KID NORMAL

AND THE FINAL FIVE



ILLUSTRATED BY
ERICA SALCEDO

GREG JAMES

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BLOOMSBURY

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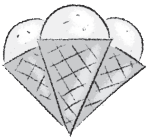
AND THE FINAL FIVE



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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY



BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4088-9892-5; eBook: 978-1-4088-9891-8

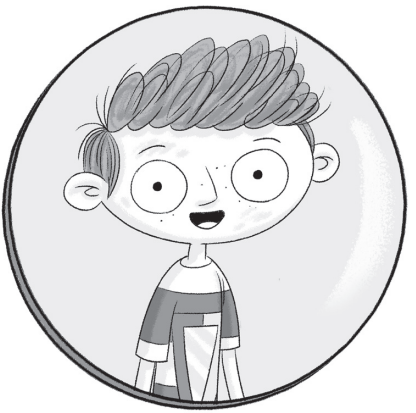
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Janene Spencer

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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There are Heroes everywhere.

You walk past them in the street every day.
You read about them in the papers.
You hear about them on the news.

For a long time, Heroes worked in secret,
But something happened to change that.

I was part of that change,
Because I discovered the Heroes' greatest secret …

Murph Cooper

The Bit Before the Beginning

It's not difficult to control people's minds, thought Nicholas Knox to himself. **You just have to give them something to be afraid of.**

He reached up and swatted a patch of ash from the shoulder of his dark, expensive-looking suit. He knew the speech he was about to give would be replayed again and again, and he meant to look his best. The lenses of the news cameras arranged in a semicircle in front of him yawned like hungry, open mouths. For a moment a trick of the light made Knox's shadow, trailing behind him across the rubble of the ruined power station, loom like some monstrous bird preparing to feed its young.

'I have something to say,' said Knox in



a commanding, strident voice as the eyes of the media focused on his keen, sharp-nosed face. 'The country deserves to know what happened here today. We have been lied to for too long. **I have uncovered a shocking secret.'**

The choking dust from the collapsed Titan Thirteen power station spun and swirled in the TV lights. Rubble crunched underfoot as Knox searched for a more secure foothold with his highly polished shoes. He smiled to himself. But only on the inside. To everyone

watching on the news, his face seemed troubled and concerned.

'My name,' he told the country for the first time, 'is Nicholas Knox. And for months now, I have been investigating a secret organisation that has been operating with the full knowledge and support of the authorities. An organisation that threatens the very fabric of our society. An organisation that calls itself the Heroes' Alliance.' He sneered the last two words out sarcastically.

He glanced around at the camera lenses, which were fixed on him like a row of glassy, mesmerised eyes. His internal smile grew broader and more mocking still, even as his face adopted a furrowed brow.

'This organisation exists to cover up the fact that there are freaks in our midst!' He raised his voice suddenly. **'People with strange and dangerous abilities.** But instead of confining them for proper research and treatment, this secretive Alliance has been allowing them to roam freely amongst us! And here you can see the result.' He waved a hand behind him. The cameras zoomed out to reveal a panorama of

tumbled concrete and twisted, blackened metal. It was an arresting image – the sharply suited man with the sad expression standing alone amongst the smoking rubble. It was a picture that would feature on the front page of every single newspaper the next morning.

'This Alliance,' Knox went on, 'does not share our common values of openness, decency and fair play. Sadly, I was too late to stop this tragedy at Titan Thirteen today. But I solemnly promise you, I will not allow these maniacs to attack again. I demand an immediate meeting with our top Government officials to present my research and to challenge them on their failure to act sooner. I will update you as soon as I can, but in the meantime I must rest after the trauma of today's events.'

He turned and walked towards a waiting ambulance, snapping **'No questions!'** at a radio reporter who tried to accost him with a microphone. Behind him, one of the last remaining sections of Titan Thirteen's giant concrete chimneys collapsed in on itself with a roar and a mushroom cloud of thick dust.

1

Oddballs and Freaks

After the villain is defeated … what then?

That was the question Murph Cooper was pondering as he hopped around his bedroom searching for a second sock. His attic room was always warm, and he'd opened the wooden doors that led on to his small rickety balcony to let in a fresh, late October breeze. Frosted spiderwebs sparkled outside as the cold air brushed past them and rushed into the room, bringing with it all the scents of autumn: mouldering leaves, the anticipation of fireworks, and a faint, far-away whiff of cinnamon-scented Christmas. A couple of the aforementioned smells may have been imaginary, but they were no less real for that.

Murph stopped his hopping as a mocking laugh drifted in with the breeze, and he peered outside to see a sleek black-and-white bird regarding him from

a nearby rooftop. The back of Murph's neck prickled uncomfortably. Even though Magpie was now powerless and safely behind bars, he couldn't shake the feeling that the man in black was still somehow dogging his footsteps.

He finally located the missing sock, which was contemplating him from its safe space under the bed with an apologetic air, and pulled it on.

Thoughts of Magpie continued to trail around Murph's head like mist as he schlupped down the stairs and into the kitchen. Magpie. The most feared enemy of the Heroes' Alliance. A man with the power to steal Capabilities. A man Murph himself had defeated only the previous week by turning his own machine against him. But Murph knew that was by no means the end of the story. The dozens of evil Rogues that Magpie had sprung from prison were mostly still at large – who knew where? – and the already overstretched Heroes were now facing perhaps their most dangerous enemy of all.

'Morning, Smurph Face,' grunted his brother Andy, who was intently reading a folded-back

newspaper propped up behind his cereal bowl. 'Plenty more press for your lot today. Not sure you're gonna like it that much.'

'I don't know why so many people seem to be listening to that awful, greasy man,' added Murph's mum, Katie, busy at the toaster. 'He's so obviously only out for himself.'

Murph sat down, unable to keep his eyes off the large black-and-white photograph now staring at him, upside down, from the back of his brother's newspaper. Even inverted, the smug expression on Nicholas Knox's face was unmistakable. The image of Magpie's pinched, lined face vanished from Murph's brain, to be replaced by this completely new and totally unexpected threat. The man with shiny shoes who had sprung, seemingly from nowhere, to blow the secret world of Heroes wide open.

In Murph's imagination Knox's pale, fox-like face broke into a mocking grin.

Knox had no Capability … no high-tech weapon to attack with. But his sudden appearance in front of the TV cameras had ruined decades of careful work to

keep the existence of Heroes a total secret from most of the population. And, worse still, he was trying to paint them as a danger, as something to be feared … as the *bad guys*.

The weekend's newspapers were still piled untidily on the table and Murph queasily pulled one towards him. **SUPER WEIRDOS,** read the headline. Below it, in bullet points, the message was clear:

- Shocking secret society revealed!
- Freaks in our midst – and the Government knew ALL ABOUT IT!
- Secret wrist communicators bypass police checks
- Location of sinister so-called 'HERO SCHOOLS' revealed!
- Weirdos make kids take 'vow of silence'!
- LOCK THE ABNORMALS UP FOR THEIR OWN SAFETY – Editorial, p. 13

'What's he got to say today, then?' Murph asked Andy.

In reply, his brother grabbed the latest paper

between finger and thumb, and sent it cartwheeling across the table. Murph smoothed it out and immediately groaned in dismay.

HE KNOX IT OUT OF THE PARK, read the headline above the photograph of Nicholas Knox, which, he could now see, showed him standing outside a black door waving and smiling. '*People's champion Nicholas Knox today challenged the Government to explain why they have been hushing up a secret society made up of people with outlandish and dangerous genetic abnormalities.*' Murph skipped ahead to another paragraph at the end of the piece: '*This newspaper believes that Nicholas Knox should be given immediate powers to deal with this menace, and he deserves our country's unending gratitude for bringing the danger to public notice. KNIGHT HIM NOW!*'

'It won't last,' said his mum reassuringly, sitting down next to Murph and replacing the paper with a plate of hot, freshly buttered toast. 'Everybody's bound to be a bit unsure. I mean, we were surprised at first – right, Andy?' Andy grunted through a mouthful of cereal. 'People are scared of anything new or different,' she

went on. 'But they'll soon see that Heroes are just trying to help. Don't worry.'

People in stories never seem to eat their breakfast, but we're happy to report that Murph ate all his toast, even the crusts, before getting up from the table. It doesn't advance the plot or anything, but it's never normally mentioned and we just thought you might like to know.

'Oi!' said Andy gruffly as Murph tugged the front door open. 'Watch out, yeah?' he went on after a pause. 'Some of the stuff they're writing. It's pretty mean. **Just ... be careful, OK?'**

Murph nodded solemnly, quite touched at this unexpected concern from his brother. He waved to his mum and slammed the door after him, head down as he marched through town towards school, brain still spinning like car wheels in a muddy field.

Halfway there, Murph paused in front of a shop decorated with garish plastic pumpkins and cardboard skeletons. His reflection gazed back at him from the frosty glass – a pretty ordinary twelve-year-old boy, messy sandy-coloured hair peeking out from beneath a

bobble hat. *I promise to keep our secrets* … he thought to himself, remembering the words of the vow all Heroes took when they joined the Alliance.

But the Heroes' Alliance was no longer secret. Not from Murph's family … not from anybody.

Murph puffed out a cloud of sigh into the chilly air. Surely, he thought, his mum must be right. Surely people wouldn't fall for Knox's nonsense … ? Stuffing his hands into his coat pockets, he set his face to the cold wind and strode on.

When you're founding a top-secret school for young superheroes, the location you choose is very important. It must be away from prying eyes, to avoid attracting unwanted attention. There must be plenty of space, so the neighbours don't get bothered by the explosions, thunderstorms and jets of unexpected soup that tend to occur as dozens of potential Heroes learn their craft. In short, it must be in the most uninteresting, boring, least desirable backstreet possible.

As Murph turned into the scruffy road, his mind wandered back to the first day he'd ever seen The

School. Then, it had just been closing for the day – Mr Souperman, the head teacher, and his former sidekick Mr Drench, had been locking up when Murph's mum had accosted them, desperate to secure him a school place. Since then, Murph had walked past these scrubby grass verges and beaten-up old cars hundreds of times. He had even seen The School on a war footing, surrounded by barbed wire and guards. But the scene that met his eyes this morning was even more alarming. He recalled one of the newspaper headlines – **'Location of sinister so-called "HERO SCHOOLS" revealed'** – and his mouth fell open in shock.

A group of twenty or thirty shouting, banner-waving protestors was almost blocking the road, penned in by a line of impassive men and women wearing black uniforms. Murph recognised the people in black immediately. They were Cleaners, the mysterious security officers of the Heroes' Alliance. By linking arms they had cleared a narrow path through the demonstration to allow students access to the school gates. But to get there, students still had to run the gauntlet of the angry mob, who were hurling abuse and brandishing their placards.

As Murph gingerly grew closer he could read the signs: FREAKS, read one, ODDBALLS, a second. Others were more elaborate still. One furious-looking woman was mutely accusing the children passing her of being SUPER-WEIRDOS. And one hand-painted sign bore a picture of a creepy-looking man wearing a parody of the kind of fictional superhero costume Murph had seen in comics, pants outside trousers and everything. IS IT A BIRD? read the writing along the bottom. IS IT A PLANE? NO, IT'S A FREAK WHO BELONGS IN JAIL.

'Stand back, please, stand back,' said one of the Cleaners, seeing Murph approaching. She and her colleagues pushed the crowd back slightly, and Murph ducked his head and hurried towards the gates. He tried to close his ears to the barrage of insults from either side, but it was hard.

'They ought to shut this place down!' he heard someone cry out. A group further back started a chant, and it gradually spread throughout the crowd.

'Weir-dos! Weir-dos! Weir-dos!'

At the front of the crowd, pressed right up against the fence beside the gates, was a knot of photographers and TV reporters. They were excitedly filming the protestors and jabbering self-importantly into their microphones. One of them had cornered Mr Souperman and was firing questions at him.

'As I keep explaining,' Murph heard the head say testily, 'Souperman is my actual surname, not my Hero alias, which is Captain Alpha. It's actually an old Scandinavian name, deriving from the Norwegian *souper mann*, which I understand was a nickname given to my great-great-great-grandfather …'

'Show us your cape, then!' someone in the crowd shouted mockingly.

'Believe me, I am sorely tempted to do just that,' said the head teacher through gritted teeth, wringing his large hands together as if squeezing an imaginary stress ball. Mr Souperman's actual Capability was super-strength, but luckily many years as a head teacher had also given him a plentiful supply of patience. 'Come along, young Mr Cooper, inside. Quickly,' he urged Murph, glancing out over the crowds as he closed

and securely locked the gates. 'This is becoming ridiculous,' Murph heard the head mutter to himself as they hurried across the front yard and in through the double swing doors.

Murph just made out a final, furious shout of **'WEIRDOS!'** before the doors slammed closed behind them.

Inside, The School was abuzz with anxious hubbub. Normally a hubbub can be quite enjoyable, but not an anxious one. The protest had got everyone rattled.

'Load of nonsense,' said a grim voice to Murph's left. Carl, the school caretaker, was peering out through the rippled glass of the doors. His face softened as he saw Murph. 'Morning, Captain Brush,' he said kindly. 'At least they won't be able to call *you* a freak, eh? What with you being our very own Capeless Wonder.' Carl's mouth crinkled into a smile, but Murph couldn't help noticing that his friend's eyes didn't seem to have got the memo. 'I'm glad the Wyvern's safely out of the way too,' he huffed. 'Dunno what they'd think if they saw a jet-powered motorbike flying overhead.

You should tell Nellie to keep the *Banshee* out of sight for a while, too.'

'Flora and Angel not back yet, then?' asked Murph. Carl's wife and daughter had been tasked by the Heroes' Alliance with delivering Magpie to a secure prison far away.

'Nah,' said Carl gratefully. 'They'll be gone a week or more. The Alliance wants to make sure none of the Rogues go looking for him, you see. Even without his powers, Magpie's a bit of a celebrity to some of them. Though, looking out there –' he peered through the window again – 'I'd say Nicholas Knox is trying to take his place. Anyone that bad-mouths Heroes tends to get the Rogues' attention, know what I mean?' Abruptly, the old man stuffed his hands into the pockets of his blue overalls and began shuffling away, head down. Murph tried to think of something encouraging to shout after him but his mind felt sluggish and foggy. Shrugging, he started to make his way into the main hall.

'They hate us!' Murph heard one of the first years say to her friends as he picked his way towards his

friends, who were all already seated at the back of the crowded hall.

'Maybe we *are* freaks,' one of them replied, before being shushed.

'It's really nasty out there,' said Mary as Murph sat down beside her. 'Don't they realise we just defeated Magpie? We're trying to protect these people!'

'Yeah, I don't think they care,' said Billy drily. 'They're going more with ''You're all freaks and you should be locked up''. I don't think we can expect a thank-you card any time soon.' Nellie gave a quiet giggle, but Murph could see the nervousness in her eyes as she darted a look at the large windows at the end of the hall. The dim outline of the placard-waving crowd was visible through the frosted glass.

'Those banners are just downright mean!' said Mary, following her friend's gaze.

'Plus the punctuation and spelling on some of them is absolutely appalling,' broke in Hilda. Murph knew that she, more than any of them, would be stung by the lies being told about the world of Heroes. 'Imagine listening to that Knox nonsense. If you believe a single

solitary word of it, you're … well, I don't know …' She searched for some suitably scornful words and, once located, shouted them loudly. **'You're a total pie brain!'**

Hilda hadn't noticed Mr Souperman striding into the hall as she was speaking. There was a sudden dip in the hubbub as he made his way up on to the stage that coincided with the end of her little speech. It gave the rather unfortunate impression that she'd just greeted the head with the phrase 'You're a total pie brain.'

'Yes, thank you, Miss Baker,' said Mr Souperman. Hilda went the colour of an impressive autumn sunset as the hubbub continued to die down to a strained, hotel-breakfast silence.

'We live,' said Mr Souperman portentously, 'that is to say, we are living. Are alive. Are living our lives … in troubled time. Times. And here I am, live … on stage. **Alive. Alive alive-o. Alive and kicking.'**

'I think the protest's really got to him,' Mary murmured. The head had always had a habit of getting

his words muddled, especially when under pressure. But this was next-level weirdness. The fact that The School was no longer secret, and the world of Heroes was under increasing threat … it was evidently taking a toll.

Mr Souperman rocked backwards and forwards on his heels a few times, apparently collecting his thoughts. They could make out his lips moving soundlessly.

'What's he saying?' wondered Murph aloud.

'He's saying "Pull it together, Geoffrey",' replied a girl on the row in front, whose Cape was super-hearing.

'Oh my,' gasped Hilda. 'He's really stressed out, isn't he?'

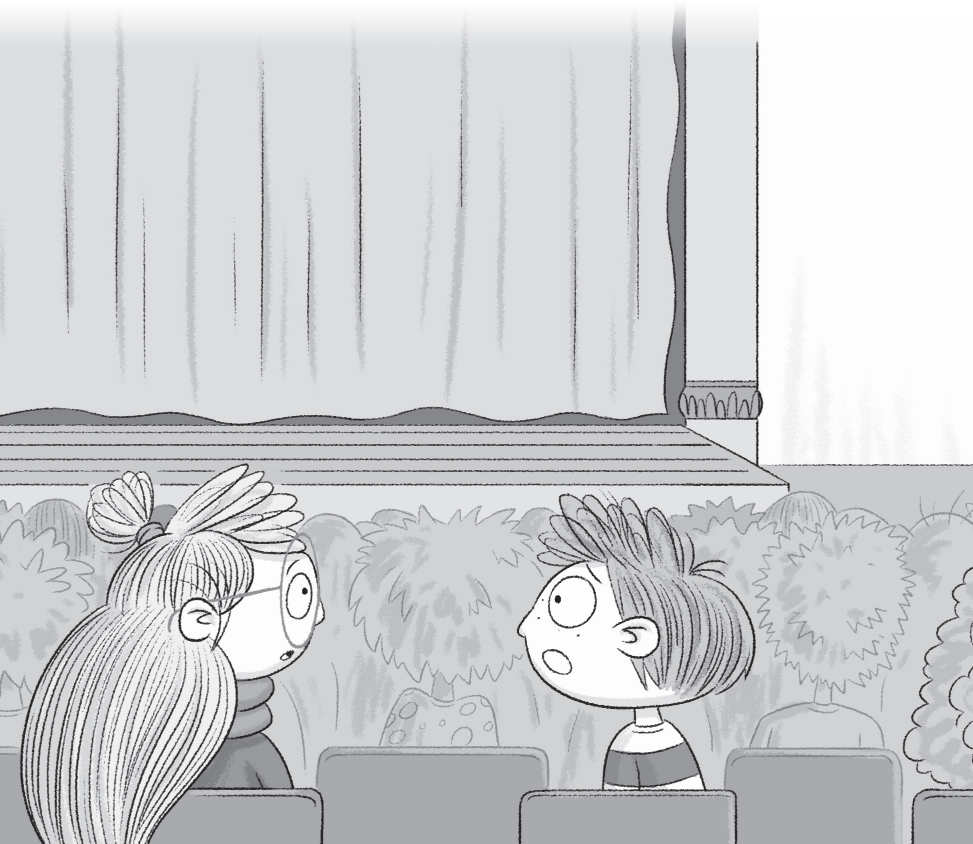
'This is when we learn what being a Hero is all about,' said Mr Souperman, suddenly loud and confident. 'This is a defining moment in our history. For decades we have worked tirelessly to keep our Capabilities secret – for fear of just this sort of reaction.' He jabbed an arm sideways, pointing out of the windows. 'There are those who would try and convince people that Heroes are something to be feared. We must show the public that we only wish to help … to save. Now,

more than ever, we must be mindful of our vow.' He raised his other hand to point at the stone tablet set above the stage, giving the momentary impression that he was in the middle of a funky dance routine from the golden age of disco.

Murph raised his eyes to read the words carved on the tablet; words they all knew by heart. A promise to fight without fear … to help without thanks … to learn what it means to be a true Hero.



'We are all aware of the enormity of the task ahead of us,' continued Mr Souperman, abandoning his funky pose and clasping his hands behind his back. 'We know the battle that we must fight. It is a battle that cannot be won with strength, or speed … or even super-hearing.' The girl in the row in front gave an embarrassed cough. 'We must prove to the people out there that we are a force for good. That we are not freaks, or weirdos, or any of the other unkind things they might say.'



'Oddballs?' suggested someone near the front.

'Yes, those too,' agreed Mr Souperman. 'We must carry on doing what we believe in. **We must be honest, and brave, and true. And above all, we need to stay calm.'** He marched over to the windows and opened one of them. **'You have nothing to fear from us!'** he yelled to the crowd outside.

As if in reply, something came flying through the window. It was met by a blur in the air. Mr Flash had activated his super-speed Capability and caught the object just as it was about to hit Mr Souperman full in the face.

Craning his neck, Murph could see that the Capability Training teacher was now holding a large brown egg between thumb and forefinger. Mr Flash's top speed was approximately 300 miles an hour, so it was a pretty impressive catch.

'Blinkin' owls, they're chucking eggs at us now!' raged Mr Flash. 'You lot want locking up!' he yelled through the window.

'You're the ones that should be

locked up!' came a shout from outside.

'He might be a vegan for all you know!' complained Mr Flash, brandishing the egg as if it had personally offended him.

'Lock up the abnormals!' retorted someone else in the crowd.

'You're not scaring anyone!' roared Mr Flash. 'All you've done is supply me with the materials to make a small omelette, completely free of charge.'

'Freak!' taunted the protestor.

'Freak with a free omelette!' corrected Mr Flash. **'Oo's laughing now, egg boy?'** He slammed the window closed, still holding up the egg like a badge of honour.

'This is horrible,' wailed one of the first years.

'No, no, now,' blustered Mr Souperman, who seemed to have lost his composure once again. 'How now … how now, brown … egg. Please stop waving that egg in my face, Mr Flash. Students, proceed to your classrooms as usual. And don't worry about the protest. It will all come out in time … in the fullness of … the wash. **No panic, please. Off you go!'**

He waved a hand in dismissal, and there was a sudden barrage of chat as everyone leaped to their feet and began to file out of the hall.

'Fancy throwing an egg!' said Mary as the Zeroes straggled towards their first lesson.

'Not particularly,' Billy replied. 'I'd rather eat it.'

'It's just a figure of speech, Billy,' she explained.

'Nah, it's definitely an egg,' Billy replied. 'Flash is gonna make an omelette, didn't you hear him?'

'Anyway,' said Mary briskly, 'moving on from that. This is really starting to worry me. What other lies might Knox tell people about The School? What if he tries to get us closed down or something?'

Murph felt a lurch of anxiety. The idea of this school not being here any more was unthinkable. Sure, he'd been sent here by accident – and, yes, his first few months had been amongst the most miserable of his life. But since then, this collection of rather shabby buildings had become the centre of his entire world. His mind reeled at the mere suggestion that it could be taken away from him.

But what could they do? This wasn't a single enemy

who could be faced, like Nektar or Magpie. Suddenly it seemed like the whole world was ranged against them. And who could fight against that? Surely not even superheroes.