

ALMOST SUPER

A novel

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RAFTER



Groundhog Day

Rafter Hans Bailey looked at the clock. In nineteen more minutes it would finally be time, and in nineteen more minutes he would finally be a superhero.

Rafter's younger brother sat at the desk in their bedroom. He squirmed on his folding chair.

"Go use the bathroom, Benny!" Rafter said.

"I don't need to," Benny replied. "I'm just nervous. And excited! You know how I get."

Benny hopped up off the chair and started pacing. Rafter couldn't help but smile. He felt the same excitement as Benny, but he was older, and should act more mature.

"How much longer?" Benny asked.

Rafter didn't have to check, but he did anyway.

"Nineteen minutes," he replied.

"Why do we get our powers at 4:23? Benny asked. "It would be better if it was 4:30. It's easier to do the math with round numbers."

Benny stopped pacing and looked at Rafter. “Actually, it would be better if it was at 4:00 because then we’d already be superheroes!”

Benny flexed his muscles and Rafter rolled his eyes.

“We get our powers at 4:23 for the same reason we get them on Groundhog Day,” Rafter replied.

“And why is that?” Benny asked.

Rafter smiled. “Because that is how the universe works.”

“Now you’re sounding like Dad.” Benny said, “I still think getting powers on Groundhog Day is weird.”

Rafter looked out the window. “Yeah, well, remember, we’ll only get our powers as long as the groundhog sees his shadow, and we both know how well that’s gone for me. ”

“Yeah, rotten luck,” Benny said. “What was it...two years ago we had that freak blizzard; then last year there was that fog. I heard some of the relatives talking, it’s been years since we went two years without new superheroes.”

Benny must have seen the look on his face.

“You don’t have to worry.” Benny said, walking to the window. “Look, there isn’t a cloud in the sky.”

“Maybe,” Rafter said. He looked again at the clock sitting on the mantel—4:05; eighteen more minutes.

“I think that clock is busted,” Benny said, “It’s not moving at all!”

“Come on,” Rafter said. “We probably should get down to the living room.”

The boys passed through the kitchen where his mom and several cousins were helping prepare the traditional Groundhog Day refreshments: green olive pie, toasted buckwheat, and banana crunchies.

A whole lot of Baileys were sitting in the living room—some on couches, some on chairs, and even a few of the unlucky cousins sat on the floor.

Rafter counted quickly in his head. *Thirty-seven superheroes, he thought, all in one place. And soon there will be two more!*

“Hey look, it’s the two lucky Baileys!”

Everyone gave a rousing cheer.

Rafter smiled and waved, and then felt silly. He made his way quickly to the piano bench; his relatives went back to talking.

There was a loud snort in the corner of the room. His grandmother sat dozing in her wheelchair; her head leaned forward, and her thin white hair fell in a gentle arc over her face and shoulders. Rafter’s dad had pointed her wheelchair toward the fireplace because earlier Grandma had sneezed and almost set the drapes ablaze. Grandma’s days as an active superhero were long gone, but she still had some of her powers left.

Rafter looked at the piano bench; there was no way he could sit still for another ten minutes. He wandered over to the window—still no clouds. He walked back and forth in front of the window, glancing at the sky every few steps.

“Rrrrrrafter Bailey, stop that pacing,” Aunt Verna commanded from the couch. Rafter stared at his aunt for a second, and then deliberately continued his pacing

Aunt Verna sat on the couch with her legs crossed, a napkin aligned with careful precision on her lap. Her back was ramrod straight, and her graying hair was pulled back into a small, tight bun. She was always concerned with what was proper. In fact, three years ago Aunt Verna had come to the conclusion that the British were the epitome of good conduct and grace, and decided it was better manners to speak with a proper British accent. She hired a voice coach and went from sounding like a crazy aunt with an American accent to a crazy aunt with a bad English accent.

“What do you think yourrrrrr superpowers will be, dearrrr nephews?” Aunt Verna asked, rolling her r’s in a way that made her sound more like a fake machine gun than a British aristocrat.

Benny spoke up first, his voice quivering with excitement. “I’m going to be a Speedy. If I can run fast, then maybe I’ll lose my baby fat!”

Benny had a round face and plump cheeks that became red and splotchy when he overexerted himself. He also had a little extra padding around his mid-section. Grandma Stevens, who wasn’t a superhero, and didn’t know about the Bailey family secret, always pinched Benny’s cheeks and reminded Benny that he still hadn’t lost his baby fat. It drove Benny crazy.

Uncle Chambers, who sat next to Aunt Verna, his wife, peered at Benny over his glasses. “Hmmm, Cousin Roy is a Speedy, isn’t he, Verna? He’s only seventeen years old. I doubt we’ll have another Speedy in the family this soon.” He sniffed through his tiny nose and took a small sip of punch from his cup.

“You know what we need,” Uncle Chambers said, “Is another Stretcher. Great Uncle Ike is getting on in years.”

Uncle Chambers had brown hair from the tip of his ears to the bottom of his neck, but the top of his head was bald and shiny. The thick glasses that sat perched on his sharp nose were always sliding down. Chambers reminded Rafter of a praying mantis.

“I don’t want to be a Stretcher,” Benny said. “They don’t get to wear a super suit, and they’re stuck to special ops missions. I’m going straight to the battles!”

“I think you’ll be a Stretcher,” Uncle Chambers said.

Benny folded his arms, shooting a dark look at Uncle Chambers.

Rafter knew what power he wanted, but he wasn’t about to tell Uncle Chambers. He didn’t want to be told what practical power he should have instead.

Rafter glanced at his grandfather talking with an uncle in the corner. Grandfather had super strength. He could lift a car as easy as lifting a cat. Even just sitting there, his grandfather looked like a pillar of strength. Rafter knew that even if a mob of supervillains came crashing through the front door, his grandfather's strength would keep them safe.

That was the power Rafter hoped for.

“Chamberrrs,” said Aunt Verna. “Would you be so kind as to cut me anotherrr slice of cake?”

Uncle Chambers set down his punch and reached for the lemon cake sitting on the coffee table. Rafter watched as one of his uncle's fingers became long, thin, and sharp. With a deft cut, he sliced a piece of cake with his knife-finger, pushed it onto a napkin, and then passed it with care over to Aunt Verna.

Aunt Verna took the cake and nibbled at it delicately.

“My goodness, Rafter, yourrrrr mother knows how to make a prrroper lemon cake,” she said.

Usually Rafter found the conversation at family gatherings tedious beyond all belief, but at least this time it was helping to pass the time.

Rafter stopped his pacing in front of the clock. 4:11.

Twelve minutes to go!

Rafter felt a heavy weight in his pocket. He reached in and pulled out a cell phone. It had been a Groundhog Day gift just a few hours ago. He had received the phone when he was twelve, and again when he was thirteen, but both times it had been taken back when his superpower had not appeared. If he didn't get his powers today, Rafter might try to figure out some way to keep the phone.

He flicked it open and scrolled through a few of the applications. He pulled up the Bailey Family locator and saw clusters of Baileys gathered at various spots around the city. In

each one of those clusters there was a Bailey relative getting their power.

He closed the map, and opened another application—the threat level meter. It measured the chances of a major crime being committed anywhere in the city. The display read four percent, which made sense. Groundhog Day was a regular day for the locals, so there wasn't much chance for anything extra serious coming from them.

And as far as the local supervillains were concerned, there would likely be no problems from them, either. They spent the holiday much like the Baileys did—waiting for their powers. One thing could always be counted on—the balance of the universe. Today the world would see the creation of a half-dozen new superheroes, and about that many new supervillains. The fight between good and evil would continue, as it always had, but now Rafter would be part of the fight.

He couldn't wait one more second.

Aunt Verna clicked her tongue, distressed that Rafter was now standing in front of the clock, instead of sitting on the bench like a proper fourteen year-old. Rafter thought about starting up his pacing right in front of her, but you didn't tease your aunt like that. Especially one who spoke in a fake British accent.

Instead, Rafter walked back into the kitchen, almost running head first into a large bowl of punch. A soft blue glow surrounded it as it floated gently into the dining room.

“Samantha?” his mother called out. She was chopping pickles at the counter, her hands glowing blue. “The punch is warm again, can you freshen it up a bit?”

The punch floated over to Rafter's cousin, Samantha, who sat at the dining room table reading a book. Without even looking, Samantha raised her hand and shot a bolt of ice into the punch. The outside of the bowl became frosty, and the punch floated back to Rafter's mother, who dipped a cup into the red liquid and took a sip.

“Ah, much better,” she said. “We can’t have warm punch on a day as important as this!” Her hands glowed again and the punch floated out of the kitchen toward the living room. She spied Rafter and flashed him a smile. “Are you ready, sweetie?”

Rafter started to reply but his mother glanced at her watch and gasped.

“Oh my goodness,” she said. “It’s almost time!” She wiped her hands on her apron, then took it off and sent it floating down the hall to the laundry.

“Michelle,” Rafter’s mother said to another of Rafter’s cousins, “Go outside and make sure all the younger cousins stay outside for the next twenty minutes. We can’t have them coming inside and discovering our little secret before they’re old enough to keep it. You have your phone set up to listen to the event? Good.”

“Everybody else, into the living room.” Rafter could tell his mother wanted to simply use her power to lift everyone up and plop them down in the living room, but she refrained. “Where is your father? He needs to get this show on the road!”

As if on command, Rafter’s father walked into the room.

“It’s almost time!” shouted his father, rubbing his hands together. “Everybody in the living room; let’s get going.”

Rafter followed his father into the living room and made his way back to the piano bench. The rest of the family began to file in behind him.

Rafter’s older brother and sister came into the room. Sixteen-year-old Jessie looked a lot like their mother: thin, long blonde hair, and tan. She made a face at Rafter, and he replied by rolling his eyes. Rafter knew that his sister’s real superpower was the ability to be super annoying, but since she could also shoot lightning out of her fingertips, he couldn’t very well pick a fight with her. Jessie found it hilarious when Rafter’s hair stood straight up, and she found plenty of excuses to zap him when their parents

weren't looking. If he got the power he hoped for, it would give him a way to get even for all the times she'd shocked him.

Their oldest brother Rodney had a laptop computer perched precariously on his lap. Sometimes their mother got after Rodney for spending too much time with his computers, but since his superpower was working with technology, he had a good excuse. He wore baggy clothes to try to hide the fact that he wasn't very athletic, but it was painfully clear nonetheless. Rodney managed the Bailey's entire computer network and security system, and had designed some of the more complex weapons and vehicles the family used. He'd also reworked the piano that Rafter leaned against.

While the piano bench was ordinary, the piano itself was certainly not. If a person happened to play Ludwig van Beethoven's Bagatelle in A Minor, and if that person replaced all of the D-sharps with E-flats, then a hidden door on the opposite side of the room would slide open with a noiseless whir. The passageway led to the root cellar. And while most of the Bailey house was ordinary, the secrets the Baileys kept in the root cellar were far from it.

Rafter looked up to see that almost everyone had finally gathered in the room. An excited buzz filled the air.

Rafter checked the sky, but there were still no clouds anywhere to be seen. A sudden fear gripped Rafter; had anybody thought to check for a solar eclipse?

Before Rafter could voice his concern, his dad stepped through relatives and stood in the middle of the room. He adjusted his glasses, cleared his throat, and began to speak.

"Thank you all for coming. It's so nice to be surrounded by family on a day like this. I know there are several cousins getting powers today, and we appreciate you coming to spend time with us.

"It is our hope that with the addition of these new superheroes, we'll finally be able to triumph over our

archenemies—those vile, evil, dirty, rotten supervillains, the Johnsons!”

He shook his fist and a wave of grumbling spread across the room. Several of Rafter’s relatives shook their fists in reply.

“The Johnsons may live in this city,” Dad continued. “And they may work in this city under the guise of normal citizens, but I think with the addition of six new Baileys to help out in the battles, we have a real shot at getting rid of them once and for all!”

There was a spattering of clapping and cheers.

Rafter couldn’t wait to join in the fight against the Johnsons; his family had been fighting these supervillains for over a century. But, could they really get rid of them that easily, with just a few more people? Besides, if the Johnsons were defeated, who would they fight? He was a superhero, and superheroes needed archenemies.

“I’m feeling something weird,” Benny said, interrupting Rafter’s thoughts. “It’s like a tingling!”

“Hot dog, it’s already happening!” their dad shouted, clapping his hands again. “Rafter, do you feel anything?”

Rafter shook his head. He looked over at Benny.

“Don’t worry,” his father said. “Sometimes there is a brief delay.”

Benny’s eyes were shut tight. He didn’t look like he was in pain, but he didn’t look comfortable either. He tilted his head to one side, and then closed his eyes even tighter. His eyebrows scrunched together.

Why wasn’t Rafter feeling anything? Had something gone wrong? Was he too old to get powers? A sudden thought struck Rafter.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Rafter cried. “Am I adopted?”

His mother made a waving motion with her hand. “Of course not, dear. And even if you were, as soon as you’re legally part of

the family, you'd still get your powers. Just like when I married your father. No shush, it's almost over!"

Benny's body relaxed, and opened his eyes.

"It's over," he said. "I have it. I know what my power is."

Something wasn't right; Rafter could see it in Benny's eyes. *He must not be a Speedy*, Rafter thought. *He didn't get the power that he wanted.*

"Benny, what is your power?" His mother's voice filled with excitement. "What did you get?"

"I . . . uh . . ." Benny started. There was a soft pop.

A strange sensation hit Rafter, tearing his attention away from Benny. He looked up at the clock. It was still 4:23!

Relief flooded over Rafter. There had been no eclipse. The sky was still blue. All was right with the world.

Rafter took a quick breath as a tingling feeling started in his toes and began to work its way through his entire body. Energy surged through his chest. He could feel the eyes of everybody in the room rest on him. He closed his eyes. *Finally* Rafter thought, *I'm finally going to be a superhero.*

The feeling became stronger and stronger until it was almost like an electrical current. His flesh seemed to buzz and pulse with an unseen power. A pressure built up inside his head and then something seemed to click. He felt a jolt. It was as if someone had inserted a flash drive into his brain and transferred information directly to his mind. His head filled up with knowledge. Another wave of energy washed over him, and then...it was over.

Rafter sat on the piano bench, stunned. He knew what his superpower was. He knew how it worked. And he knew that he would have it for the rest of his life.

Rafter Hans Bailey jumped off the piano bench and ran from the room, so no one would see him cry.