

CHAPTER ONE

IF THERE WAS ONE word that would sum up West Texas perfectly, it would be ‘nothing.’ Lots and *lots* of nothing for miles in every direction.

When most people who haven’t been to Texas think of the state, they usually think the whole state is like those old Western movies: Barren land everywhere, cacti and tumbleweed dotting the landscape, and everyone’s riding a horse and wearing cowboy hats and jeans. There’s some truth to all of that, but Texas is actually a pretty diverse state, ecologically-speaking. Sure, it’s usually pretty hot no matter what part of the state you’re in, but in Texas, you can find forests, fields, mountains, rivers, lakes, beaches, and all sorts of different places. You can even find snow sometimes during the winter, though calling it ‘snow’ is a bit of a stretch sometimes given how light it is.

The point is that Texas is much more than just tumbleweeds and cattle, like a lot of people think it is. Except, of course, for West Texas. I’d never been out to West Texas before. My Mom grew up out here, but she never talked much about it. Even then, we still didn’t visit there because Mom’s parents had moved to a small town on the coast of Texas after my grandfather retired from working in the oil fields; as a result, I had never asked Mom about what it was like. It just seemed irrelevant to me if we were never going to go there.

So when my boss, the superhero Rubberman, told me that I was going out west to train with his old mentor, Nightbolt, I was curious. I didn’t know exactly what to expect. I vaguely recalled a few stories Mom used to tell me about growing up near the oil fields when she was a girl, but that had been years ago, back when I was like ten-years-old, and I hadn’t thought about them in such a long time that I could only remember a few minor, unhelpful details, like how her mom, my Grandma, always had a hard time washing the oil stains out of Grandpa’s clothes.

Still, I like visiting new places, so I didn’t object when Rubberman told me to head out west. I packed my bags (well, just one bag, really, because I didn’t need much), hopped into the Rubbermobile with Adams, and we went out to West Texas. More specifically, to a small town called Los Congrejos, which was close to the Texas/New Mexico border. It had taken close to four hours to reach the town, even with the Rubbermobile’s enhanced speed, but the drive itself didn’t bother me too much.

What did bother me was the discovery that West Texas was literally the most boring place on the planet. Well, okay, I guess that’s an exaggeration, but seriously, there’s virtually nothing out here.

I sat at an old, abandoned bus station on the outskirts of Los Congrejos, where Adams had dropped me off after informing me that Nightbolt would come by to pick me up soon. I had been sitting here for half an hour already, but still had not seen Nightbolt. Or any other human being, for that matter. I did, however, find a rattlesnake under the bus station bench, which thankfully was more scared of me than I was of it, because it slithered away as soon as I saw it.

From what I could see of Los Congrejos, it was a much smaller town than Golden City. There was a small post office, an old gas station, and a few small buildings that looked abandoned. The sign outside of the town had claimed that Los Congrejos had 356 people, but I wondered if that number was outdated, because I hadn’t seen even one human being moving among the buildings which formed the core of the town.

I looked up and down the main road. The cracked asphalt seemed to stretch on for eternity in every direction. There were no cars or trucks or even hitch-hikers on this road. As a matter of fact, it seemed like the road hadn’t been used in quite some time, aside from the Rubbermobile, which of course was probably already halfway back to Golden City by now.

I found it hard to believe that Los Congrejos was home to one of the oldest superheroes in the world. Small towns like these generally did not have superheroes, generally because they couldn't afford to hire one or crime rates were so low that the average police officer was usually capable of taking care of the town by themselves. I half-wondered if Rubberman had been mistaken about Nightbolt's location, because this town looked like the *last* place any superhero, retired or otherwise, would live.

Not to mention it was a lot hotter than I expected it to be. Granted, Texas winters usually weren't that cold, but it felt hotter out here than it did back home in the city. Maybe it was because I sat directly under the sun; the bus station didn't provide much shade. My costume helped regulate my body temperature, but even so, I still felt uncomfortable sitting here in the heat. Adams had said something about nights being much colder out here than in the city due to the lack of plants and buildings to retain heat, but right now I'd say it had the opposite problem of being too hot.

I hadn't had time to do a lot of research on Nightbolt before I left the city, but according to the few Internet searches I did do, Nightbolt was one of the first ever legalized superheroes from fifty years ago, when superheroes were first recognized by the government as legitimate businesses. He retired thirty years ago and had moved out to West Texas. Unlike Iron Angel, however, Nightbolt occasionally trained superheroes or sidekicks who showed particular promise, although the numbers he trained went down each year until his last trainee, from what I could tell, had been Rubberman five years ago. It seemed like he hadn't taken a trainee since then, with the exception of me, of course.

Then again, maybe he wasn't going to break that streak, if I stayed out here in this old bus stop for much longer. According to my phone, it was half an hour past the time that Nightbolt was supposed to pick me up, which made me wonder if he had decided at the last moment that he did not want to train me. If so, I'd need to call Adams and have him pick me up again. I wish I had Nightbolt's phone number, because then I could call him myself and let him know I was here.

Just then, I heard a low, rumbling engine coming down the road. Sitting up straighter, I looked down the road, but did not see anything at first until a small black dot appeared on the horizon. As the black dot came closer and closer to the bus stop, I saw that it was an old, beat-up truck. I don't know what its original color may have been; all I could tell was that it was now a very rusted red color. Its engine was noisy and whiny, yet somehow the truck still worked, driving steadily down the road toward the bus stop without stopping or slowing, though it wasn't going very fast, either.

Impatiently, I rose from my seat and waved at it. I figured that the truck probably belonged to somebody who lived around here, so they might be able to tell me where Nightbolt lived. Because it was clear that Nightbolt wasn't going to show up, I'd just hike to his house, wherever it was. It probably wasn't very far from here. Besides, it would be better than just sitting here in this old bus stop waiting for him to arrive, anyway.

To my relief, the truck was slowing down the closer it got, until it finally stopped right in front of the bus stop. Its engine still whined and made popping sounds, but I didn't care. I was just happy to see another human being. Even though I wasn't much of an extrovert, I didn't like sitting alone out here in this bus stop for very long.

The passenger's side window—which was crusted with dust—rolled down, allowing me to see the driver of the truck for the first time. I was stunned by what I saw.

The truck's driver was a positively ancient old man, his skin as rough and gray as stone. He wore a faded old red hat, a white T-shirt, and old coveralls. He was extremely skinny, even skinnier than me. He looked only slightly better than the Necromantress' zombie. Indeed, I almost thought he was a zombie at first.

But no zombie had eyes like that. They were hard, rough eyes, the eyes of a man who has stared death in the face again and again. They were the same eyes that my grandfather, who had been in the military, had had before his death a few years back. The old man looked at me with eyes that were much stronger than the body they resided in.

As a result, I felt awkward, standing there with my suitcase in hand and staring at the tough old man. The two of us stared at each other for what felt like an eternity, as if we were waiting for the other to make the first move.

But then, all of a sudden, the man said, "Are you Beams?"

His voice was soft and old, just as ancient as his body, but somehow I sensed that it was not the voice of a man you disrespected.

"Uh, yes," I said, nodding. "I'm here because I'm supposed to be training with Nightbolt. I don't know if you can point me to his house, but—"

The man chuckled softly. "Boy, I *am* Nightbolt, the one and only. I thought I recognized your picture, but I wasn't sure until I got close enough to see for myself. These old eyes ain't what they used to be." He gestured at me. "Come on in and take a seat. That bus stop isn't a place for a sidekick who needs training."

Though I was briefly startled by this man's admission that he was Nightbolt, I nonetheless opened the door and entered the truck. The interior was small and cramped, forcing me to pull my legs up to my chest. It didn't help that the floor was covered in garbage; old fast food restaurant bags, empty water bottles, various discarded bills, and so on. The seats of the truck were torn slightly, allowing their yellow stuffing to peek out.

I paid little attention to that, however, because I was too busy staring at the man who called himself Nightbolt, who had now turned the truck around and was driving back the way he came. I was too busy contrasting the old, decrepit man sitting in the driver's seat with the images of Nightbolt I'd seen online. The most common picture of Nightbolt online was of a strapping, handsome young man wearing a body suit with lightning bolt designs. He certainly looked nothing like the skinny old man who was taking me to his house today, which made me wonder if this man actually was Nightbolt.

"So, you're Dennis' sidekick, right?" said Nightbolt, glancing at me. "He's told me all about you. Said you can shoot lasers from your eyes."

"Uh, yeah," I said, nodding. I gestured at my visor. "My visor lets me regulate the strength of my lasers easier. It was specially designed by Super Apparel."

"Superhero equipment has gotten real fancy since my days," said Nightbolt. "Back in my day, you usually had to make your costume and equipment yourself. And it always got torn or broken, so you spent just as much time fixin' it up as you did fighting crime. Those were the days."

"Uh, yeah," I said, mostly because I didn't know what else to say to that. "So, er, are we going to your house?"

"Yep," said Nightbolt, nodding. "Sorry for not coming to pick you up sooner. This old piece of junk just doesn't want to start sometimes, and sometimes even when it does start it stops in the middle of the road and refuses to go any further."

"Are you sure that isn't going to happen here?" I said.

"It might," said Nightbolt casually. "Don't worry. I've got a lot of experience getting this old piece of junk working again. But it ought to make it back to the house without too much trouble, so just sit back and relax."

Easier said than done. The truck was so bumpy and rough that I couldn't have relaxed even if I wanted to. Not to mention I was still taken aback by Nightbolt's, uh, 'strange' appearance, to put it

lightly. Even though he had been one of the very first legalized superheroes, he looked like any old Texas man you'd see in West Texas. I wondered why he was apparently so poor. Surely he had a lot of money saved up from his days in the business, didn't he?

"What you staring at?" said Nightbolt, glancing at me. "You look like you've never seen an old man before."

"It's not that," I said. "It's just ... you're a bit different from what I was expecting, that's all."

Nightbolt chuckled. "That's what everyone says when they first see me, sonny. I'm not offended. All of the latest pictures of me available are from twenty, thirty years ago, back when I was much younger than I am now. I've changed quite a bit since then, but my memory is as sharp as ever." Nightbolt tapped the side of his head. "Everything you need to know is still right here in the old noggin. Don't you worry about that."

I nodded, but deep down, I was skeptical that Nightbolt would be able to teach me anything. He looked so old and fragile that I was worried he might fall over and break his back if I tried to punch him in a training session. His old body might not be able to keep up with me, unless his 'training' involved something completely different from what I was expecting.

I looked over my shoulder. Through the back window, the town of Los Congrejos grew smaller and smaller, though due to how flat everything was, it would probably be a while before it vanished from sight.

I looked at Nightbolt again. "I was told you lived in Los Congrejos, yet we're going away from it."

Nightbolt shrugged. "I have all my mail delivered to the Los Congrejos post office, but in truth I live just outside the town. I prefer my privacy and the people here respect that, so I never have to worry about anyone intruding on my property, and low crime rates means the police never ask me to help. Can't say that about people in most places. In most places, retired superheroes have a hard time maintaining their privacy, especially if they were really big before they retired."

"What about the media?" I said, raising my voice to be heard over the noises the engine made. "Do they ever bother you?"

Nightbolt gave me a rather evil grin for a retired superhero. "Nope. They used to, but after I introduced them to Spike, they stopped coming."

"Spike?" I said. "Who is that?"

"You'll see," Nightbolt replied. "Anyway, we should get to my house pretty soon. I've got a spare room all set up for you, so don't worry about where you'll be sleeping."

"Great," I said. "What kind of training are we going to do, anyway? Are we going to start today or tomorrow? Rubberman didn't tell me much about what your training is like, but—"

Nightbolt waved off my questions. "Talk, talk, talk. I forgot how much you city folk talk. I'll tell you more about my world famous training methods when we get there. It's too complicated to explain here."

"Sorry," I said. "It's just that I'm really eager to start my training and I'd like to have an idea of what we're going to do so I can prepare for it."

Nightbolt chuckled. "No one can prepare for *my* training, kid, but you remind me of Dennis, even though he was older than you when I trained him. Always asking questions, always eager to know everything. He could never relax."

"Sounds like how he is now," I said. "Even though he's supposed to be resting, he's still doing business even in his hospital room. I don't think he even knows the meaning of the word 'relaxed.'"

"Aye," said Nightbolt. "But I suppose if he relaxed like a normal person, he wouldn't be as successful as he is today, now would he?"

"No, he wouldn't," I said.

With that, we fell into silence. Nightbolt seemed perfectly at ease, turning his truck down a side road I hadn't even noticed, which took us away from the main highway and out into the surrounding countryside. We passed an abandoned oil derrick, gradually making our way closer and closer to Nightbolt's home, wherever it was. It seemed strange to me that I still couldn't see his house, even though West Texas was a very flat, almost barren part of the state. Either Nightbolt's house was far from the main highway or it was somehow hidden. Maybe he had put a large cloaking device on it, but given how poor Nightbolt appeared, that seemed unlikely.

After about half an hour of driving, I finally saw Nightbolt's house. It was a tiny, one-story house, surrounded by a half-rusted iron fence. The house itself had a small stone chimney, its orange roof shingles extremely faded, probably due to being directly under the Texas sun for so long, and an old rocking chair on the front porch. The gate around the house was closed and locked, although the lock didn't look particularly strong even from a distance.

"Here we are," said Nightbolt as he brought his truck to a stop before the front gate. "My humble little abode."

I blinked. "Wow, uh, Nightbolt, it's ... nice."

Nightbolt looked at me curiously. "A little disappointed? Were you expecting a super secret underground base or something? Dennis tells me he has a base like that. I suppose that going from a super secret underground base to a normal house in the middle of nowhere is somewhat of a downgrade."

"It's not bad," I said. "It's just ... I don't know, I expected something a bit fancier from one of the first superheroes, that's all."

Nightbolt scowled. "Not all of us retired rich, you know. Some of us retired with as little under our name as we had when we first started. And some of us were scammed out of our savings."

Nightbolt sounded quite bitter when he said that, but before I could ask him to elaborate, a loud barking noise came from behind the house. Then the largest dog I'd ever seen in my life bounded from out behind the house and rushed toward the fence. He was huge, some kind of German shepherd mix I think, with chocolate and white fur and paws that looked as big as my fists. He wore a spiked black collar and was barking like crazy, each bark almost as loud as a shotgun blast.

"Spike!" Nightbolt shouted in a surprisingly loud voice. "Get away from the gate! It's just me, you dumb animal. There's no need to wake up the whole neighborhood."

I would have made a quip about how Nightbolt's house *was* the whole neighborhood, but the loudness of Spike's barking made it impossible for me to hear myself, much less say anything. Still, Spike did shut up when Nightbolt shouted at him, but he didn't move away from the gate. He just stood there, his tongue hanging out of his mouth and his large tail waving back and forth excitedly behind him.

"That's Spike," said Nightbolt, shaking his head. "He's friendly, don't worry. He just barks a lot, especially whenever I bring anyone new over. Anyway, let's go inside. Follow me."

Nightbolt hopped out of his truck faster than I expected a man his age to move. By the time I climbed out of my side of the truck, he was already at the gate, shooing away Spike, who retreated toward a small building which looked like his doghouse, though it was the biggest doghouse I'd ever seen. I shook my head and followed Nightbolt through the gate. Spike didn't move from his doghouse even when I entered, nor did he growl, but he did watch me carefully with his big eyes. I couldn't help but feel nervous about the huge dog. I'd had a bad experience with a big dog when I was a kid, so I still felt wary around them even when they acted perfectly friendly.

That's why I could finally relax when Nightbolt and I entered his house. The interior of the house was slightly nicer than the exterior, but I immediately noticed a thin layer of dust on the shoe rack near the front door, a shoe rack which had only a couple of old, dusty pairs of shoes and some cracked rubber boots.

"Welcome to my home," said Nightbolt, spreading his arms to indicate the house. "What do you think?"

I stopped and looked at the house's interior.

The front door was directly connected to the main living room. It wasn't much of a living room, either. An old flat-screen TV stood against one wall, with two large, though clearly aging, red recliners and one wooden chair set around it. To my left was an entryway into a very small kitchen with an old-fashioned refrigerator and sink, with no dishwasher from what I could see, though there was a drying rack on the counter. A short hallway to my right was lined with three doors, which I guessed were Nightbolt's room, my room, and the bathroom, though I didn't know which was which.

"It's okay," I said. "Very small, but small is okay."

"Small is good," Nightbolt said. "Not quite as big as my old base, but let me tell you, after spending thirty years working in big places, a small place is a nice change of pace. It's easier to take care of, at any rate."

I nodded. "Right. Well, what are we going to do?"

"Eat," said Nightbolt, clapping his hands together eagerly. "I'll get some beans and hot dogs cooked up. Meanwhile, you can go unpack in your room now if you want." He pointed down the short hallway. "Second door to the left. It's unlocked, so don't worry about needing a key. Also, the bathroom is the door to its right, so if you need to go, you know where it is."

Once again, I nodded and made my way toward the hallway. I was pretty tired after such a long day and wondered if I could catch a quick nap before dinner. Nightbolt would understand if I needed to rest up a little bit after the long trip here. At least, I hoped he would; he seemed like a pretty reasonable guy, all things considered.

Unfortunately, I was so distracted by my own thoughts that I didn't notice the small desk piled high with documents and envelopes near the entrance to the hallway until I bumped into it accidentally and sent a good portion of the envelopes and documents falling to the floor. I immediately dropped my suitcase and began scooping up the papers, trying to put them all back on the desk as quickly as I could.

"Beams, what was that sound I heard?" Nightbolt shouted from the kitchen. "It sounded like you knocked something over."

"It's nothing," I shouted back. "Just knocked over some of your bills. Nothing's broken, don't worry."

As I said that, I picked up the envelopes two or three at a time, trying my best to gather them all up as quickly as possible. I cursed myself for my clumsiness. First day here and I had already made a mess. Granted, it wasn't a very bad mess, but it probably didn't make me look very good in Nightbolt's eyes nonetheless.

But as I gathered the envelopes in my arms, one of the envelopes on the floor caught my eye. It had Nightbolt's real name (Joshua Owens, apparently) and his address in the middle, but in the top left corner, where the sender's address went, was 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, D.C.; that is to say, the address of the White House. Even stranger, it had a curious name listed under it: *Cameron Marcos, Director of the Department of Extraterrestrial Affairs.*

Extraterrestrial affairs? What did that mean? Was this some kind of joke letter? It had to be. Someone wrote a prank letter to Nightbolt, who for some reason hadn't thrown it out. Yet why would it have the White House's address on it if it was a prank? And why did it look so official? I remembered my dad getting a letter from the White House once, as a response to a letter he wrote to the President. The official letter had given a pretty generic response to Dad's, but I remembered the envelope very well, which resembled this one almost exactly.

Before I could puzzle this further, the envelope was snatched out of my hand. Startled, I looked up and saw Nightbolt standing over me. He was scowling again, just like before, only now I was sure that he was going to beat me up for looking at his mail.

"Oh, Nightbolt," I said, standing upright, even though there were still a lot of letters on the floor. "I didn't hear you come up. I was just picking up your letters and got lost in thought when I was thinking, um, about my upcoming training with you."

"Lost in thought," Nightbolt repeated in a voice that told me he didn't believe a word I said. "Yes, Dennis told me you had a tendency to do that sometimes. Probably not helped by the long drive here, which can do a number on even a young person's attention span."

As he spoke, he put the White House envelope into the back pocket of his coveralls. I had a strong desire to take it and read what the letter said, but I didn't even try to reach for it. I was under the impression that Nightbolt would break my arm if I tried to take that letter in particular from him.

"Since you are clearly very tired from the trip here, I think you should go to your room and rest until lunch is ready," said Nightbolt. "Don't worry about the letters. I'll pick them all up myself. You just get some sleep."

I nodded and, after depositing the envelopes in my arms back onto the desk, picked up my suitcase and walked past Nightbolt to the door to my room. I opened it and entered quickly, but before I closed the door behind me, I looked over my shoulder one last time to see Nightbolt—his back to me—reading the White House letter, the envelope in his right hand, the letter in his left. I wondered what it said and why Nightbolt didn't want me to read it. It had to be very important, especially if it was from the White House, though that didn't help me understand why anyone in the government would send an old retired superhero like Nightbolt a letter.

But maybe it wasn't any of my business. I came here to train, not poke into Nightbolt's private business. I closed the door to my room behind me, plunging me into darkness, but that still didn't stop me from wondering if there was more going on here than I originally thought. If so, I was probably going to figure out one way or another over these next four weeks.