

CHAPTER ONE

I FLEW AS FAST AS I could through the air, pushing my body to its absolute limit to keep up with the roaring airplane beside me. Between the howling wind all around me and the loud airplane engines, I could barely hear myself think, but I could still see the smoke rising out of one of the engines quite clearly as the plane struggled to remain in the air. The pilot must have been really good, because so far he had managed to keep it in the air against all odds, but sooner or later the engine would burn out and the entire thing would go crashing down.

Unless, that is, I could stop it. Which was looking increasingly unlikely with every passing second.

I looked ahead. Through an opening in the clouds, I saw the Showdown City Airport stretched out before us. Showdown itself stood a little farther off, but not too far away. Assuming the plane made it to the landing stripe, I could easily see it crash into the airport's main terminal, which would not only kill most of the passengers, but a good chunk of the airport workers and people waiting for their flights. That just made it all the more imperative I stop the plane.

I tried to get under one of the wings to keep it in the air, but with nothing to grab, I just slid off, forcing me to use a combination of my super speed and flight powers to catch up. I caught glimpses of terrified passengers through the windows on the Alpha Airlines plane, but at the moment there was nothing I could do to assure them that everything was going to be okay.

"Bolt!" said Valerie in my ear, her volume turned up unusually high so I could hear her above the roaring of the plane's engines and the whipping wind all around me. "What is the status of Alpha Airlines Flight Two Seven Four?"

"Not good," I said. "Smoke from the engine is getting worse and the pilot is barely keeping the thing airborne. Looks like it's going to fall out of the sky any second. Tell Brains and Vanish to evacuate the airport. It's gonna be ugly."

"Affirmative," said Valerie.

My earcoms clicked off, but hearing Valerie's voice reminded me of I got into this situation in the first place.

Less than an hour ago, the pilot of Alpha Airlines Flight 274—inbound from Chicago—had reported that one of the plane's engines had failed for reasons unknown when they were about an hour out from the Showdown City Airport. He estimated that the plane would be unable to land safely and that they needed help to make sure it didn't crash.

That was where I came in. When we got a message from the police informing us of this, Brains sent me to intercept the plane and do what I could to help it. My superpowers were well-suited for this sort of thing and I even had experience intercepting giant objects falling from the sky. It had seemed easy, so, of course, I didn't hesitate to head out from the Braindome to catch up with the plane, which I found easily enough with Valerie's help.

The problem was that I had underestimated just how big, fast, and *loud* airplanes could be. This wasn't a tiny two-person plane that a hobbyist might fly for fun. This was a full-sized commercial airline plane run by Alpha Airlines, one of the biggest airplane companies in the world. This particular model was the biggest they had, capable of holding over 850 passengers at once. According to the pilot, they didn't have quite *that* many passengers on board, but it was pretty darn full and that meant it was even heavier than it normally was.

And worse, it got faster and faster the closer it got to the airport. If I didn't do something quick—

Suddenly, the smoking engine exploded. Shrapnel and smoke flew back toward me, which I barely managed to avoid, forcing myself to fly up through the clouds to avoid getting hit.

That was when I noticed the plane was falling now, the nose dipping toward the ground. At that angle, it wouldn't even reach the airport. It would just crash straight to the ground and kill every single passenger on board.

No time to think. Just act.

I activated my super speed and rushed toward the plane, going underneath it. Activating my super strength, I grabbed the underside of the airplane Atlas-style and pushed up.

It was *heavy*. I had lifted plenty of heavy things throughout my superhero career and, thanks to my super strength, most of it was easy. But I'd never tried to lift an entire airplane full of nearly a thousand people, plus their luggage and anything else on board. Every muscle in my body screamed in protest as I pushed the airplane up, but I ignored that and focused entirely on keeping this thing airborne.

To my relief, I could feel the plane righting itself already, rising inch by inch as I pushed against it with every muscle in my body. In my mind's eye, I could imagine the pilot and passengers alike being confused at this turn of events, wondering why they weren't falling to their deaths like a stone thrown off a cliff. It would have brought a smile to my face if I wasn't already using my face muscles and every other muscle in my body to keep this thing up.

But maybe they weren't going to survive after all, because we were now on course for a direct crash into the landing stripe. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't force the airplane to stay up. Nor could I make it change direction. All I could do was watch as the black asphalt of the landing stripe grew closer and closer. At this rate, even I wouldn't survive a direct crash like this. At least the passengers had the plane itself to take most of the impact. I, on the other hand, was going to take the brunt of the crash. At least I would probably instantly die upon impact, but that wasn't a very comforting thought.

Just as the plane broke through the last of the cloud cover, it came to an abrupt stop in midair. The stop was so abrupt that I was thrown off the underside of the plane and crashed into the landing stripe, landing flat on my back. Though the fall was far from lethal, it did jar me and make my head spin for a moment before I shook my head and looked up.

I found myself staring directly up the nose of the massive Alpha Airlines plane hanging in the air above me. I could dimly make out the terrified and confused faces of the pilot and co-pilot in the cockpit, but I was more focused on the fact that the airplane itself had simply stopped in midair like someone had grabbed it with their hand. A part of me feared that the airplane would simply crash down on top of me, which would definitely kill me no matter how strong I was.

"Hey, Bolt," said a familiar voice behind me. "Long time, no see."

Startled by the voice, I looked up and saw a superhero standing behind me, holding out one hand toward the airplane, the other on his hip. He wore a costume similar to mine in design, except blue and yellow, and he had a cool cape as well. He looked to be about my age and had a lean, athletic body, with dark brown hair and deep black eyes which were looking at me with a degree of amusement.

Although it had been a while since I saw him, I had no trouble recognizing the hero who stood above me now. "Strike? What are *you* doing here?"

Strike's friendly smile disappeared, replaced by a troubled frown. "Dizzy is missing, Bolt. And I need your help to find her."

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