



Susan Gable

A Hero to Keep - Chapter 1

FOR THE UMPTEENTH time, Greg Hawkins glanced at the observation window—the one that reflected into the room he used at Erie University's Children's Center—and wished he had superpowers.

Nothing spectacular, mind you. Just the ability to see and hear through the walls. To know who was staring at him this time.

At least a goldfish in a bowl could stare back.

"*KerPOW! KerPOW!*" At the far end of the table, one of Greg's kids wiggled in his chair, banging his fist on the cluttered surface and sending colored pencils rolling in different directions.

"Mr. Hawkins, how do you spell kerpow? I want to write it big."

"Kerpow, huh?" He jotted it on a scrap of paper and passed it down the table, sneaking a covert look at his watch as he did. They were more than halfway through the session and Julie still wasn't there. It wasn't usually a good sign when one of his kids was late. Especially this late. Without a parent calling him.

Just three weeks earlier they'd lost a member of the group—Scotty—and Greg didn't think any of them—not him, not the kids, nor their parents—were ready to deal with another setback. Hopefully there was another explanation.

"Okay, guys, quick five minute break. Take a stretch, look at what everyone else has been doing." He pulled out his cell, checking for messages, while the kids eased from their chairs.

"I need a drink of water," Cheryl announced as she headed for the door.

"And I have to go to the can," Michael said, following on her heels.

"Hold it. Earlier I let you go get a drink—" he pointed at Michael—"and you—" he moved his finger to Cheryl—"go to the bathroom. What's going on?"

Cheryl turned in the doorway, hands behind her back. She shrugged her shoulders, but her face had gone white. That concerned him.

Michael, meanwhile, danced in place, attempting, no doubt, to convince Greg of the urgency of the situation. "Got a drink before, now I have to take a leak. In one end and out the other, right?"

"Thanks for the biology lesson, professor. Be back in five. We have work to finish." Greg frowned at his phone. No messages.

While the other three kids milled around the room, and the unseen eyes on the other side of the observation window watched, he doodled a clock, hands racing around the face, springs exploding from the side. Time. The enemy of all.

The enemy of his program.

The new university dean was on a mad cost-cutting rampage, and had made it clear that Greg's art therapy program was near the top of the chopping block. She believed his program would be better suited run through one of the local hospitals, or cancer centers, or even one of the social services organizations.

And being that the university provided him with space he'd otherwise have to purchase or rent, utilities, an umbrella of insurance, grad students to do the grunt work... A serious amount of money would be needed to fill the gap if he couldn't find someone else to take on his program.

He was funded through the end of the summer semester. Unless he convinced Dean Auld otherwise, time was up in August.

"All right you guys, back to it." The kids didn't need much encouragement and returned to their places and drawings.

Except the two who'd left the room and were still missing in action.

It was the action part that had him worried. Michael and his sidekick Cheryl, ever faithful though of late slow moving, were undoubtedly up to trouble.

He didn't need superhero powers to sense it. Being the uncle to almost a baker's dozen kids—one of his sisters was due in two months with nephew thirteen—and having been a boy himself, he just knew it. He had a soft spot for Michael, in part because the boy shared his name with Greg's dad. But soft didn't mean he'd give the kid a free pass.

Sticking his head out the therapy-room door, he scanned the hallway. Big surprise, Cheryl wasn't at the water fountain on the corner. Nor was Michael in sight. "You guys keep working. I'll be right back. I have to see what's keeping Cheryl and Michael."

Greg turned towards the mirrored window, crossing his fingers Dean Auld wasn't behind it. "Watch them," he said, exaggerating the formation of the words in case the observers didn't have the speaker turned on. At the very least, they could make themselves useful.

At the men's room, a quick search revealed Michael wasn't there. He rapped on the women's door next. "Cheryl? Are you in there?"

"Yeah, Mr. Hawkins. Sorry, but after I got a drink, I had to go the bathroom again. I'll be right out." Suppressed giggling followed her confession.

Crap. "Do you know where Michael is?"

"Uh, no. Didn't he come back to the classroom yet?"

"If he had, would I be asking you?"

"Oh, right. I guess not."

"You have two more minutes. If you're not back by then, I'm coming in there after you."

"You wouldn't!" she shrieked. "This is the girls' room."

"Try me. You could be sick in there. It would be my duty to be sure you're okay."

"I'll be back to the classroom." Cheryl's voice was more subdued this time.

"If you see Michael on your way, tell him he's pushing it if he wants to keep working with me. I don't tolerate nonsense like this."

A loud gasp echoed in the bathroom. He didn't often threaten to kick kids out of his program.

Satisfied she'd roust Michael, Greg hustled to the classroom, resisting the temptation to open the observation-room door and find out exactly who was in there. Low voices reached him as he passed.

Back inside, he walked around, praising the other children. Stopping at Cheryl's empty chair, he studied her four-panel page. An honest-to-goodness strip in the making, it had real potential. There was definitely art talent there, not that this was about talent. Still, he loved to nurture it when he found it.

The Dastardly Duo skittered in the door and into their seats next to each other, both out of breath. "Sorry, Mr. H," Michael said. "Didn't mean to take so long. I went for a stroll. Needed to stretch my legs, you know?"

Greg narrowed his eyes, but opted to let it go. No fire alarms had gone off; there hadn't been a flood coming out of the bathroom. "Cheryl, this looks great. I love your use of color here." He pointed to the first panel, where a flying dog carried a basket of treats toward a building labeled Cleveland Clinic—where Cheryl had had her tumor removed three months earlier.

She looked smugly at Michael, then beamed up at Greg. "Thank you." She elbowed the boy. "Come on. Show him."

"Are you crazy? No way."

"But it's great. I want him to see."

"No."

"Yes." Cheryl grabbed Michael's Penn State baseball cap and yanked it off his chemo-bald head.

"Cheryl! You know we don't touch people's caps in here," Greg scolded, reaching for the hat, then stopped, staring at the crown of Michael's head.

"See? Now if someone at school steals his hat, it won't matter. Because they'll think it's cool. Isn't it cool? Don't you love it?"

He had to admit, the superhero about to kick the snot out of a cancer-cell bad guy drawn in black magic marker actually looked good. Maybe Cheryl had a future as a tattoo artist. "Not bad, Cheryl. Still, I don't think Michael's mother is going to be happy when she sees this. What's wrong with working on paper like everyone else?"

"Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel ceilings," offered one of the others from the end of the table. "That's not paper."

"He didn't paint someone's head and that was a commissioned work," Greg said.

"Does commissioned mean someone asked for it?" Cheryl said. "Cause Michael asked me to do this. And he paid me." She yanked a rumpled five-dollar bill from her pocket and displayed it proudly. "Now I'm a professional artist, Mr. Hawkins, just like you."

Greg swallowed his chuckle, turning it into a cough. Then, recalling that he was being watched, he pasted a stern look on his face. "Go to the bathroom, Michael, wet some paper towels, and clean that off. With soap." Thank God they only used water-based art supplies, nothing permanent.

"Awwww, come on. At least let my mom see it first. Maybe it will make her laugh. She hasn't laughed in a long time." Michael made sad, puppy-dog eyes at him, a technique the ten-year-old had perfected with hospital nurses.

"You can't pull that face on another guy, kid. It only works on women."

"Damn. Well, it was worth a shot."

"Language, mister."

"Leapin' lizards, Batboy, it was worth a shot."

Greg struggled to keep a straight face at that one. Then the idea of what Michael's mom would say chased the fleeting humor away. "You seriously think your mother is going to laugh when she sees your head?"

The boy shrugged. "Like I said, it's worth a shot, don't you think?"

"Put your hat back on. Save the surprise for after you're out in the car, okay?"

The grin returned as the boy crammed the cap back on his head. "You're cool, Mr. H. Thanks."

Greg wasn't sure if Michael's mother would thank him or not. If nothing else, it would remind her that despite her child's illness, he was still a kid. All boy and then some, despite his second bout of cancer. "Now, all of you, finish your work. On the *paper*. We've got ten minutes left."

The door flew open, crashing into the wall as Julie came barreling into the room, causing the drawings taped nearby to flutter upwards, then slowly fall back into place. The group stared at her, pencils, crayons, markers, poised mid-stroke.

"Woo-hooo! Guess what everybody? I did it." She waved a piece of paper in the air. "I kicked cancer's butt! I'm in remission."

"All right!" Greg caught the girl as she launched herself into his arms, lifting her up for a celebratory hug as a wave of relief washed over him. A win. Not a loss, but a win. Exactly what they needed right now. He glanced over her now-curly-haired head at her mom, who leaned against the doorframe. He smiled.

Happy tears glistened in the woman's eyes, but didn't spill over. "Thank you," she said.

He just nodded, then set Julie back on her feet. "That means I owe you a special certificate, doesn't it?"

"Yes, you do. And you hafta make me a character in your next comic book, too."

While the rest of the kids hugged her—no more work was getting done today, that much was obvious—Greg thumbed through a folder he kept in his briefcase, looking for her certificate. He kept one prepared for each kid, showing it to them when they were down and needed some extra motivation. A lump filled his throat as he flipped past Scotty's to find the right one. It featured Julie in a flowing purple cape, one fist raised victoriously, booted foot on the "head" of a cancer-cell villain with black X's for eyes—because he was dead. Using a calligraphy marker, he inked in the date, then blew on it before presenting it to the girl with a flourish.

"There you are. I knew you could do it. And so can the rest of you. Say it with me..."

Voices blended together as they all shouted, "Captain Chemo kicks cancer's butt!"

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"Kicks cancer's butt?" Shannon Vanderhoff raised a skeptical eyebrow at the social worker as they watched the commotion from the dim observation room. "See? That proves my point completely. This man, this *comic book artist*," she let the phrase drip with as much scorn as she could muster, "encourages violence in children. Ryan hardly needs more violence around him. Besides, my nephew doesn't have cancer. I'm not sure why you wanted me to see this."

"Greg Hawkins isn't *just* a comic book artist, Ms. Vanderhoff. He's got a master's degree in art therapy. And he doesn't only work with cancer kids. He's had amazing results with children who need empowering. Children like Ryan."

Shannon turned to the opposite window, moving closer and leaning her forehead against the glass. In this other room, set up like a mini preschool with a wide variety of toys and books on short shelves, Ryan sat at a low, kidney-shaped table. A social-work grad student was vainly trying to coax the boy into helping her assemble a wooden puzzle. "Really? Children like Ryan? So, he's worked with kids who've watched their father kill their mother? How many?"

"Well, I don't know if Greg's worked with kids exactly like Ryan. I just meant emotionally traumatized kids."

In the room, Ryan shook his head at the young blond woman, pushing the puzzle to the far end of the table. He rose from his chair and wandered to the bookshelves. Without being choosy, he pulled out a picture book and plunked down in a beanbag. He held the open book close to his face, effectively shutting out the student who'd followed him.

Shannon closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Breathe in, take what life hands you; hold it, accept it; breathe out, let it go.

The mantra had worked well for her up until almost two-and-a-half months ago, in early February, when six-year-old Ryan had come to live with her. Neither one of them quite knew how to deal with what life had handed them this time.

His mother, her sister, dead.

His father, her brother-in-law, sitting in jail, awaiting trial.

Ryan, the nephew she'd only had personal contact with twice in his six years, living in Shannon's computer room, both of them struggling to come to grips with it all.

The social worker gently laid her hand on Shannon's shoulder. "You look completely exhausted."

Exhausted didn't begin to cover it. Shannon worked nights as a hotel auditor, doing bookkeeping. Finding a reliable babysitter hadn't been easy. And she wasn't getting much sleep during the day, since she had to take care of the boy. Single parenthood wasn't for the weak of body or spirit.

"I'm worried about you as well as Ryan. Please, speak to Greg. I think he can help. What have you got to lose by talking to him?"

Lose? "Absolutely nothing." Shannon straightened up, moving from beneath the woman's palm and returning her attention to the scene in the art room. Parents who had come to claim their children had joined in the celebration and were exchanging hugs and high-fives.

"Great. I'll go tell Greg you want to speak with him." The door to the observation room closed before Shannon could get another word out.

She took the opportunity to get a better look at Greg Hawkins, who'd spent most of the time in the classroom with his profile to her. Now he faced the window full on, talking animatedly to one of the parents.

She'd expected a geek—scrawny, thick glasses, pants hiked halfway to his armpits. What else would a comic book artist look like?

Not like this. He was gorgeous, with a face that could accurately be described as chiseled, high cheekbones that gave his face an angular appearance, a strong chin, and a wide smile that put an extra spark in his—blue? green? Hard to say with the distance and window between them—eyes. Dark brown hair. The rest of him looked fit, too. He wore a blue striped shirt with its sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a pair of khakis.

He probably made superheroes jealous. And geeky alter-ego personas would sell out their identities for half the charm and confidence this guy oozed.

The social worker had reached his side, and after a few murmured words, Greg looked up at the window. Shannon almost stepped back, nearly convinced he was gazing through the mirrored glass and actually seeing her. He nodded—to her or the young woman standing next to him? After a quick glance at his watch, he made his way through the throng, offering more nods and comments as he went. Several of the children were tugging on his arms, looking up at him with pleading expressions on their faces. The positive response—"Yes" was easy enough to lip read — made the kids jump up and down, then he disentangled himself from their grips and headed out of the room.

Only a few moments later, the door opened and he entered the narrow observation room. "Hi," he said, hand outthrust. "I'm Greg Hawkins. I understand you wanted to speak to me about...?"

"Shannon Vanderhoff. About my nephew." She briefly shook his hand, then gestured in Ryan's direction. "Miss Anderson seems convinced you can help him."

"But you're not so sure?"

She sighed, looking over at Ryan, who once again sat in a chair at the table, face propped in his palms so that only his sandy-blond hair showed. "Mr. Hawkins, no offense to you, but your

specialty—"

"Comic books?"

"Yes, comic books. Superheroes. Big busted women in tight clothes, weird creatures, and people fighting. I don't think that's what my nephew needs. He's seen enough violence, thank you."

"Abused?" he asked. "Because I've worked with a number of abused kids. My program, which doesn't focus exclusively on using comic book formats, gives kids back some sense of control in their lives."

"I don't know if I'd classify Ryan as abused. No one ever hit him, at least, not that we know of. I don't think his father meant him to see what he saw."

"Which is?"

"No one knows exactly what happened, except maybe Ryan. But in the end, my sister was dead. The police believe Ryan saw his father beat and strangle his mother."

Greg whistled softly. "Poor kid. That's hard to swallow. Watching your mom die, and not being able to do anything about it, that's got to make you feel kinda helpless."

"That's how I feel right now, too." Shannon splayed her hand across the glass. "I haven't been able to help him so far. I'm taking him to a therapist twice a week, but it doesn't matter because he won't speak. He won't play for play therapy. He barely sleeps, barely eats."

"And what about you?"

She turned to him, moved by the compassion in his eyes. Which she could now see were blue. "Me?"

"Yes. Have you talked to anyone? Are you eating? Sleeping?"

"As much as can be expected, I suppose."

Greg snapped his fingers. "I remember now. I saw this on the news. Philadelphia, right?"

"Yes. The media turned my sister's death into a circus. I was glad to get Ryan away from there. Here in Erie, he's not so much a news story. I detest the idea of hauling him back there when the trial starts."

The man appeared pensive for a moment. "Listen, the parents and kids from my group are all going out for lunch to celebrate Julie's remission. Why don't you and Ryan come with us? Maybe you can both eat, we can talk, and you can check out some of my references. Let them tell you if they think I've made their kids more prone to violence or if they suddenly want to wear skin-tight outfits and try to fly off the garage roof." He smiled at her. "I'll even spring for the pizza and pop. So what have you got to lose?"

What was it with these people and their asking her what she had to lose? Most of the time she stood to lose nothing. Because Shannon didn't believe in keeping things, holding on to things. Hence, you couldn't lose what you didn't try to keep.

But Ryan...

Ryan was different. If she didn't do something, it was Ryan who stood to lose himself. Someone had to reach him.

"Pizza, huh?" She shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

"Your enthusiasm underwhelms me."

"Try not to take it personally, Mr. Hawkins. Look, I never had much use for superheroes. I don't believe in heroes or white knights of any sort. I believe in not expecting too much out of life, and being content with what you have." She pointed to Ryan, waited for the art therapist's gaze to follow. "But for that little boy in there, for him, I want more. So I'm willing to entertain the notion that superheroes and comic book artists *might* just offer him some hope. Convince me."

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