



## ***Spreading Rumors About So-Called Superheroes***

I can't think of anything really exciting that had happened during the first twelve years of my life. But that all started to change one morning in sixth grade.

My dad was watching the news while he got ready for work. That meant my sister and I were stuck watching it, too, while we ate our breakfast, even though I really wanted to watch Plastic Pup cartoons. Instead, I had to try to tune out all the boring talk about politics and the stupid jokes of Wally the Wacky Weatherman.

"Now back to our top story of the hour," the news anchor boomed in a deep, serious voice. "Yesterday afternoon, there was another sighting of what some people are calling—strange as it may sound—a superhero . . . right here in Kanigher Falls."

My head snapped up from my cereal bowl. For once, I was interested in the news.

“That’s right,” bubbled the blond coanchor. “Superheroes are common in big cities, like Kurtzburg, but Kanigher Falls hasn’t seen a superhero since Jade Mask marshaled the Founders’ Day parade twelve years ago.”

As the video rolled, I leaned forward to get a better look. The footage was shaky and very blurry. A bank alarm rang shrilly, and two people ran out the front door of the bank, each carrying a grocery bag in one hand and a gun in the other. They jumped into a car that pulled away before they could even close their doors.

Whoever was working the video camera tried to zoom in on the license plate, but the car vanished from the screen. The image spun around as the camera operator tried to figure out what was happening. People started screaming.

The camera tilted up just in time to catch a shot of a purple boot and what could have been a purple skirt. Someone must have lifted the car at least twenty feet into the air, because the sound of shattering glass and twisting metal as it fell to the ground was deafening. The shaky camera work made it impossible to see any details, but a white and purple blur was definitely flying in front of the skyscrapers, carrying the two bank robbers.

The news anchor reported that the thieves had been deposited on the front steps of the Seventh Police

Precinct's station house. "Police would not confirm whether the apprehensions were made by Ultraviolet, the rumored superhero of Kanigher Falls," he continued. "However, several eyewitnesses—including the camera operator of the previous video clip—all swear they saw the woman."

They cut to a series of interviews with people who had seen the bank robbery. A little old lady pointed at the sky. "She picked up that car like it was no heavier than a toy," she croaked.

A fat man in a blue suit shook his head. "I'm not sure what I saw, but I know it was a woman wearing white and purple, just like I've heard about on the news."

I was shocked to see the next person being interviewed. It was Ms. Matthews, my history teacher. Underneath her image, the TV station had written *Sophie Matthews, Superhero Skeptic*. I watched as my sour-faced teacher rolled her eyes. I was pretty familiar with the expression. It was Ms. Matthews's way of telling someone he'd asked a really stupid question. I'd seen that look too many times, most recently when my friend Teddy had asked her why John Adams added a "Quincy" to his name the second time he became president.

"This is what you consider responsible journalism?" Ms. Matthews scoffed. "Spreading rumors about so-called

superheroes? A bank was robbed and the criminals were brought to justice, but you're here stirring up silly comic-book fantasies." She clucked her tongue disapprovingly, the way she always did when Teddy . . . well, the way she always did when Teddy did pretty much anything.

"Isn't that your teacher?" my dad asked, gesturing toward the TV with his coffee mug.

"Yeah," I responded, my mouth full of Cocoa Blasters and milk.

"She's a barrel of laughs, isn't she?"

"She hates everything," I explained. "The class, the school, the students, and now even superheroes. The only thing that makes her happy is talking about boring old stuff, like . . . I don't know . . ." I looked down at the history notes sitting next to my backpack. I'd spent most of the lecture sketching a pretty cool picture of Freedom Knight beating up Painspider, just like in last month's issue of *Freedom Knight*, #342, but I had also managed to jot down a few points about the Civil War. I picked a few of the words at random. "Like slavery or the American Grant," I read aloud.

My dad stopped drinking his coffee and stared at me, confused. Then he looked down at my notes. "Do you mean *U. S. Grant*?"

"United States, American—you knew what I meant," I

said with a wave of my hand. “On the bright side, I only have to be in her class for an hour a day.”

“U. S. Grant was a person, Nate, not a thing,” my dad said sternly. “It’s Ulysses S. Grant, not *United States* Grant.”

“Whatever. What I was saying —”

“No, not ‘whatever.’ Nate, you’re in sixth grade. You should know who President Grant was.”

“Right.” I wanted to talk my way out of looking stupid, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. “Um . . . on a positive note, I got a B in gym.”

My dad wasn’t impressed.

“We’re doing flash cards when I get home,” he ordered. My dad never saw a pack of flash cards he didn’t like. There were times I was certain the store owners in Kanigher Falls were purposely stocking boxes of flash cards at their checkout counters just in case my dad happened to shop there. He would come home from the hardware store and announce, “I got a Phillips-head screwdriver, eight sheets of medium-grit sandpaper, a box of one hundred multiplication flash cards, and a pack of C batteries.” Seriously, what hardware store stocks math flash cards?

What made things worse was that my big sister, Denise, loved doing flash cards with Dad. She could

recognize the faces of all the U.S. presidents — even Benjamin Harrison — before she was five. She knew her multiplication tables by the time she was six. If you named a year, she could rattle off any significant historical events that had taken place then, along with their dates.

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. “Sorry, Dad.”

“No need to be sorry,” he chuckled. “Anytime’s a good time for flash cards.” Without warning, he wheeled around to face my sister. “Denise! Seventeen sixty-five!”

“Parliament passes the Stamp Act,” she mumbled, rolling her eyes and slurping her cereal. “It was the first direct British tax on the American colonies, fueling separatist feelings that would eventually lead to the American Revolution.”

“Very good!” Dad smiled, turning his back long enough for me to shoot her the evil eye and for her to stick her tongue out at me in reply.

By then the news anchor was done talking about anything I cared to hear, and was having a conversation with Gary Greenthumb the Garden Guru about peat moss. I grabbed my backpack, drank the last sip of my apple juice, and headed for the front door.

“I want to see your homework tonight before you watch any TV,” my dad shouted as I tried to make my

escape. “And I don’t want to hear, ‘The teacher didn’t give us any!’”

It wasn’t that my sister was smarter than me—

Well, okay, maybe my sister *was* smarter than me. The point was I knew plenty of things. They just weren’t the things my teachers were grading me on.

For example, what other kid in my class knew that Mr. Enigma’s first appearance was in *American Musketeers* issue twelve, much less owned a near-mint copy? Who among them could identify the colorist on a 1970s issue of *Man Ghost* just from the shading of the hero’s shadow? Certainly none of them had ever won the prestigious Ultimate Comic Book Trivia Championship of Knowledge medal awarded every June at Funny Pages, the local comic-book shop. I knew because the last three were hanging in my bedroom.

And I knew my comic-book collection was bigger than those of any other three guys at school combined.

That was why I was so excited about having a superhero in town. Suddenly, everyone was talking about superheroes, and no one knew more about superheroes than me.

Growing up in Kanigher Falls had been difficult for me, since we’d never had a superhero. One eighth-grade kid was from Fradon, and he had his picture taken with

Ms. Miraculous two years ago, before his family moved here. If I had a quarter for every time he'd found a reason to "casually" pass that photo around and make sure everyone got a good look at it, I'd be able to afford that near-mint copy of *Marauder* #2 in the locked display case at Funny Pages. Mark Schweikert claimed to have seen Zilch at the mall in Claremont, but since Zilch is a shape-shifter and can look like anyone, it was kind of hard to prove. Wintertyrant had taken one of my classmates' uncles hostage during a standoff with police at the stock exchange the past summer, and another girl claimed that her grandmother's neighbor in Weisinger was Baron Shield.

Even my mom had stories. She'd grown up in Darwyn City, and she'd always seen Phantom Ranger when she was a kid. She made it sound like you couldn't turn the corner without bumping into the guy. Of course, when she and my dad got married, they didn't stay in Darwyn City. They had to move to boring old Kanigher Falls.

But now things were going to change. We finally had our own superhero.