

CHAPTER ONE

TODAY WAS SUPPOSED to be my day off from work, but it's funny how my work has a tendency to find *me*. Especially when I don't want it.

The day started off normal enough. I woke up, took a shower, got breakfast, and checked my family's mailbox, where I found a birthday card from my grandpa who lived on the other side of the state. The card was nice, a simple 'Happy 18th Birthday, Grandson!' with a personal note from grandpa congratulating me on becoming a man and asking me what I was going to do after I graduated from high school. My birthday was technically not until next week, but Grandpa always sent me my birthday card early because that was how he was.

Also, Grandpa had also enclosed a check of \$100 in the card. It puzzled me at first because most people don't use checks nowadays, but I appreciated the money nonetheless and decided to head to the bank to deposit it into my bank account. It wasn't nearly as much money as what I made as a sidekick working for Rubberman, but it was a nice gift from my Grandpa and I saw no reason to delay depositing it, especially since today was my day off. I did have a date later today with my girlfriend, Nancy, but stopping by the bank and dropping off the check was quick and easy.

Normally, anyway. I should have known better, given my luck, but I guess I just wanted to be optimistic for once and not assume I would find myself in the middle of a bank robbery on my first day off in a while.

Anyway, I got to the Golden City First National Bank shortly after breakfast. Here I found very few people aside from myself in the lobby. There weren't even as many bank tellers as there normally were. That was probably because the bank closed early on Saturdays and had a smaller staff as a result.

Still, I managed to find an open bank teller, a pretty thirty-some-odd-year-old woman whose nameplate said her name was Jennifer, and handed her my check. Jennifer took my check and deposited it without any fanfare, although she did apologize to me at first when they had some computer troubles, as the bank had apparently switched to a new computer system recently and it still had some bugs to work out.

Which, again, didn't bother me. What did bother me, though, what was happened next.

"It's fine," I told Jennifer when she apologized. "I'm not in any hurry. Today's my day off."

Jennifer smiled. "That's nice. Where do you work? I don't think I've seen you around town."

I smiled back in return. Due to secret identity laws, I couldn't divulge my secret identity as Beams to just anyone, so I said with a shrug, "Just a part-time job doing some boring yard work. Nothing more."

"As boring as being a bank teller?" said Jennifer. She chuckled. "Because it *does* get boring around here, though at least we only work until lunch today. After I get off work, my husband and I are going to see the Rubberman movie tonight."

I paused. "The Rubberman movie? I thought that wasn't coming out until next week."

"It is," Jennifer said, glancing at the computer screen in front of her as my check was processed. She held up a couple of tickets. "But my husband managed to snag a few

tickets to a preview screening at Super Cinema tonight. Only a handful of people were eligible to get these tickets and my husband was lucky enough to get two.”

I frowned. I knew that the Rubberman movie was finally coming out next week—April 4th, which also happened to be my birthday—but boss hadn’t told me about the early screenings. He had told me we were going to be at the midnight premiere next week, but it sounded to me like at least some people were going to see it before us. That seemed a bit odd to me, but perhaps it was something our local theater, Super Cinema, was doing to create hype for the movie. “Huh. I hadn’t heard of that.”

“My husband works at the theater and they were giving away free tickets to employees,” said Jennifer with a shrug. “So he managed to get a couple for us. I can’t wait.”

I nodded. “I hope you and your husband enjoy the movie. I’ve heard it’s supposed to be good, but I’m not going to see it until the premiere next week.”

“I’ve been looking forward to it for *ages*,” said Jennifer with a sigh. “I know a lot of people aren’t happy with how Rubberman and Beams have dealt with the Zero Knights, but I still like them.”

I nodded politely. Legally I couldn’t tell her I was Beams, but the truth was I hadn’t seen the movie myself yet, either. Rubberman had seen more of the completed movie than I had, but even though the movie was based on his life, he apparently had not seen it all just yet, either. So when I said I didn’t know if it was any good, I was telling the truth.

“I’m definitely looking forward to it,” I said. I suddenly yawned. “Weird. I feel really sleepy all of a sudden.”

Jennifer yawned at about the same time as me. She rubbed her eyes and said, “Yeah, I do, too. Which is weird because I slept really well last night. Maybe I’ll take a nap after I get home from work.”

I nodded. I had slept well last night, too, and even had a cup of coffee this morning, too, which made me wonder where my drowsiness had come from. “Same ... same here. Will probably crash when I get home.”

Jennifer yawned again and glanced at her computer. “All right, Mr. Fry. It looks like your check has ... check has cleared.” She yawned yet again and reached for her coffee. “Okay, this is ... this getting ... ridiculous ... coffee ...”

Before Jennifer could pick up her coffee, however, her eyes closed and her head slammed into the keyboard before her. She snored loudly into her keyboard as if it was her pillow.

Startled, I said, “Jennifer? Are you ... are you okay?”

Even as I said that question, however, I heard *thumps* all around me. Looking around, I saw everyone was falling asleep. The other bank tellers were slumping at their desks, their heads lolling onto their shoulders. The other customers were lying on the floor or sleeping on the sofas in the lobby. Even the security guards at the entrance had collapsed onto the floor, sleeping as peacefully as if they had fallen asleep in their beds back in their homes.

And worse of all, I could feel my own exhaustion threatening to overwhelm me. My eyes felt as heavy as lead and my limbs started to feel like sandbags. I grabbed Jennifer’s coffee and downed the whole thing in one gulp. The steaming hot coffee burned my throat and lips, but the caffeine did wake me up and make it easier to fight the

sleepiness, though even with my caffeine high I could still feel the sleepiness threatening to overwhelm me. Just like how everyone else in the lobby had fallen asleep at once.

Wait ... everyone falling asleep at the same time ...

Horrified at the implications, I pulled out my phone and dialed Rubberman's number. I desperately waited for Rubberman to answer, but when I heard the third ring, the doors to the bank slammed open and half a dozen armed men burst into the room. They swept the lobby with their guns until they noticed me standing in front of Jennifer's desk and focused on me.

"Hey, how come that kid is still standing?" asked one of the thugs, a tall, skinny man who looked like he had probably done every drug in the book. "He should be sleepin' like the rest of 'em!"

"Does it matter, Ronny?" asked a fat black man standing next to him. He pointed his gun at me. "You 'member what boss said. Put all of 'em to sleep and kill anyone who wakes up."

Crap. The caffeine from Jennifer's coffee was still keeping me awake, but there was no way I could beat all of these guys on my own. My powers worked with or without my costume, but fighting without my costume's protection was always dangerous and I didn't want to out my identity by using my powers. All of the witnesses might be asleep, but I didn't want to out myself to a bunch of thugs like these guys.

Right before the black guy could shoot me, however, a familiar sardonic voice said, "Hold your fire, men. I think I know who this kid is."

The thugs parted to reveal another man standing behind them, who stepped forward. Based on the way the other thugs looked at him, it was clear that this man was their leader.

He appeared to be a middle-aged man with messy bed hair and huge bags under his eyes. His rumbled clothing looked like it could use a good iron and his slumped shoulders made him look like he needed a good nap. Yet his bloodshot eyes and sleepy appearance, I knew, were really just an illusion that hid a far more deadly and calculating mind than most people understood.

"ZZZ," I said, turning to face him. "Long time, no see."

ZZZ, the infamous assassin, supervillain, and member of the Dark Collective, smiled a sleepy, though threatening, smile. "Same to you, Beams. No time to chat, seeing as we're on a deadline, but I think we might be able to squeeze your death into our schedule, at least."

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