

**HERTZ**  
**TO BE A**  
**HERO**  
**WANTED: SUPERHEROES**  
**2**



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BRYAN DAVIS

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# CHAPTER I

## Sometimes You Just Have to Shoot Your Sister.

I stood next to the ruins of the Stellar Building, set a fake replica of my superhero device on the ground, and aimed my paintball rifle directly at Sam. "Ready?"

About fifteen paces away, she planted her sneakered feet on the sidewalk near a rainwater puddle. The sun cast morning rays on her as the autumn breeze flapped her purple cape and black skirt, her skin protected from the cool air by long sleeves and thick leggings.

She tightened her gadgets belt and called, "Fire away. Princess Queenie Unicorn Iris Ponyrider isn't scared to be shot by Prince Edward Lionhearted Oscar Fruitloops Thunderman."

I set my finger on the trigger. "You shortened our superhero names."

"No, I didn't. They're nicknames." She wrinkled her button nose. "You don't expect me to say our full names every time, do you? That would be silly."

"I'd rather you not ever say my superhero name at all. It's too much like our cat's name."

"No, the cat's name is—"

I pulled the trigger. The ball popped from the

barrel, exploded against Sam's chest, and splattered her with paint.

She grimaced. "Ow! That stung!"

I lowered the rifle. "That's what I was afraid of. You're not invulnerable. My changes to the superhero device didn't work." I walked to her and touched her light brown tresses, now speckled pink. "Good thing for you the paint's water based."

"You mean good thing for *you*." She took the rifle and aimed it at me. "Your turn. You promised. If I feel pain, you feel pain."

"All right. All right." I raised my hands and backed away several steps. "Let 'er rip."

Flashing a grin, she pulled the trigger. The ball zipped out and burst on my chest. Green liquid splashed across my outer shirt and into my face. I sputtered, spewing paint. "Happy?"

"Very." She squinted. "Didn't it sting at all?"

I touched the spot where the ball hit me. Just wet. No pain. "Strange. I don't feel any stronger, but maybe I got some of the invulnerability when I used the device on myself."

"Better not test it. I mean, like jumping off a building or something." She handed the rifle back to me. "Getting splattered with paint is better than splattering yourself on the ground somewhere."

"Right. If I did that once, I wouldn't have the guts to do it again." I smiled and winked, waiting for her to laugh.

She narrowed her eyes. "I don't get it."

"Wouldn't have the guts. My guts would be ... Never mind." I picked up a sponge we brought for



cleanup and washed the paint from my face, hair, and clothes. Most of it came off without a problem, though some green paint dotted my red outer shirt, making me look like a Christmas decoration.

I handed the sponge to Sam. While she cleaned up, I attached the paintball rifle to my weapons belt and instinctively felt for Mastix, but it wasn't there. I had left it at home to make Mephisto feel more comfortable about coming. "I thought Mephisto would've shown up by now. We're running out of things to do."

"Maybe old Turnip Head thinks it's a trap. Or maybe he's just scared of me." Sam dropped the sponge, picked up a fist-sized stone, and threw it completely over the Stellar building, ten times farther than normal, and a lot farther than I could ever hope to throw it.

A twinge of sadness stung inside. Sam got all those powers even though I was the one who invented the machine. And I was the big brother. I was supposed to be her hero. How could I ever be that if she was stronger, faster, and better at everything than I was?

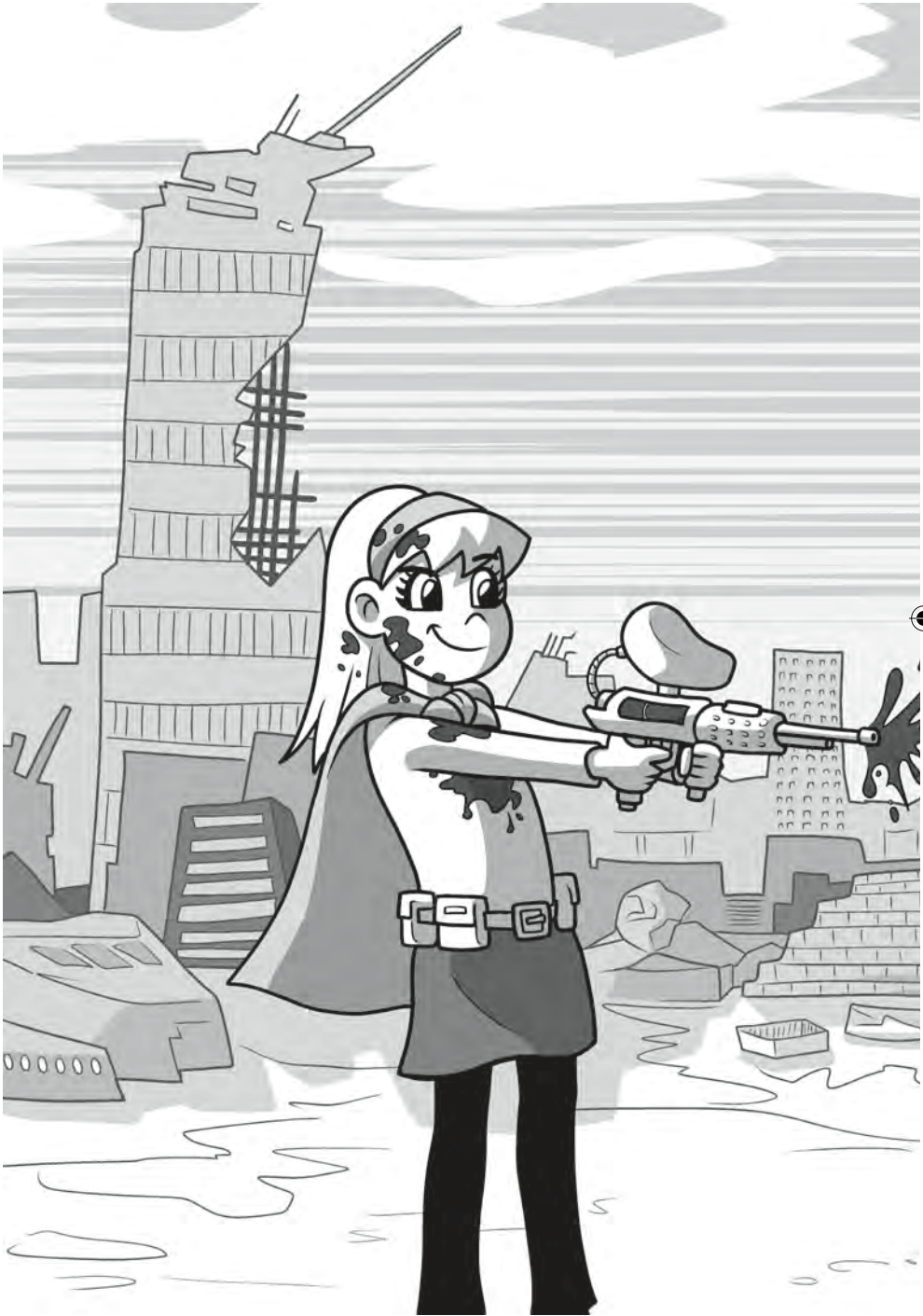
I blew out a sigh and tried to block the thoughts. At least she was a great kid and never bragged. Well, hardly ever.

Sam touched the spool line on her belt. "I could throw a claw to the Stellar roof and climb to the top. Maybe see if Turnip Head's anywhere around. I've been practicing a lot."

"I know. And you're getting really good at it. If he doesn't show soon, we'll both go up there."

She grinned. "Goody."

I scanned Nirvana's downtown skyline. A lot of





repairs had been completed since the earthquakes three months ago, including some at our apartment building. About ten blocks away, a new tower climbed well into the sky, a structure that could broadcast a warning signal in case of an impending disaster. Because of Mephisto's earthquakes, the local government built the warning system and included speakers throughout the city that would allow the authorities to broadcast important announcements. They built the tower in quite a hurry, but, fortunately, they hadn't had a reason to use it yet.

At ground level, orange barrels stood here and there on the narrower roads. Although the police had not yet allowed traffic back into the city, the dredged-up streets were filled in, electricity and water had been restored, and many of the buildings had been either patched or demolished to make way for new construction.

Most people thought Mephisto and his mischief were gone forever, but I knew better. At some point, he would strike with the hypnotizing gas he mentioned the last time we heard from him. We had to strike first.

"Eddie," Sam said, prodding my shoulder. "You zoned out again. You're like a zombie lately."

I looked at her. "Yeah. I know. Sorry."

"So do we climb the Stellar building?"

"We can wait a little while longer."

"If Turnip Head doesn't come soon, let's go to Magruder's and get a foot-long hoagie and a bottle of Mr. Splash. I'm starved. And I got gas. I need to let out a whopping burp. Mr. Splash's bubbles will help."

"Mephisto will come. The bait's irresistible." I used

my foot to nudge the top of the fake device, a metal box about the size of a home gaming machine. "He got a taste of having super strength. He'll want it again."

Sam squinted at it. "The real one has three buttons, not two."

"Shhh! He might be listening. Gilbert said Mephisto has drone spies that look exactly like real birds."

"All right. But it's boring just standing here listening to my stomach growl."

"Try to occupy your mind with something." From my pants pocket, I withdrew a phone I had borrowed from Milligan and started its puzzle game. "You have a good vocabulary. Maybe you can help with a crossword puzzle."

She huffed. "Not at the super genius level you play." She mimicked a computer voice. "What's a thirty-letter word for nose hairs?"

"Actually the words are pretty short, but when I figure them out, I have to make them into anagrams to enter them correctly."

"What's an anagram?"

"A scrambled word. It's tough because I don't know how to scramble them until I see what fits in the puzzle, but I like playing this level because a woman in Nirvana invented it. She calls it Anna Anne's Anagrams. That's her name, I guess. Anna Anne. Anyway, the more I play it, the more hits she gets. I'm just supporting her, though sometimes I have to do some hacking to get to the next level."

Sam yawned. "Listening to you made me more bored than ever."

"I was just trying to help you—"

“Look!” Sam pointed upward. “There’s a weird bird. Could it be a spy?”

I slid the phone back to my pocket and followed her pointing finger. A penguin sat on the ledge of the Stellar’s highest remaining window. One of my recent tweaks to the superhero invention had given Sam super sharp eyesight that always lasted long after her strength faded. She never missed anything.

I whispered, “Yeah. Maybe one of the drones. But how could a penguin get there? Penguins can’t fly.”

Sam shrugged. “Penguins don’t use elevators, and they can’t climb stairs, so maybe fairy dust.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure. That’s the most logical guess.”

“I thought so. Princess Queenie has a new poem about fairies. Want to hear it?”

I sighed. “Go ahead. I’m watching the penguin to see what it’ll do.”

Sam took in a breath. “There once was a fairy named Tears, who led the fairy choir for years. Although she sang with a bleat, she gave everyone treats. They all just wore plugs in their ears.”

I laughed. “Actually, that’s pretty funny. And it’s called a limerick, a special kind of poem with a rhyme and rhythm pattern like that. Dad used to make up a lot of them.”

She nodded. “Limerick. Got it.”

The penguin dropped from its perch. A parachute opened behind it, and it landed gently on the pavement. It waddled close and grabbed the superhero device with a hand-like appendage. Wheels emerged under its feet, and it sped away.

I touched Sam's back. "You know the plan. See you in a minute."

She took off after the penguin at super speed, more than three times faster than I could run. In fact, we recently raced, and she ran backwards to give me a chance and still won.

The twinge in my gut returned. Once again I just had to deal with her being the real superhero in the family. I couldn't let it get to me.

In the distance, her form shrank, then stopped. A few seconds later, she returned and skidded to a halt, slightly out of breath. "Good enough?"

"We'll see." I withdrew the phone again and started its GPS app. On the screen, a flashing red dot moved along the city map, tracking the location of my device. "The penguin slowed down. Mephisto probably thinks he got away with it. Now we'll track it to his new hideout."

"Coolio. Better update Mommy."

"Yep. But first Milligan. I want to see if there's any news about Mephisto's hypnotizing gas."

She grinned. "Say hi to Uncle Weasel Nose for me."

I switched the phone to its dialing app. "You know he doesn't like that name."

"True, but you gotta admit his pointy nose makes him look like a weasel."

"Can't argue with that." I punched in Milligan's number and held the phone to my ear.

"Eddie," Milligan said in his usual mafia-boss accent. "You got good news or bad news?"

"Good news. Mephisto took the device, just like we planned. We can see it on the tracker app."

"Perfect. Where are you now?"

"At the Stellar. How about you?"

"Gas company watching for sabotage. And I got some muscle checking the other utilities. Nothing yet on the hypnotizing gas."

"All right. We'll wait for you here."

"I'll be there on my bike in five. I might have to dodge some road barrels, so maybe longer."

I imagined the route, including the barricades. It would be exciting to do some of that dodging myself. Milligan had let me drive his motorcycle several times with Sam behind me on its extra large seat. He turned out to be a pretty cool uncle. "Okay. That'll give me time to call my mom."

"She's probably still on her shift at Magruder's. She'll have to meet us down the road somewhere. See you in a few, Eddie."

"Yeah. See ya." I pressed the End button and punched in Mom's cell number. After a few rings, her voicemail picked up. After the prompt to record a message, I said, "Mom, everything's going according to plan, and we're on the move. When you get off your shift, pick up Gilbert and give me a call."

The moment I pressed the End button again, the phone let out a high-pitched squeal, nearly making me drop the phone. When it stopped, the screen showed a photo of Sam and me. Mephisto's voice came through the speaker. "These two seemingly innocent children are actually dangerous villains. Their names are Eddie and Samantha Hertz. If you see them, kill them."

"Kill us?" Sam said. "Why would—"

"Sam." I set a finger to my lips. "Just listen."



The photo on the screen switched to a portrait of Damocles wearing his cowl. "Many of you probably recognize Damocles," Mephisto continued. "If you see him, do not approach him. He is far too dangerous." An icon appeared on the screen. "Download this app and use it to report to me if you see Damocles or if you are successful in killing Eddie or Samantha. That is all for now."

I tried to close the app, but it stayed on the screen. I pressed the Off switch to reset the phone. When it rebooted, it seemed to be back to normal.

Sam furrowed her brow. "If Turnip Head thinks he has the real superhero device, why is he trying to get help? I mean, he'll have superpowers. Who needs normal people?"

"Maybe to test the hypnotizing gas. If people try to kill us, that means it works." I punched in our home number. "Let's see if Gilbert has an idea. He said he might come to our apartment to work on my artificial intelligence version of Damocles."

Someone answered after the first ring. "Hello, this is the Hertz residence, Gilbert G. Godwin speaking."

"Gilbert, it's Eddie."

"Eddie," he said, his tone spiking with alarm. "It's terrible. It's tragic. It's traumatic."

"Calm down, Gilbert. What's going on?"

"I wanted to call you, but I didn't have the number for the phone you borrowed. Considering the crisis, contacting you immediately was my highest priority."

"Fine. Just tell me what the crisis is."

"Of course. Mephisto deployed the hypnotizing gas in a most unexpected way. We thought he would

use gas, water, or sewage lines, but, no. His method was far craftier. Rather ingenious, I think.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just spit it out, Gilbert. What did he use to deliver the gas?”

“Burritos.”

“Burritos? You mean, like, Mexican food?”

“Exactly. Burritos, fajitas, tacos. He used them all.”

“But they’re not a gas.”

“No, but they produce gas. I don’t think I ever told you that I discovered the gas by accident. It comes from a bluestar, a rare flower that grows in relatively dark confines. It produces a liquid that is a powerful hallucinogen. To make a long story short, I created the gas from the liquid by exposing it to acids that the human stomach manufactures.”

“Okay,” I said. “How could Mephisto spread the gas using stomach acid?”

“I heard about the circumstances from your mother when she called earlier. It seems that a young hoodlum broke into Magruder’s last night and tried to add the bluestar flower’s liquid to their Mexican food ingredients, but he was caught in the act. He confessed to successfully doing the same at the warehouse for Bart’s Burrito Barn, a local Mexican restaurant chain, several days ago. I went to the closest Bart’s, purchased a burrito, and tested it. Indeed, it was infused with the bluestar liquid. Therefore, anyone who has recently eaten at Bart’s literally creates the hypnotizing gas with his own stomach acids. Then, when the gas is expelled through, shall we say, exhaust from one or both human digestive system extremities, anyone who breathes the gas is highly susceptible to hypnotic suggestion.”

“You mean, they’ll obey what someone tells them to do?”

“Precisely. A certain high-pitched signal causes the brain to respond to the next suggestion it is given. With my birds, I showed a video of a member of its species sleeping, and the bird fell asleep almost immediately. I assume humans will respond to the first spoken command they hear after the signal.”

“Yeah, we heard the signal through my phone. Mephisto hacked into the network somehow. Then he talked through a phone app and told people to kill Sam and me. I have no idea how many people have the app.”

“Then you should trust no one,” Gilbert said, “not even your mother. She told me that she ate at Bart’s yesterday.”

“What about you?”

“Of course you can trust me. After many years using the gas, I am immune, though the times of testing the gas in its early days often sent me into a highly suggestible state. During my experiments, I fetched a cracker for a parrot every time he said ‘Petey wants a cracker.’ I fed him three boxes of crackers before I realized what I was doing. Fattest parrot you’ve ever seen. In any case, I am no longer susceptible. But, then again, if I am under the gas’s influence at this moment, I could be lying to you about being immune.”

“You’re probably safe. I’m just worried about my mom.” The sound of a motorcycle drifted on the air, drawing closer. “Listen. Just be ready for when my mom picks you up. Stick with the plan.”

“Very well. I also have some news regarding the

Damocles artificial intelligence device that you will find quite interesting.”

“Good. Tell me about it when—”

The motorcycle engine drowned my voice. Milligan careened around a corner and zipped to my side. Wearing his gangster-like pin-striped suit and no helmet, he nodded toward the space on the seat behind him. “Room for both of you, but you’d better stow that paintball rifle in the saddlebag.”

I stared at him. He seemed kind of glassy-eyed. He, too, might have been hypnotized. Could I trust him? “Sure, Milligan. Just a second.” I spoke loudly into the phone. “Gilbert, I have to go. The tracker’s working, so you can monitor where the device is going.”

“I will do that. Good-bye, Eddie. Be careful. Be cautious. And, above all, be courageous.”

“Right.” I punched the End button once more and switched to the tracking app, then detached the rifle and set it in the saddlebag. I shouted above the motorcycle’s roar. “Um ... Milligan, have you had any burritos lately?”

He blinked. “Burritos? What kind of crazy question is that?”

“I was just wondering if maybe—”

“No time to talk about food.” Milligan grabbed my wrist and pulled me to the motorcycle. “Get on.”

Unable to fight his strong grip, I gave in and straddled the seat. Sam climbed on behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. The moment we settled, Milligan zoomed away, nearly throwing us off the bike.

“Which way?” he yelled.

Thinking about where I was sitting and remembering what Gilbert had said about exhaust from human extremities, I tried not to breathe. I reached the phone forward and showed him the screen.

He grabbed the phone and held it in front as he drove. "Got it. Looks like it stopped in Peace Valley."

"Peace Valley? You mean where ..." My throat tightened. As before, I didn't want to breathe, and hearing that name made it nearly impossible to suck in a breath.

"What's a matter, Eddie?" Milligan shouted. "Cat got your tongue?"

I forced out, "That's where my ..." I couldn't say another word.

"Yeah, I know. That's where your father took a dive into the drink. And you never saw the crash site. Right?" He revved the motorcycle and accelerated. "Maybe it's time for you to see it."

I swallowed hard. It was true. Milligan was hypnotized and under Mephisto's control. What could we do? At this speed, jumping off would be dangerous. Yet, if I stayed with Milligan, he might try to kill us. I turned to Sam and whisper-shouted, "He's hypnotized. We have to jump."

Her eyes flared. "No. You jump. You got the invulnerable thing, not me. When you're out of my way, I can take care of Uncle Weasel Nose."

"I'm sure you can." I looked around. We were zooming through a suburb. Houses lined the road with browning grass in every yard, much better for a soft landing than pavement. I twisted to the side, rose to a crouch on the seat, and leaped toward a lawn in

front of a house. I threw my body into a sideways roll, then half-tumbled and half-skidded across the rain-softened turf.

When my momentum stopped, a white paper bag blocked my view of the street. Its logo said Bart's Burrito Barn. That couldn't be good.

I batted the bag out of the way. About fifty paces down the road, the bike lay on the curb. At the edge of a yard, Sam straddled Milligan as he lay on the grass. She pointed at him as if daring him to get up.

I climbed to my feet, my limbs sore and my elbows and knees scraped, but not too bad. Either my device really did make me sort of invulnerable, or the lawn cushioned my fall.

The front door of the house flew open. A man and woman emerged. The man, short and stocky, carried a table lamp with the power cord dangling, and the woman, tall and lean, clutched a metal trash can lid. Both lumbered toward me like a pair of zombies, ready to pound me with their weapons.

More doors banged open. From houses all around, men, women, and children marched in my direction, each wielding something that would probably hurt even if I really were partially invulnerable, especially the huge, snarling Doberman one girl guided at the end of a leash.

I sprinted toward the motorcycle. The girl released the Doberman and shouted, "Molly! Kill!"

The dog shot toward me, its sharp teeth bared. Still running, I ducked under a frying pan swung by a wrinkled old woman and skidded to a stop next to



**We zipped away, barely escaping.**

Sam and Milligan. I spotted the phone on the grass and snatched it up. "Let's go."

We set the motorcycle upright and leaped onto the seat. After starting the engine, I looked back. The Doberman closed in. Just as it lunged, we zipped away, barely escaping its snapping jaws.

"Whew!" Sam hugged me tightly from behind. "That was close!"

"No kidding." As we zoomed down the road, I looked at the GPS tracker. Just like Milligan had said, the red dot flashed in Peace Valley at a bend in the river, which meant that he would know where to find us. Even worse, Mom might be hypnotized as well. How could we battle against our own mother? Not only that, how could we take on Milligan, his cronies, and the entire city?

I let out a sigh and rode on. Danger didn't matter. Sam and I had to save Mom, Milligan, and all of Nirvana.