THE INVISIBLE BOY

Alyssa Hollingsworth

Illustrated by Deborah Lee

Piccadilly PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
PICCADILLY PRESS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
www.piccadillypress.co.uk

Text copyright © Alyssa Hollingsworth, 2020
Illustrations copyright © Deborah Lee, 2020

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Alyssa Hollingsworth and Deborah Lee to be identified as Author and Illustrator of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-84812-799-9
Also available as an ebook

1



Typeset by Perfect Bound Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Piccadilly Press is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

To the ones I encountered but did not see




23 PAGES
NADIA QUICK
GIRL REPORTER
FEATURING INVISIBLE BOY AND PADDLEBOY!
DESIGN DL COMICS
23¢
23 PAGES
NADIA
GIRL REPORTER


NADIA QUICK
GIRL REPORTER
HMMMM
What is that boy doing with my canoe paddle...?
The Origins of Paddle Boy
He may have looked ordinary...
But I knew as soon as I saw him...
He was a supervillain.
Introducing Paddle Boy!

Chapter 1

GIRL REPORTER UNCOVERS SCOOP OF THE CENTURY

Here's the scoop: A supervillain lives on my street.

And that's just the sort of breaking news I'm after.

The sun shines through my window for the first time in days. Before the rain can return, I grab my backpack and check my supplies: two pens (yes), three mechanical pencils (yes), Lois Lane press pass from Halloween (yes!), spare notepad (yes). Slipping the strap over my shoulder, I snatch my regular notepad from my bed and practice flipping it open. It swings to the next blank page with a satisfying *snap*.

I've known about the supervillain—alias Paddle Boy—ever since he moved here in January. Supervillains can generally be identified by a few basic signs:

1. Important, often rich family (bonus points if the parents are odd).
2. Scheming attitude.
3. Puts others (or their belongings) in danger.
4. Takes credit for stuff, especially stuff that someone else did.
5. Makes a big show of everything.

The very first time I saw Paddle Boy, I witnessed his senseless evil: wanton destruction of private property (signs 2, 3, and 5). I don't know what this guy has against canoe paddles—he fled the scene before I could catch him—but that's one of many questions I intend to get answered this summer. Wonder Dog sits at attention by my door, her tail thumping on the carpet and her blue eyes sparkling with mischief. When I grab her leash, she hops up and turns circles. White and gray fur comes off her in a cloud. Australian Shepherds may be soft and adorable, but it would take infinite brushing to conquer their shedding. I blow some stray strands out of my mouth as I hook her leash to her harness.

"We've got a story to catch!"

When my Language Arts teacher, Ms. Thuran, asked me to write a headline-making, news-breaking article for the Junior Journalists Contest in the fall, I doubt she realized I

would snag a story as big as *this*.

Wonder at my side, I march down the stairs and to the front door. Mom is sitting in her home office, one room over, and she leans back in her chair.

"Starting your investigation already?" she asks. "You know, you're allowed to enjoy summer break a *little*. You don't *have* to hop to work the Monday after school gets out."

"I'm on deadline," I remind her. "And I have my first lead."

"Ah, I seem to have raised a career woman." Mom shakes her head but toasts me with her mug. "May your sleuthing be successful. I expect a full report when you get back."

I pull the door wide. "I'll see. Some of this might be confidential until publication."

"Have fun!" Mom calls after me.

"Yes, ma'am!" I reply in my best naval-officer-voice. As the door swings shut, I turn to survey my surroundings. Our lot looks like a badly cut piece of pie with the point at the street. On one side we have a neighbor, and on the other side there's a steep, briar-covered bank falling into the creek—we call it Little Hunting Jr., because it's a tiny tributary off Little Hunting Creek. The driveway cuts down the middle of our wedge-shaped front yard.

June occupies Northern Virginia with an attempt at humid heat—but after my family was stationed in Florida

and Mississippi, I have a high standard for "hot." And this, like most things in Virginia, is lukewarm at best.

Wonder pulls me down the steps to our lawn, sniffing around for the perfect place to pee. I'm not sure why she bothers searching, because she always goes in the same spot, but it gives me a chance to write in my notepad.

Date: June 17. Time: four o'clock. Weather: Thick dark clouds and everything dripping, but no rain right now. Little Hunting Jr. has flooded into our yard, almost up to the pine tree where we store our canoe.

A canoe that's still short one paddle. We do have a single paddle left, but that gets really inconvenient out on the water. Dad says it's too much work keeping the canoe straight without the second paddler, and the current on the Potomac River is too strong. Basically, Paddle Boy ruined everything.

After Wonder's done her business, I head toward the street. Paddle Boy lives five doors down from us, in an unassuming yellow house. This may not fit Supervillain Criteria #1 (rich family), but I'm willing to bet the simple everyday-man act is all part of his plan. Few would suspect this to be the choice hideout for a sinister mastermind.

Our street is basically a long narrow U, with a drainage ditch in the middle. Water in the ditch passes through concrete pipes where Wakefield Street meets Stratford Lane,

then flows down toward my house at the bottom of the U, where it goes through some more pipes and then to Little Hunting Jr. and finally Little Hunting Creek. I cross to the far side of the street, so I can start with a bit of spying, scope out the scene.

But before I pick a good scouting spot, Paddle Boy's front door opens. I tug Wonder close and duck behind a skinny tree.

Paddle Boy walks out.

He carries a big plate in his hands—I can't tell what's on it—and he's dressed in his normal I'm-just-an-innocent-kid clothes. It's the same kind of outfit he wears to school, an artful disguise our teachers never see through. They all think he's so great because he gets good grades and combs his honey-blond hair and says thank you to the bus driver. A classic bad-guy-pretending-to-be-good act. But I won't be fooled. What can he be doing out here?

He turns onto the street and begins walking toward me. Well—toward my house. I dive from behind the skinny tree to a slightly thicker one, though it isn't ideal cover. The water in the drainage ditch rushes like a river between me and him, gushing through the concrete pipes under the street ahead of me, then out into the ditch flowing fast toward the other pipes back near my driveway. Though they're nearly as big

as I am tall, today the water almost completely fills them. At least with this barrier, Paddle Boy can't jump over to me and smash something else. Like my pencils.

Paddle Boy's gaze flits in my direction, and I press hard against the trunk. But Wonder—who has absolutely no common sense—wags her tail and gives a friendly bark.

I roll my eyes. There's no avoiding it now, so I spring out in the open. Across the median, I shout, "Hey! What are you doing?"

Paddle Boy startles and the plate flies out of his hands, scattering—cupcakes?—like grenades over the asphalt. His face turns redder than Superman's cape—villainous rage, I'd guess—and he runs the other way.

"Hey!" I call after him, scribbling notes without even looking at my notepad.

But right then, Wonder lunges.

If there is anything Wonder loves more than peeing, it is human food. And Paddle Boy just dumped a whole lot of human food for the taking.

The leash rips out of my hand. My notepad goes flying in the other direction. Wonder plunges into the water.

I run to the ditch's edge. "Wonder, no! Come!"

She keeps swimming, too keen to pay attention to me. Distantly, I hear a door slam—Paddle Boy has gone inside. A

wad of branches breaks loose upstream, slicing through the brown water. It misses Wonder by a foot, racing on toward the pipes. I open my mouth to call again.

Wonder's head jerks to the side. Her leash, tangled in the branches, yanks her downstream, too.

I run along the bank. "No!" I shriek.

Now Wonder turns toward me and tries to move against the current. But she doesn't make any progress—the pull of the branches is too strong. The pipes are getting closer, and if she's sucked in, she could drown.

"Wonder!" I fling off my backpack and rush a few steps into the ditch, immediately soaked to my shirt. The water shoves me over, grabs my legs, and whirls them out from under me.

For a breathless moment, I kick at nothing, but then my toe catches on the submerged bank and I manage to push myself up the sloped side, sitting in the filthy mud. Ahead of me, the branches move faster as they near the big pipes. Wonder's head bobs under the surface and up again.

"No," I cry, voice cracking.

Then something rushes past my shoulder and splashes into the water.

A dark-haired boy just jumped into the middle of the rushing stream.

I don't know where he came from. It's like he appeared out of nothing, swimming toward Wonder.

I scramble to my feet and run to keep up with them. The boy grabs Wonder's harness. The branches vanish into one pipe. Just in time, the boy braces his feet on the pipe's concrete edge. He strains against the torrent, barely keeping himself and Wonder above the surface.

"Hang on!" I pull a large branch from the side of the road. I wade down the shallowest slope of the ditch and, careful to plant my feet wide apart, hold it out.

The boy fiddles with Wonder's harness, and then the leash comes off its hook and disappears with the branches into the pipe. Still struggling against the current, he shakes his wet, dark hair out of his eyes. He twists and grabs my branch. A scar below his wrist flashes in the pale sunlight. Now his red hoodie, soaked through with dirty water, looks nearly black.

I throw all my weight backward, dragging the boy and Wonder to the side of the ditch. When they reach land, the boy lets go of my dog, who bounds over cheerfully. I drop to my knees and hug her soaked, furry body to my chest.

"Oh my gosh," I gasp. My breath hiccups. "Oh my gosh, thank—"

I lift my head to look at the boy. But he's gone.

I stare at the place he last stood.

What . . .

A shiver rushes down my spine, and I tighten my arms around Wonder. She smells like a wet dog, but I don't even care. She's safe. Paddle Boy's cupcake scheme didn't work—he didn't lure my dog to her demise.

"I'm glad you're okay," I whisper, blinking away tears. She bops my nose with hers. I can't help smiling. "We need to thank that kid."

I shift my attention back to the street. My notepad is lying on the asphalt. I grab it and my backpack, but my eye catches on a white piece of paper a few feet away.

Without hesitating, I pick it up, too, and turn it over in my hands. It's not paper—it's a photograph. In it, a woman about my mom's age stands in front of a bright purple town house. She's wearing jeans and a gray T-shirt, and her hands are clasped behind her. Her hair is frizzy and long, and her smile seems a little nervous. But she has kind—sort of sad—eyes.

I check the back again. In faded ink, there's a note: *Settled in the Washington house. I have your room ready, whenever you decide you want to come. Love you, always and a day. Mom.*

The writing is a little smudged, but not too damaged. Which means it hasn't been out here during the recent rain—it was dropped, like my notepad, a few minutes ago.

It must belong to that boy.

I turn a full circle, trying to find any other sign of him. But there's nothing—I don't know the direction he went. The street is so wet, I can't even see any footprints.

I look down at the photo.

Just like there are signs that identify a supervillain, there are signs that identify a superhero.

1. A tragic family history (bingo! He's separated from his mom).
2. A talent at foiling schemes (like the cupcake trap for Wonder).
3. Rescuing people and their belongings (he saved Wonder's life).
4. Refusing to take credit, even for good stuff (he vanished without letting me thank him).
5. Most notably, a superpower (he vanished into *thin air*).

My pulse quickens.
Forget my supervillain story.
I think I've found a hero.