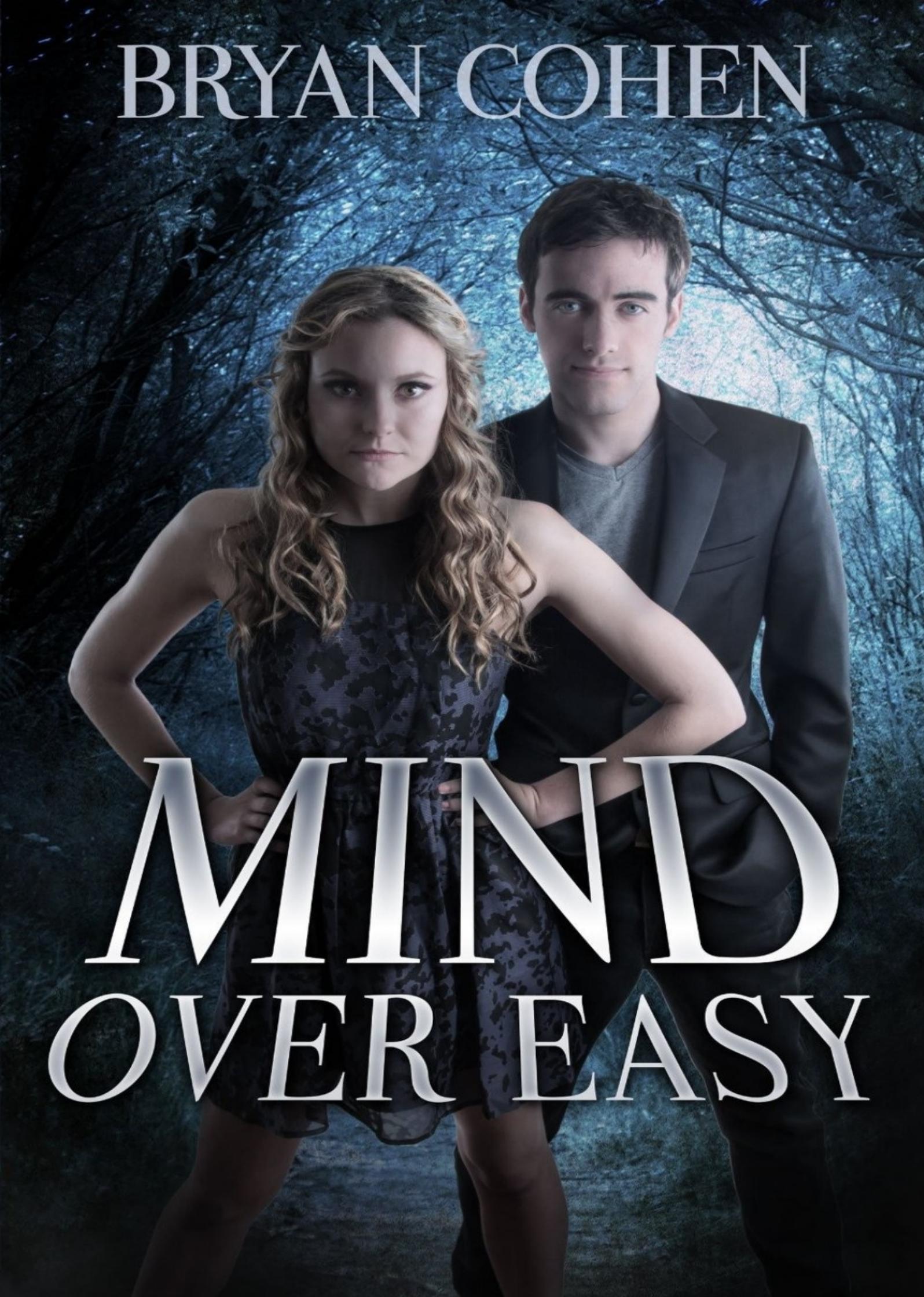


BRYAN COHEN



MIND  
OVER EASY

# Mind Over Easy

By Bryan Cohen

## **Ted Saves the World Series**

*Book 2*

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# PART ONE

## Chapter 1

A man wearing sunglasses and a bulky coat that hid his build walked through the abandoned parking lot at Page's Diner attempting to sense any power Ted Finley may have left behind. He was a stranger to Treasure, though he'd forced himself to become more integrated after he saw the news reports of Ted's heroic exploits. Most of the glass had been cleared from the lot after the neighborhood chipped in to cut down on cleanup costs for the diner's owner, Debra Page. A few shards glistened in the bushes as the man looked up at the broken building. His mind turned to his childhood home, which had been similarly ravaged the last time he'd seen it. The pit in his stomach ached as he opened the half-cracked front door. A hint of power was left in the room, as a fire might leave a burnt carbon aroma.

"It's not here anymore. But it was."

Aside from the broken windows, the diner looked like it could have been ready to open the next morning. The stranger understood why when the realtor walked in.

"Hello?" The woman sported a big smile on her face, as if she could sense a hefty commission. "I saw you walk in. Are you interested in hearing about the building?"

The man rested his hands against the wall and felt something seep into his body. For him, it was like the odor of a cigarette to a former smoker a few months after quitting. His mouth watered.

"I'm very interested," he said. "What happened here?"

The woman's face brightened as she went into salesman mode. After introducing herself, she began to speak with pride.

"Local hero – no, national hero – Ted Finley saved over a dozen patrons from a gang of thugs here not three months ago. If it weren't for him, this would be a spot of tragedy, but he made it a triumph."

"It looks a little tragic." He kicked a piece of glass from under one of the booths toward the wall. It ricocheted against a blue piece of tile, making a pinging sound before it caromed to the woman's feet. "I'd heard something about classic literature on the walls. Are those books still here?"

The woman carefully picked up the glass and placed it in a wastebasket. "The former owner actually donated those books to the local library. They were put into a special collection."

As he walked over to the woman, she straightened her spine. The corners of his mouth turned upward.

"Thank you." The man laid a hand on her shoulder. "I was never here – and you can't see me now."

The realtor flinched and put her hand up to her forehead. A few seconds later, she recovered and began tidying the diner up for her first appointment of the day. When she looked in the stranger's direction, her eyes moved through him as if he were transparent. The stranger placed his hand against the wall once again as he walked toward the exit.

Like many buildings on the upscale side of town, the Treasure Library was new and its residents did all they could to keep it looking that way. The man passed a team

of sidewalk power-washers when he entered. The fresh smell of air conditioners and Lysol covered up any evidence that there were books inside. The stranger would have taken the musty odor of old paper any day.

It only took a few minutes for him to find the right librarian.

"How may I help you, sir?" The woman didn't look up from her computer.

"I'd like to see the special stacks."

"Do you have a library card?"

When the stranger said he didn't and wasn't a town resident, the librarian pointed to a placard displaying the policy for viewing the special stacks. He could accompany a town resident with a library card, but the man had no desire to bring anybody else into this situation. At least, not yet.

"Would you mind letting a fellow book-lover see a few first-edition classics? I've been tracking these down for weeks."

His explanation was a half-truth. Seeing the original print of Moby Dick mattered less to him than what might lie between the lines. The librarian's monotone seemed pulled straight from a computerized voicemail system.

"We appreciate your commitment to the arts, but a policy is a policy."

The stranger rubbed the back of his head. "It was worth a shot to do it the old-fashioned way. I figured a little charm never hurt."

"What do you mean the old-fashioned way?"

The stranger reached toward the librarian and spoke as if he were chanting. "Take me to the special stacks. Nonchalantly, if you please."

The librarian closed her eyes for a second before standing up and grabbing the key beside her. "Right this way."

She was no perkier than before.

The stranger smirked. "I would have told you to be bright and excited to talk to me, but I didn't want you to hurt yourself."

The librarian didn't respond as they passed through several doors on the way to the stacks. While many of the rooms were visible through glass walls, the hand-carved door to the stacks was opaque and heavy. The stranger wondered if it was one of the building's original doors, before the suburbanites decided that modern was beautiful. The librarian opened the door and led the man in before locking them inside.

The smell of crumbling paper and stitched covers sat in the room like a cloud. He felt like he'd left a world made of plastic to enter a truer reality.

Beyond his five senses, he felt a powerful force drawing him closer. If Page's was the smoke, this room was a blazing fire.

He tried to sense the source with his eyes. "I need to see the books from Page's."

With every step the librarian took, the man felt a stronger pulse of energy. She laid a few books on top of a table, and the stranger swore he could hear a faint hum emanating from them. One in particular began to call to him without words, and he touched it.

A flash of blue electricity shot through the room, the lights dimmed and the stranger flew backwards into the wall. The man squinted to cope with the pain and pulled himself back up. He rubbed the spot on his shoulder where he'd made an impact.

"I think it's fair to say that wasn't the right one."

The librarian remained stoic beside the table as the man chuckled to himself.

"Thanks for your concern."

This time, he concentrated more carefully on the book he should choose. When it became clear that a first edition of the book *Of Mice and Men* was the right fit, he opened it to the first page and put his finger on the text. His body vibrated with the first wave of energy.

The librarian folded her arms. "You know, you shouldn't put your fingers all over it."

The stranger's eyes widened and focused on the woman. "Let me guess: you hate people and love books? But what if you thought I was the love of your life?"

He didn't need to point in her direction anymore. The book amplified his power enough that a simple glance did the trick. The librarian's features softened as she looked at the man in a new light. Her eyes brightened and she grew twice as lively as before.

"Who's a good boy?" The woman bent at the knees and began to clap at the stranger. "Who's a good boy? Oh, Hitchcock. Come on over here and give mommy some kisses."

The stranger held back his laughter. "Funny, I would've pegged you as a cat person."

"You are just such a good boy." She was about to tousele the man's hair before he stopped her with his mind.

"Why don't you take some vacation days with good old Hitchcock?"

The librarian's previous demeanor returned. She nodded and left the stranger in silence. The man flipped through the first few pages of the book and felt his mental powers increase with every passing second.

"While you play, it's time for me to get to work."

## Chapter 2

Erica LaPlante sipped her coffee as she watched the living soul, Ted Finley, attempt to arrange a series of objects five feet off the ground in the form of a word. She gave him the option of using anything in the lair, as long as none of the items he chose were the same weight as one another. Ted had finished the E and the R of her name when she started to take in their surroundings.

She didn't believe Dhiraj at first when he said he'd cobbled together the funds for a secret hideout. A small staircase beneath a closed-down bakery led to a massive space that must have connected the basements of almost every storefront on the entire underdeveloped block. The subcontractors had outfitted the formerly abandoned space with the latest technology: 50-inch touchscreen monitors, holographic simulators and even a state-of-the-art fitness center. Erica remembered the good old days, when she could train the living soul in a barn, a forest or a factory. She appreciated the new equipment, and the top-of-the-line coffee maker was serving her well at the moment, but there was nothing like getting your hands dirty. She wasn't sure if that was possible in the pristine environment they found themselves in.

A five-pound weight from the letter I tumbled to the ground, and Erica noticed the rest of the word start to falter.

"Concentrate." Erica took another drink, the warm beverage tickling her throat on the way down. "Just because one thing falls, doesn't mean the other ones have to."

Ted sneered at Erica before turning his attention back to the word. His gym shirt was covered in sweat, the result of a two-mile jog at 4 a.m. followed by hand-to-hand combat training. Erica liked to do the mental work last, because a living soul needed to be prepared for the most difficult of circumstances. She'd seen multiple living souls fall prey to a failed effort to use their powers when they were exhausted. She'd also seen one die because of his inability to balance physical and mental energy.

She didn't enjoy thinking back on that moment. After all, she was the one who'd had to kill him.

"That looks good."

Erica was startled to hear Ted speak. He'd been completely silent for the previous few minutes as he arranged the letters.

"It is." She took an exaggerated sip and licked her lips.

Every time she got too focused on training him, Ted would do or say something that reminded her they were dating. At first, she blamed the fact that she was in a teenaged body that still had the related urges. As she'd spent time with him, however, she knew there was something else about him. His poofy black hair and face that was too long for his neck weren't winning any modeling contracts. Even though he'd put on a few extra pounds of muscle since he'd started training, Ted was still as wiry as could be. But the physical stuff didn't matter to Erica. She liked who he was and what he cared about. She also didn't mind the way he looked at her, as if she were some kind of goddess.

Ted's face turned up into a grin. "I think I know a good place for that."

Erica felt the half-full cup of coffee zip out of her hands. "Hey!"

The beverage stayed completely upright and undisturbed as it moved across the

room and formed the last part of the word.

"I think you mean 'A.'" Ted beamed at his joke and his three-dimensional word.

Erica already felt the absence of the warm cup against her hands. "There were less delicious objects you could have picked."

Ted raised his chin in air. "I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention."

She wanted to be angry, but her name was spelled out so expertly that she let pride bubble to the top instead.

Erica put her hands together. "Good work. It really is something."

When Ted looked up at the word to admire it, Erica struck. She dashed in with lightning speed and tried to catch him in the back with a jump kick. He turned to block the blow with his elbow, though the objects from the E and the R toppled to the ground. She swung at him with a left and a right punch, but he feinted both before pushing Erica's chest to knock her backward.

He crouched down into a fighting stance. "So that's how it is." Ted looked down at the fallen objects.

"You dropped your E." She mimicked his stance.

"Maybe I did it on purpose." With that, Ted put out his right hand and started shooting the items in Erica's direction.

She kicked a trashcan to the side and let several crumpled pieces of paper and pencils zip past her. "Gotta aim better than that."

When a medicine ball came right for her midsection, Erica caught it in one hand, spun around and threw it right back toward Ted. The ball shot at him with such speed, he didn't have time to react before it knocked into his thighs and sent him face-first to the ground. The dumbbell from the I made a clanging sound as it hit the ground; the C and the A were the only letters that remained hovering.

Ted coughed. "Good toss. Almost de-manned me." He rolled onto his back, did a kick flip onto his feet and turned back toward his protector. "Now it's time for a little offense."

Ted came running at Erica. She sighed as she easily sidestepped his attack, got underneath his arm and used his momentum to flip him onto his back. As the thud echoed throughout the room, Erica watched the items from the C and the A start to waver and fall. She made a mad dash for the A and flipped through the air, catching her coffee before it reached the ground and landing on her feet.

She took a sip and shook her head. "Here's a tip: when you're tired and floating something, stay on the defensive."

Erica offered Ted a hand and easily pulled him back up to a standing position.

"Good to know."

After Ted took a quick shower in the lair's full-service bathroom, they packed up Erica's car in the back alley. Ted looked at his watch and back at Erica multiple times.

"Yes?" Erica finished loading the car and shut the door.

"I noticed that its 6:30."

"Mmmhmm."

Ted put his hands on his hips. "So that means we're getting out early."

Erica nodded. "Mmmhmm."

Ted rolled his eyes and took Erica around the waist. "You're driving me crazy! I

wanted to see if we could do less training and get up later."

Erica brushed away a strand of hair that was getting in the way of his eyes. "No. I just have somewhere to go before school."

She started to turn toward the car, but Ted pulled her back toward himself.

"You said you haven't felt any dark souls cross over since Sandra, right?"

Erica could tell where Ted was going with this. She slumped against the car. "Correct."

"And there's been no evidence of any otherworldly activity."

Erica nodded.

Ted inched himself closer to Erica. "Then maybe." A few inches closer. "Maybe." Even closer. "We could scale things back a little bit."

Erica gave Ted a quick peck on the lips. "Not gonna happen." She pulled herself away from Ted and walked around to the driver's side.

"But—"

"Sorry, Ted. No buts. You've got to be ready for anything at all times." Erica got inside and started the car.

Ted walked around to her side, and she rolled down the window to accommodate.

"Will you at least consider going to three days a week?" Ted sported a pair of puppy dog eyes that had more of an effect on Erica than she'd wanted. Unfortunately for Ted, it wasn't enough.

"Goodbye, Ted."

Ted squinted at Erica. "Wait, we're not going to school?"

Her lips twitched. "We are going to school. But I've got somewhere to go first. Alone."

"But what am I going to do?"

"You're a superhero. Take your wings and fly away."

Erica took the car out of park and left Ted standing in the alley. She wasn't quite sure what he'd said as she drove away, but she swore she heard the words, "But I'm tired!"

The musty air of the cave was thicker than usual that morning. Even though it had been three months, Erica couldn't help but picture the battle pitting Ted and herself against the dark souls. Erica looked up at the walls, which were still covered in ancient writing. Nigel and his gang had foolishly told her that the dark souls were using the wall to communicate between the Realm of Souls and Earth. It had taken a little bit of work, but Erica was able to reconfigure the communication device to send a secure message to Gan and Reena, the commanders of the light soul army. Erica traced the stone wall with her fingers and found her way back to the latest conversation they'd been having. The chat reminded her of a long-distance chess match, with each side taking a week to reply to the other. She typically went on weekend mornings to hide her communications from Ted, but she felt particularly anxious this week to see how her superiors would respond. She looked up at the last few inter-dimensional messages.

"He's stronger than I thought. The training is going well and I'm pleased with his progress."

"You said the same about Adam. Should we be worried?"

"Ted isn't like that. He doesn't crave power. He's of great service to this mission."

The latest response from Gan and Reena was written right next to the room's entrance. "Does he suspect that there are other powers he can tap into? Is he aware of them?"

Erica gripped the rock and thought up her response. As she conjured words in her mind, the words transposed themselves in the ancient script on the wall.

"He's only been able to use the one power. He doesn't suspect a thing. Our secret is safe."

## Chapter 3

Ted traced the length of Erica's hair with his eyes. He followed the strands of one curl to the side of her face and then to her eyes. He didn't care that she'd made him fly to school when he was dead-tired. Ted tended to get over any of Erica's so-called transgressions the next moment he saw her.

She was focused straight ahead on Mr. Redican, their long-term English substitute, who was discussing one of Shakespeare's Henry plays. Ted couldn't have told you which one as he contemplated the beauty of Erica's wide, deep eyes. Before he became a superhero, all he could share with Erica was the moment between when she caught him staring and when he turned away embarrassed. Things were different now.

"Hal was the son of King Henry IV, so he could have had any friends he wanted in the entire kingdom." Mr. Redican took a few paces before stopping just ahead of the front row of desks. "Why on Earth would he hang out with Falstaff?"

A confident jock voice piped up from the back of the room.

"Because he was his dealer?" Travis asked.

Even Erica laughed at that one. Ted got her attention with an exaggerated frown. As Travis high-fived the person at the desk next to him, Erica shrugged her shoulders and mouthed the words, "What? It was funny."

Travis had been friends with the Torello twins before they died, turned evil and were killed again by Ted. While most of the town was on the hero's side in the conflict, Travis was firmly part of the opposition. Travis was part of the popular crowd now, but Ted remembered a time when he would stand next to him at science fair competitions.

Mr. Redican cleared his throat, and most of the students turned their attention back to the front.

Redican was younger than most of the other teachers, which made Ted feel like he could relate to him more. As a sub, he'd gotten stuck with one of the oldest rooms in their school. The tiles on the floor needed to be replaced. Unlike most of the rooms, it still had a dark, green blackboard instead of a whiteboard. A square of the ceiling right above the instructor was missing, which allowed Ted to see a copper pipe and a thick, black cord.

Redican took the beat-up room in stride, using his energy and enthusiasm to keep Ted and the others invested. At least, Ted was engaged whenever he didn't have the urge to stare at Erica, which he continued to do after a few moments of paying attention.

"For all we know, he may have been Prince Hal's dealer," Redican said. "They were drinking buddies. But how would it make you feel if you saw the Vice President, the next person in line, getting drunk at a bar down the street from your house? Ted?"

Ted turned his glance away from Erica for just the second time in at least five minutes. Mr. Redican may have been one of the cool teachers, but his patience for ogling could only be stretched so thin.

"I might worry he'd suck at his job, but at least I'd think he was a cool guy."

Several students laughed politely, though it wasn't quite the ovation Travis had

gotten for his joke. Ted didn't mind. After all, the slight chuckling beat the usual silence his comments received before he became a celebrity.

"Great point, Ted," Redican marched the length of his desk. "The people who see Hal drinking with his buddies think he's a cool guy. He's out with the commoners. He's not sitting on some throne somewhere. He's with the people." Redican came to a stop. "Now here's the big question. Is he doing this as a political tactic or because it's fun?"

Erica raised her hand. Ted admired her slender arm and the fact that such a skinny biceps could deliver one hell of a punch.

"Ms. LaPlante?"

She turned her head to the side and pursed her lips together. "A little from column A and a little from column B."

The class really got behind that one. Even though Erica was dating a former loser, her popularity stock couldn't be higher. The bell rang and Mr. Redican called out the assignment to read through the end of Act IV.

Before Ted could pack up his things, Erica's buxom friend Beth had reached his girlfriend's side. While he had every morning to train with Erica and most evenings to talk hero business, he was still jealous to cede any of his Erica time.

"I can't handle it." Beth tucked her long, red curls behind one ear. "Mr. Redican is too hot for words."

Beth wasn't a quiet girl. Ted figured that Mr. Redican heard every word she'd ever said about his body and his mind, but he appeared to ignore every last one.

As Beth and Erica walked out of class, Ted followed closely behind.

"I see the goods." Erica tossed her hair. "I'm mostly in agreement."

Beth rolled her eyes. "Would you be 100% in agreement if you weren't in love with Captain Eavesdrop?"

Ted cleared his throat. "I'm not eavesdropping."

Beth and Erica stopped and turned around. Ted's girlfriend and protector put her arms around his neck and pulled him toward her. The combination of the sweet smell of her shampoo and the spritz of rich perfume she wore made his heart pump just a little bit faster. He loved that half his clothes took that scent home with him at the end of the day. Ted kissed Erica's glossy lips and took a moment to look into her eyes again, this time with a much better view than from two desks away. She only met his eyes for a second before she looked back at her friend.

"He can listen in on whatever conversations he wants to, as long as I get to kiss him at the end of it."

The words rang true enough, but ever since Erica returned from the dead with a whole new bag of personality, Ted wondered if lines like these were more theatre than reality.

Beth made a gagging sound. "I've officially choked on my own vomit and died." She imitated a corpse. "Can you see if Mr. Redican will come to my funeral and weep over my grave?"

"I'm sure everyone will, Beth." Ted tightened the grip around his girlfriend.

Beth gave Ted a minor death glare and turned back to Erica. "I'll see you in sixth period." Beth gestured at Ted. "Maybe you'll have this out of your system by then."

Beth gave a strained smile and left.

"It's not likely." Erica pulled Ted toward her once again and kissed him on the

cheek. She lingered there for a moment. "You need to stop staring at me in class."

Ted's mouth opened wide. "Staring? I would never stare. There's a very interesting poster about Charles Dickens right over your shoulder. I'm sure you just saw me reading that."

Erica took her hands off of Ted's neck and let one hand brush the side of his arm before grasping his hand. Ted interlocked his fingers with hers.

"I'm sure that's the explanation," she said. "You're making it hard for me to concentrate. You've been in school for the last 12 years. I'm trying to get the hang of it again."

Erica looked 17 years old, but Ted needed to remind himself from time to time that she'd been around a lot closer to 17 generations.

"I figured you'd have this stuff down pat." Ted grinned. "Didn't you pal around with Willy Shakes?"

Erica dug her nails into Ted's palm. "You see one play in the 1590s and everybody thinks you're some kind of expert."

Ted knew there was a lot about Erica he'd never know. When would there be time to go over several hundred years of history? But he had a strange feeling about the morning's training session.

"So, where did you have to go today?"

Erica stopped to get a drink at the water fountain and pretended not to hear. "Hmm?"

"Where'd you drive off to? Does it have something to do with the sword?"

After Ted had taken out Nigel and the Torello twins with the otherworldly sword, he suggested that he should walk around with it at all times. Erica had said it was too dangerous and she needed to put it somewhere safe. Not even Dhiraj knew where Erica's secret hiding space was.

"Ted, you need to trust me." She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "I only hide things when it's for your own good." Erica took Ted's hand and continued to lead him toward her locker.

Ted trusted Erica, but there was something strange about the way she said "your own good" that gave him pause. He made a mental note to run the conversation past Dhiraj and moved forward.

Comparing the hallway of Treasure High to Redican's classroom was like comparing a fresh apple off the tree to a moldy, shriveled orange. Ted had been at the school for close to three years, and it had already been remodeled twice. The ceilings were high, the walls smelled of fresh paint and the lockers were shiny and absent of any trace of gum. Even though Ted and his family didn't live on the rich side of town, he got to experience how the other half lived every day he walked into the squeaky-clean school.

As they got close to Erica's locker, Ted felt his free hand dig into his pocket. He looked over at the large poster on the wall. It read:

"I Can Be Your Hero, Baby.

Get Your Tickets for Junior Prom."

They were dating, but aside from occasional hangouts with Beth, Winny, Jennifer and Dhiraj, it'd been mostly a private affair. He wasn't sure how Erica would react to being asked out to prom, so he'd put it off. After weeks of being dogged by Dhiraj, he

broke into Erica's locker using his powers and placed a "Will You Go to Prom with Me" sign inside. Even though Erica wasn't the same person he'd grown up with, it would still fulfill a lifetime goal if she said yes.

When Erica reached her locker, she gave him a probing glance. "What is it?"

Ted looked up at the ceiling and then the walls. "Oh, nothing. Nothing."

Erica laughed. "You are too strange."

When she reached for her lock, both of their phones buzzed at the exact same time. Ted's heart sank when she put down the lock to check the message.

"It's Sheriff Norris." Erica's popular girl grin was gone. She'd gone right into game face mode. "There's a robbery and hostage situation downtown."

Ted felt like he'd just heard Erica speak Greek. "In Treasure?"

She nodded. "We better go."

As Erica turned, Ted grabbed her hand. "But, what about sixth and seventh period?"

"Sheriff Norris'll write you a note."

She tried to leave again, but Ted held her firm. He looked back at the locker and wondered if he should just ask her right then and there. "Wait!"

Erica rolled her eyes. "What is it, Ted?"

For a moment, Ted couldn't help but see the old Erica in his girlfriend. The one who'd be willing to end their relationship in a heartbeat. "I... I was wondering if--"

"Whatever it is, we'll talk about it after. Duty calls."

Erica took Ted's hand again and began leading him in a fast-paced walk toward the parking lot. He looked at Erica's locker.

Then Ted used his powers to move the card under a stack of books inside. "You know, sometimes I kind of hate duty."

## Chapter 4

Dhiraj knew he had checked the PayPal balance of Super Ted Finley LLC about 20 minutes ago, but he felt the need to check it again. The numbers were clear: Ted's superhero practice was a million-dollar enterprise. The crowdfunding campaigns came fast and furiously after Ted's heroics at the diner. There were endeavors to create a costume for Ted, a lair for him to plot against villains, and a sort of heroic tour in which he'd go city by city for a one-night-only action/adventure show. Dhiraj corralled every single one, and the end result was seven figures in the account, even after the construction of the lair.

As Dhiraj leaned back in the white, plastic chair, he remembered how he'd dreamed of the day he could manage a million bucks. Soon enough, he'd be able to do his thinking in a high-rent office with glass walls like his father's practice. He figured it would make the study hall room with its boring, taupe paint and its short, green carpet to shame. As the daydream continued, Dhiraj tapped his pencil against his desk so loudly, his neighbor had to catch the pencil in mid-air to stop him. Dhiraj nodded and moved his thought process back to the inside.

*What the hell am I going to do with this money?*

Ted would have to fulfill a few milestones between now and the end of the summer, and the tour was already shaping up. In three attempts to approve costume design ideas, Dhiraj had struck out with Ted.

"I'm not wearing any of those... things." Ted looked like he was about to pull his hair out.

Dhiraj sat on the edge of Ted's bed. His room was as clean as he'd ever seen it. Mrs. Finley blamed it on the fact that Erica tended to visit multiple times per week for study sessions.

"Ted, you have an obligation." Dhiraj affected his best CEO voice. "These people dropped a hundred grand on this design. You have to at least pose for pictures in it."

Ted launched two green stress balls into his hands. The second they arrived in his palms, he started to squeeze the life out of them.

"You seem calm."

"I'm not a brand, Dhiraj. I'm not a corporation. I'm a person."

Dhiraj was about to chime in when Ted chucked a stress ball at his sternum. Dhiraj caught it before it could do any damage.

"I know." Ted groaned. "Corporations are people, blah blah blah. Between school, training and all this business stuff, I haven't exactly had a lot of time for friends." Ted floated a soda his way and slurped through the straw. "When's the last time we met where we didn't talk about hero business? Heck, when's the last time we saw Natalie outside of school?"

Dhiraj knew the answer to the last question. They saw Natalie at the mall over a month ago, but it was only because they ran into her by chance. Dhiraj knew Ted was right. The social encounters had been scarce.

"I promise if you pick one of these costumes, we can go get a smoothie after."

Ted let out a small sigh. "Just go with the least spandexy one."

Dhiraj had hoped that after basketball season, which Natalie missed half of after recovering from her stab wound, the three of them would once again be thick as thieves. Since the season ended, however, Natalie had been missing in action and took days to respond to most texts.

Natalie wasn't the only woman missing from Dhiraj's life. Dhiraj switched from his email to social media and took a glance at Jennifer Norris' profile. He'd planned on waiting just a few days after the dark souls incident to ask Jennifer out. But when she returned to school after a week off, the typical carefree smiles he'd come to expect from his golden girl had evaporated. When he attempted to start up conversations with her in school, her responses were curt at best. He opted to wait to ask her out until she'd emotionally recovered from the incident. Three months had passed, but the old Jennifer had never returned.

When the study hall proctor came around to check on computer screens, Dhiraj quickly switched to a decoy paper in a writing program. He sighed as the beep from a text caught his attention. The proctor was about to admonish him when he showed her the text.

"Official hero business." Dhiraj puffed out his chest. "Check the five o'clock news for more info."

Less than a minute later, Dhiraj had packed up and spun his blue subcompact car around to pick up Ted and Erica. He laughed at the rows of luxury vehicles that would need to remain in the lot past three o'clock.

"Suckers."

His passengers were waiting under a red metal awning just outside of Hall B. The three of them had run multiple drills to exit school in an orderly fashion, but this would be the first one with real crime on the other end. Erica sat shotgun while Ted took the back.

"Everybody buckle up." Dhiraj clicked his belt into place. "It's going to be a bumpy ride."

"Why?" Erica followed his advice. "Do you need to get your shocks fixed?"

Ted did the same. "Are we going off-roading?"

Dhiraj glowered. "I just wanted to say something cool." Dhiraj pulled out of the Lexus showroom-like parking lot and gave the gas pedal a push. "Let's be the superhero team that has fun."

Dhiraj merged onto the highway and got into the fast lane. He wondered if he'd be able to employ any of the skills he'd learned from using a stunt driving Groupon.

"Actually, Ted and I are the superhero team." Erica typed a few words into her phone.

"What does that make me?"

Ted chuckled. "The superhero team's driver?"

Dhiraj knew he wasn't supposed to pass on the right, but seeing as innocent people were in danger, he did so with gusto. "I don't know what you guys are talking about. I bring you gadgets. I take care of all the back end. I'm like Q and M rolled into one."

Dhiraj caught Erica's puzzled look in his peripheral.

"Why does everything have to connect back to movies for you?"

"Everything I know, I've learned from pop culture."

Ted laughed and squeezed Erica's shoulder. "Same here."

Erica let out a groan. "Why even try to save the world?"

Dhiraj changed lanes and took the curve of an exit a lot faster than he should have. The tires made a skidding sound. The car was about to spin out of control when Ted steadied it with his powers. Dhiraj could feel the tires moving into the right position without his steering command.

When they'd stopped skidding, Ted returned control to the driver. "Careful there, buddy."

"Just warming you up." Dhiraj put on a fake smile. "Nobody should superhero cold."

"Uh huh." Erica pointed toward the sign outside the shopping complex. "Pull in over here."

Dhiraj parked and scampered around the car to open the door for Erica. She stuck out her tongue at him and exited. Ted followed, and the they were about to dash away before Dhiraj held up his hand.

"Guys! Don't forget the gear."

"Oh yeah." Ted rubbed his hands together. "All the secret agent stuff. Did you ever have this as a kid?"

Erica raised her eyebrows. "Sorry, we didn't have plastic yet when I was growing up."

Dhiraj opened the trunk to reveal some of their crowdfunded goodies, including night vision goggles, bulletproof vests and fiberoptic cameras. When the equipment had arrived, Sheriff Norris said it was better than anything they had in the office. Dhiraj grabbed the cameras and locked the car.

Sheriff Norris and the rest of his squad were camped outside the jewelry store where the situation was taking place. The shopping center consisted of a chain Thai restaurant, an ice cream parlor, the jewelry store and a couple of knick-knack shops Dhiraj had never entered. The jeweler was the smallest store on the strip, and it looked unremarkable from the outside. Dhiraj tried to picture how they'd shoot the movie version of the scene. It wasn't as glorious a location as he would've wanted for their first organized team outing, but it would have to do. Besides, Dhiraj assumed they'd make the store look way bigger and cooler when Hollywood put it on the big screen.

When the three of them walked in, Sheriff Norris and the rest of the department parted like the Red Sea. Ted was in front, with Erica and Dhiraj flanking him. Dhiraj imagined the trio looked pretty awesome; that is, until Ted tripped on a power cord that led into one of the department's vans. He fell forward so quickly that the hero didn't even have time to deploy his powers, landing face-first on the ground. There was a gasp from the onlookers. Dhiraj saw Erica shake her head as the sheriff ran over to help Ted to his feet.

"I'm okay." Ted brushed some dirt from his face. "I'm good."

Sheriff Norris chuckled. "You three sure know how to make an entrance."

"Once we're done learning how to walk—" Erica glared at Ted "—how about you tell us what we've got, sheriff?"

Ted nudged Erica. Dhiraj overheard the whisper.

"Shouldn't I take the lead on this in public?"

Erica put up both her hands and smirked before taking a step back.

Ted took her place. "What've we got, sheriff?"

"It's a robbery gone bad. Six hostages, one of whom has a potentially serious injury. At least three kidnapers. All of them armed."

Ted squinted. "I don't remember the last time there was a robbery—"

"Four years." Sheriff Norris looked past the three of them to the jewelry store. "Discounting the occasional house burglary, it's been four years since anything like this."

Dhiraj presented the cameras. "You want some eyes on the inside?"

The sheriff's eyes twinkled. "And it isn't even my birthday yet."

Dhiraj set up the equipment as the sheriff and his men guided two of the cameras in through an air conditioning vent on the back of the building. They flipped the devices on and Ted used his powers to maneuver them through two storage closets and into the jewelry store. Before long, they could all survey the scene. Dhiraj flipped a switch, and the sound from inside the store played through a speaker.

"Will you stop crying?!" A scrawny kidnapper stood over the body of an injured hostage.

There was a puddle of blood beside her, and Dhiraj wondered if it was from a knife or a glass wound – shards of glass from the jewelry cases were spread throughout the room.

"Stop looking at her!" The scrawny man gestured to his fellow robbers. "Get the cops back on the phone."

Judging by the way he gave orders, the man seemed to be in charge. That didn't seem to stop him from nervously pacing back and forth.

Ted cleared his throat. "What's the play here?"

Before Erica could say a word, a noise came from the other side of the parking lot. There were voices, one of which echoed louder than the others through a bullhorn. A group of about 50 people marched in unison and began to surround the sheriff's forces.

"Here they are." The sheriff looked over at his squad. "Set up the barricades, boys."

Erica placed her hands on her hips. "Do they have a permit?"

The sheriff nodded. "It just came in before you got here. I was hoping we'd be through already, but they work quickly."

Dhiraj marveled at the growing crowd. He recognized some of them from outside the school parking lot. Most of them were middle-aged or older and carried signs. Dhiraj wondered how any of these folks could maintain a day job while harassing Ted. He looked through the crowd to see if any of their slogans were clever. Most of them said one thing and one thing only.

"Go Home Alien!"

The Go Home Alien movement had grown from a hashtag into something much more annoying.

Dhiraj shrugged. "If only they were protesting robberies."

Nobody laughed at the joke. Erica looked angry enough to punch somebody.



## Chapter 5

Erica watched Ted as he reacted to the arrival of the GHA movement. She'd seen him grow in a lot of ways over the last few months, but this was always going to be the toughest part.

*How are you supposed to feel like a hero when it seems like everyone is out to get you?*

Erica recalled the protestors knocking on the Finleys' door when she was over for dinner. She almost welcomed the confrontation of calling the sheriff to get them off the lawn. Erica was built for conflict, not for small talk. There were only a dozen people in the local GHA group at first, but a few advertisements here and there coupled with constant anti-Ted chatter on a few choice news channels caused the movement to grow. Now there were thousands of people who met throughout the world to talk about getting Ted to go back to his home planet, as if there was such a thing.

Erica leaned in toward Ted. "Are you alright?"

Ted squirmed and gave the crowd a final glance before turning to her. She could already see the sweat starting to bead on his forehead.

"Never been better." Ted's voice cracked. "I'm glad all my fans are here to see it."

Erica put her hand on his back and took a soothing tone. "Hey, it's okay. It's just like the lair. Just you and me."

"And a hundred protestors." Dhiraj looked around as if he were playing a game of I-Spy. "Oh, and the local news just got here."

Erica moved her hand from Ted's back to the base of Dhiraj's neck. When she squeezed, he yelped from the pressure. "We're coddling now, Dhiraj. We're not writing the screenplay."

Dhiraj shrank from the challenge and nodded. Erica watched Ted as he stared into the camera monitors. She saw a silver necklace on the far wall of the store begin to move as Ted tried to get his bearings.

"You're doing great, Ted." Erica could hear Ted's breathing grow faster. "One step at a time, okay?"

The necklace lifted off of the wall and hovered in the air. While all of the kidnapers were concentrating on their hostages, they missed the ghostly piece of jewelry floating in the air behind them. Ted's hand moved as if he were controlling the silver necklace like a puppeteer with his strings. He was about to gently place the necklace back, when a shout rose up from the mob behind him.

"Just go home!"

Ted jumped, and his powers caused the entire wall display of necklaces to come crashing to the ground.

The kidnapers turned and pointed their guns at the commotion. "What the hell was that?!"

As the men inside investigated the damage, Ted hung his head. "I can't do this, guys. It's too hard."

The shout from the ground had morphed into a chant of "Just go home! Just go