even get a chance to scream. Both halves of his body just fell onto the ground, leaking that same strange, disgusting green blood that had come from his thigh wound.

Dennis realized he had been holding in his breath. Letting out his breath, he looked up at Iron Angel, who stood over him like a guardian spirit. Iron Angel was panting, yet he still stood, his wing dripping that Killer's green blood, while his chest heaved in and out heavily.

"Dennis!" screamed a voice from behind him. A second later, Dad appeared out of nowhere and took Dennis into his arms, hugging him so tightly that Dennis thought he was going to die anyway. "Oh, Dennis, I thought you were going to die! I'm so glad you're okay."

"Y-Yeah," said Dennis, his voice tight. "Thanks, Dad. Could you let me down, please? You're squeezing me too much."

Dad stopped hugging him as hard, but he didn't let go of Dennis. He just flashed him an embarrassed grin. "Sorry, Dennis. Everything just happened so fast that I was worried you might have somehow gotten hurt and I didn't see it. Especially when that monster slapped you in the face."

"I'm fine, Dad," said Dennis. "Really. I don't need to go to the doctor or anything like that."

"Actually, I think you should take your son to the doctor," said Iron Angel, folding his good wing behind his back. "Killer was a very strong supervillain. He could have easily broken something in your face without you knowing or realizing it. Also, his body is usually covered with a lot of different spores, so it's possible he could have poisoned you without you even being aware."

Dad looked at Iron Angel with new found respect in his eyes. "Yes, yes, of course. But first, thank you for saving my son, Iron Angel. If you hadn't killed that beast, I would have ... I don't know what I would have done."

"It's fine, sir," said Iron Angel in a modest voice. "I should be thanking your son, Dennis, because if he hadn't distracted Killer like that, the Tree Golems would never have deactivated and I would never have gotten a chance to take him out for good." He looked at Dennis. "Your son has the makings of a true hero, I think."

Dennis beamed. Even though he was tired and hurting, he forgot all about that in order to say to Iron Angel, "Really? Do you think so?"

"Of course," said Iron Angel. He rubbed his back. "Most kids your age would never have even thought about trying to distract such a dangerous villain. It was a stupid, reckless move, but

superheroes have to make stupid, reckless moves all the time.” He grimaced. “Like patrolling the city alone at night. I should have brought Winged Gal with me. She’s never going to let me forget this.”

Dennis, however, had stopped listening to Iron Angel after that. He was too busy thinking about what Iron Angel had told him, about him having the potential to be a real hero. No one had ever told Dennis that before, not even his parents.

“In any case, I will call the police and let them know about Killer,” said Iron Angel. “You two should go back into your house. It’s possible that Killer might have some allies hiding nearby and I don’t want them to have any easy targets.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Dad, nodding. “Come along, Dennis. We’re going back inside.”

Dad put Dennis back on the ground and walked back to the back door. Dennis followed, but before he got very far, he heard Iron Angel say, “Dennis?” causing him to stop and look over his shoulder at him.

“Yeah?” said Dennis. “What is it?”

Iron Angel pulled a card out of a compartment in his armor and handed it to Dennis. “Take this.”

Curious, Dennis took the card and looked at it. It had Iron Angel’s name and phone number on it. It even had Iron Angel’s website address, which was cool because Dennis didn’t know of very many people with their own website.

He looked up at Iron Angel again. “What’s this?”

“My business card,” Iron Angel replied. “I want you to have it so you can call me when you’re old enough to apply for a sidekick license.”

Dennis gasped. “Wait, you mean you want *me* to become your sidekick?”

Iron Angel nodded. “Sure. Like I said, you have the potential to become a true superhero someday, although you’ll need plenty of training before then, like I got. Besides, my current sidekick, Winged Gal, won’t be my sidekick forever, so I’ll need a replacement at some point and you’d fit in my business perfectly.”

Dennis trembled. He almost couldn’t speak, but he finally said, “Thank you, Mr. Iron Angel. I will keep this business card in a special place forever.”

“Call me by my real name” said Iron Angel. “Luke, Luke Hat. Or just Mr. Hat. Mr. Iron Angel sounds too strange.”

“Yes, Mr. Hat,” said Dennis, nodding.

“Good,” said Iron Angel. “Now go and join your parents in the house. Tomorrow is a school day, so you should want to get as much sleep as you can so you won’t fall asleep in the middle of class.”

Once again, Dennis nodded. Then he turned and ran toward the back door, clutching the business card in his hands as if it was the most valuable jewel in the whole world. It would be several years before he could apply for a sidekick license, he knew, but he would make sure to keep this card where he could find it.

Because, more than anything else in the whole wide world, Dennis wanted to be a hero, a true hero like Iron Angel, and he would become a true hero, no matter how long it took or what he had to do to get there. One day, he would fight crime alongside Iron Angel and keep the city safe from all danger. He knew that as certainly as he knew his own name.