

# CHAPTER ONE

**M**Y MOM ALWAYS SAID that I have a strong arm, but I always thought it was just one of those things that moms say to their sons ... at least before I punched the local school bully through the cafeteria wall with one blow after I lost my temper.

Maybe I should back up a bit and explain how I got to this point. Maybe something happened along the way that gave me my superpowers, that would explain how I got here. Dad always says that, whenever you find yourself in a mess of a situation, retracing your steps can help you figure out how you got into it in the first place, so I'll do that.

My name is Kevin Jake Jason and I am seventeen-years-old and an only child. Earlier today, I started my first day at my new school, John Smith High School, located in Silvers, Texas, which is a pretty small, obscure town that no one seems to know about. My parents and I moved here from New York City during the summer because it's supposed to be cheaper, but I think Dad just wanted to get as far away from my mother's parents as possible. I didn't really want to move, but I decided to roll with it because I've always liked cowboys and Westerns and thought Texas girls might be cuter than New York girls (or that's what one of my New York friends who has family in Texas told me, anyway).

Anyway, like I said, today was my first day at my new school. It was a lot smaller than my old school back in New York; just a few hundred students versus a few thousand. Even so, I still felt awkward, because I was the new kid and I literally didn't know anybody. It was pretty easy for me to figure out who the jocks were, who the popular girls were, who the nerds were, and so on, but I still found it hard to approach anyone, and I'm no introvert—Dad was, though, but that's because my Dad is a software developer.

But it wasn't all bad. I got through the first period okay without running into any real harassment or bullying. Most of the students and faculty were a lot nicer and friendlier than the students and faculty back in my old school in New York, but it just seemed like a sort of obligatory friendliness, like Texans were supposed to be polite to strangers. And that was what I was, really, because like I said, I didn't know anyone and no one knew me.

That was why I dreaded lunchtime. Back in my old school, I always sat with my friends David and James, but David and James were still in New York. I was facing the very real possibility of sitting by myself at lunch today, which was something I hadn't experienced since first grade.

So when the bell rang and the students went to lunch, I found myself briefly debating whether or not I should just skip it. But I was so hungry that I went to lunch anyway, deciding that I could suffer a little embarrassment if it meant getting something to eat.

And when I got to the cafeteria, I quickly discovered that pretty much everyone—including the nerds—had their own cliques that they ate with. With my tray in hand, I stood in the cafeteria, looking for an open table I could sit at, but it seemed like every table was full and no one looked eager to invite the new kid to sit with them. No one even seemed to notice me, although a few of the popular girls sitting at a nearby table kept glancing at me like they were afraid that a loser like me would try to sit next to them. Not that I thought I was a loser, but I knew they probably did, based on the way they looked at

me.

Every table, that is, except for the one in the upper right corner of the room. A black guy sat there by himself, seemingly without any friends of his own. Of course, he might have just been waiting for his friends, but he didn't really look like he belonged to any of the other groups. He wore a long-sleeved shirt and baggy jeans, but he didn't look much like a jock or a nerd. I noticed he had some kind of necklace tucked into his shirt, which made it impossible to see what was attached.

But the guy didn't look very judgmental, so I made my way across the noisy cafeteria to him. I accidentally walked into a big guy with dark skin and blond hair, who glared at me as I walked around him apologizing for not watching where I was going. He didn't follow me, but I felt like his eyes never stopped following me as I walked over to the guy sitting by himself at that table in the corner of the cafeteria.

As I approached the table, the black guy looked up at me. He seemed surprised that someone was coming up to his table, which confirmed to me that he always sat by himself.

"Hi," I said, stopping at the table. "Anyone sitting here?"

The guy shook his head. "No, it's open. Sit where you like."

"Thanks," I said. I sat down opposite him and put down my tray on the table between us. "By the way, my name is Kevin Jason. What's yours?"

"Malcolm Rayner," said the guy. "You're the new kid, right?"

"How did you know?" I said.

"Because I've never seen you before," said Malcolm. "I know pretty much everyone in this school, so when I saw someone I didn't know, I thought you were new."

"You know everyone?" I said as I sipped from my water bottle. "You must be pretty popular, then."

Malcolm chuckled. "Popular? Nah. It's just a small school, so you get to know everyone pretty quickly even if you don't have any friends."

"Oh," I said. My earlier suspicion was correct, but I decided to change the subject because Malcolm didn't sound like he really liked talking about his popularity—or lack thereof—in the school. "So, uh, do you usually sit by yourself?"

Malcolm shrugged. "Eh, sometimes. But it's not a big deal to me. I'm used to it. Anyway, where are you from?"

"New York," I said. "New York City, that is."

"Really?" said Malcolm in surprise. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

I shrugged as I took a bite out of my tuna sandwich. "My parents decided to move down here because it's cheaper than living back there."

"Cool," said Malcolm. "I've never been to New York City before." He leaned forward, an interested look on his face. "Have you been to Hero Island? I heard the Neohero Alliance let's normal people go on tours around the place for a fee."

I figured he was going to ask me about that place once I told him I was from NYC, mostly because it seemed like everyone who didn't live in NYC wanted to know all about the main base and headquarters of the largest superhero organization in the world. It was located on Hero Island, an artificial island created by the neohero Mr. Miner twenty-five years ago to give the Neohero Alliance a base of operations. I didn't mind talking about it, but it got kind of annoying to be asked about it every time I told

someone I was from NYC.

So I said, “No, but I've seen it. My parents never let me visit it. They thought it wasn't safe.”

“Not safe?” said Malcolm in disbelief. “But Hero Island has a bunch of powerful neoheroes on it, right? I mean, Omega Man himself lives there and he's the most powerful neohero on the planet. It seems to me like the safest place in the world, if you ask me. I wish I could go there myself some day. It would be awesome.”

“Some of my friends back home visited it,” I said. “But they said it was kind of boring because they just got to see the Neohero Alliance Museum and a few places deemed safe for tourists. They didn't get to see the training facilities or the places where they store the weapons they take from defeated supervillains or anything like that.”

“They probably only let real members of the NHA explore the rest of the base,” said Malcolm. He sighed. “It would be awesome to get to meet Omega Man himself.”

I nodded. Omega Man was one of the first neoheroes and the most well-known and beloved. I had only ever seen him on Internet videos and pictures, but I knew he lived in NYC and was from the city. I had never actually met him, but Dad said he met Omega Man once, a long time ago. Dad never told me much about that meeting, though, except that it was brief.

“So what's this school like?” I said as I took another bite of my sandwich. “Anything crazy ever happen here?”

Malcolm shook his head. “Nah. It's pretty quiet most of the time. Even the pranksters don't usually do anything *that* crazy. Not that I'm complaining, though.”

That was disappointing to hear. Back in my school in New York, there was an entire subculture of kids who pranked students and school faculty alike. Every year, these kids would get together to make the biggest and wildest prank of the year, known as the Big One, which was always supposed to top last year's Big One. Granted, sometimes they got out of control—the last Big One resulted in the entire school evacuating and several members of the NHA arriving under the belief that the supervillain Judgment had taken over the school—but I always looked forward to them and even helped organize a few, but always on the periphery, because I wasn't considered one of the pranksters even though I always enjoyed a good prank myself.

Then I noticed Malcolm's necklace again and said, “What's that on your neck?”

Malcolm looked down at his necklace tucked into his shirt. “Oh, this? Er, it's nothing. Just something my grandma gave me.”

“Can I see it?” I said.

Malcolm hesitated, like he wasn't sure whether to say yes or no, but before he could answer, a tray slammed down on the table next to me and a second later a girl of about my age sat down next to me. Her sudden appearance next to me made me scoot to the side involuntarily, but the girl didn't even seem to notice me because she was looking at something on her smartphone.

The girl was kind of cute. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, though her yellow shirt was rather plain. She wore jeans and had a belt with rhinestones on it, which were hard to look at directly because they reflected the light from the ceiling so much. Her smartphone had a rhinestone case, though it looked a little beat up like she didn't take very good care of it.

“Hey, Tara,” said Malcolm, though he didn't sound very excited to see her. “What's up?”

“Hey, Malcolm,” said Tara, still without looking at Malcolm or me, her focus on her smartphone.

That was all Tara said. She still didn't look at me, which made me think that she either didn't think I was worth her notice or she was just too absorbed by her smartphone to pay attention to me. Regardless, I felt too nervous to say anything, and it wasn't just because I was the new kid in school, either.

“Oh, uh, Kevin, this is Tara Reynolds,” said Malcolm, gesturing at her. “Tara, this is the new kid, Kevin Jason.”

Tara looked up at her phone just long enough to look at me through her glasses before returning her attention to the device in her hand. “Nice meeting you, Kevin.”

“Uh, nice meeting you, too,” I said. I looked at Malcolm. “Is she your friend?”

“We know each other,” said Malcolm. “We, er, don't really have any other friends.”

“We just sort of hang out together because no one else likes us,” said Tara, again without looking at me or Malcolm. Her response surprised me, because I hadn't realized that she had been listening.

That was when I realized that I was hanging out with the freaks. I mean, not that I hated Malcolm or Tara, but I hadn't realized that they were clearly on the bottom of the John Smith High School pecking order until this moment. Just my luck, I suppose, that I, the new kid, would end up eating lunch with the two least popular kids in the school, which probably meant that the rest of the school would always associate me with these two even if I stopped hanging out with them.

While that realization sank in, Malcolm looked at Tara again and said, “Oh, hey, Tara, did you know that Kevin is from New York? We were just talking about Hero Island and how awesome it would be to go there.”

Tara suddenly froze. I didn't know her very well, but even I could tell that Malcolm had accidentally stepped on an emotional minefield. I fully expected her to throw her smartphone at Malcolm or maybe just throw him out the window.

But then Tara relaxed and said, in a tense voice, “I wouldn't want to go there. Those neoheroes aren't anything special.”

“What?” said Malcolm. “Oh, come on, Tara. Omega Man is awesome. And the Midnight Menace, too.”

“All they do is cause destruction and get innocent people caught in the crossfire of their dangerous battles,” said Tara, still without looking at either of us. “Personally, I think we'd be better off without them.”

Frankly, I was stunned by her excessive negativity toward neoheroes. I've always known that there were some people who hate anyone with super powers, whether they do good things or bad with those powers, but I didn't really encounter too many of those people back in New York. I'm not as big a neohero fan as Malcolm, but I liked them a lot and always thought it would be cool to become a neohero myself.

But I could tell that Tara had other reasons for disliking neoheroes. She didn't scream or shout, but I could tell that she must have been letting some of her personal experiences with them affect her. I considered asking her, but then realized that that would be like sticking your hand into a meat grinder just to see what happens.

Despite Tara's negativity, I still thought she was cute and was going to ask her out before a harsh voice behind me shouted, “Hey, new kid!”

Uh oh. I knew *that* tone. It was the sort of tone that all bullies used whenever they addressed their next victims. Or, at least, that was the tone bullies back in my old school used, which almost made me think that one of my old bullies somehow traveled all the way from New York to Texas just to pick up where we left off.

Nonetheless, I looked over my shoulder and saw a large guy with tanned skin and blond hair—the same guy I bumped into earlier—walking toward our table. He was taller and larger than me, wearing an old leather jacket that just made him look even more intimidating. He looked vaguely Mexican, but he looked like he might have had some other race in him, too, though I wasn't sure which.

“Uh oh,” said Malcolm with a gulp. “That's Robert Candle, the local bully.”

“Why does he seem angry with me?” I said as I tried to calculate how much time I had before he arrived.

“It's a John Smith High School tradition,” said Tara. “Robert always 'greet' the new kids, usually by stuffing them into a locker or making them give him their lunch.”

“Or both,” said Malcolm.

I hated dealing with bullies. It wasn't that I was a coward or small and weak; I was actually really strong. It's just that I'm bad at fighting and I've gotten in trouble at my old school for defending myself from the bullies there. I always found it easier to just go along with whatever the bullies demanded of me than make a scene and get in trouble with the school administration.

But there wasn't any running or making peace now. Robert looked like he was pissed, so I stood and tried to look as tough as I could, mostly because I knew that some bullies would leave you alone if you looked as tough as or tougher than them.

Robert, apparently, wasn't one of those kinds of bullies, because when he reached our table, he looked completely unimpressed by my tough guy act. He was taller than me, almost towering over me, though it was probably just his angry demeanor that made me think he was so much bigger than me.

Still, I did not cower before him. I just said, “Hi, Robert. What's the problem?”

“I'm not going to ask how you know my name, loser,” said Robert. He poked me in the chest with one of his large fingers. “But don't play dumb with me. You know what you did.”

“No, I don't,” I said. Robert's tone was annoying me, but I tried to keep my cool. “I really don't.”

“You bumped into me back there,” said Robert, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “Remember? It was just five minutes ago.”

I nodded, albeit slowly. “Yes, I do, but I apologized.”

“I don't care,” said Robert. “I don't accept apologies. I think you were intentionally trying to piss me off.”

“Why?” I said. “I just got here. I don't even know you. Why would I go out of my way to make you angry?”

“I don't know why, but I think you did,” said Robert. “But I'm willing to overlook it if you would give me your lunch every day for the next week.”

“What?” I said, not bothering to hide the indignation in my voice. “You want me to give you my lunch for all of next week?”

“Yes,” said Robert. “If you do that, I might be able to overlook such stupid behavior from a kid as green as yourself.”

I raised an eyebrow. "A kid? We're probably the same age."

"Shut up," Robert growled. "I know what I said."

I didn't think he did, but I decided not to say anything that could escalate the situation, although that was hard because my temper was starting to rise. Mom always told me that I should control my temper, but it was always hard to do whenever I was talking with a bully like Robert.

Still, I managed to say, in a calm voice, "What will happen if I say no?"

"Then I'll just beat you up and take your lunch," said Robert. "Every day for the next week, I'll give you a progressively worse beating and then take your lunch."

"What the hell?" I said. I stopped myself quickly, taking a few deep breaths to control my temper, and then said more calmly, "What? That's not a fair choice. Either way, you get my lunch every day for the next week."

Robert smiled, a psychotic smile that I wanted to wipe off his face. "And? Why should I care? You're the new kid around here. That means you don't get a choice about what we choose to put you through."

My hands balled into fists, but I shoved them into my hoodie. But that did nothing to cool the anger boiling within me.

I looked at Malcolm and Tara. "Guys, is he for real? Tell me this is some kind of elaborate prank."

Unfortunately, Malcolm and Tara seemed to be trying to turn invisible, because Malcolm was looking at his food as if it was the most interesting thing in the world, while Tara had brought her smart-phone even closer to her face. I would have considered this a betrayal, but neither of them were really my friends, so maybe I should have seen that coming.

Regardless, I looked at Robert again, who was still smirking at me. He put his hands on his hips and said, "All right, new kid, what will it be? Give up your lunch for a week or receive a beating from me and still lose your lunch for a week?"

My hands shook. I was starting to fantasize about knocking Robert out in one blow, but I kept myself from doing something I'd regret.

But neither was I going to stand here and take it. So I said, "Sorry, Robert, but looks like you're going to have to get your own lunch this—"

I didn't even see it coming. Robert's fist smashed into my abdomen, knocking the air out of me. I gasped in pain and fell down onto my seat at the table, causing Malcolm and even Tara to look at me in surprise.

Wrapping my hands over my stomach, I looked up at Robert, who was now holding his fist up like he was going to mash my head in.

"You just *had* to make things difficult, didn't you, new kid?" said Robert. He snorted. "Oh, well. It's been a while since I've gotten to beat a new kid. Most new kids don't have the balls to say no to me."

Damn, Robert hit *hard*. He really was as strong as he looked. Yet I didn't let the pain make me cower. Instead, it made me angrier than ever. My anger rose within me like a geyser and I was just about ready to blow.

Robert swung another fist at me, this time aiming for my head, but I caught his fist with my hand. I expected it to be hard to hold back, but to my surprise, I held back Robert's fist with ease.

"What?" said Robert. He sounded genuinely shocked, like he was incapable of understanding what

was happening. “How did you do that?”

I wasn't sure how, because I had never done that before. But I didn't question it. I just stood up, forcing Robert's fist back as I did so. Anger continued to flow through my veins and I wasn't going to be calm anymore.

Robert seemed to get over his shock, because he pulled back his other fist and threw it at me. But I dodged it easily and responded with a punch of my own, aiming for his chest, which was unprotected and a big target.

When my fist collided with Robert's chest, Robert literally went flying. He flew backwards through the air, across the entire length of the cafeteria, screaming loudly and drawing the attention of everyone in the cafeteria. Hundreds of pairs of eyes followed Robert as he flew, until he smashed straight through the cafeteria wall and stopped screaming.

I stood there, blinking in disbelief. I looked down at my own fist, which looked no worse the wear for having punched a big guy like Robert all the way across the cafeteria. The only thing I noticed was how strong I felt, but I was too shocked to pay attention even to that.

Then I looked at Malcolm and Tara. Malcolm was staring at me like I had grown a set of wings and flew away, while Tara had actually dropped her smartphone onto the table and stared at me with the same shock as Malcolm.

That was when I felt people looking at me and looked back at the rest of the cafeteria. Everyone in the cafeteria was looking directly at me, wearing expressions as the ones Malcolm and Tara wore. I probably looked the same, but I didn't have a mirror so I couldn't see my face.

All I knew was that I had done something I had possibly just murdered another kid ... and I hadn't even known I could do it.

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