

The Utility Man

by Brian Cole

Chapter One

Five years ago Al Hunter, the Mayor of Grand City, signed into law 'The Superhero Incentive Act'. Truth was, he had little choice. For some reason villains of all stripes had decided to settle in 'The Biggest Little City in Iowa' and the crime in Grand City had gone off the chart.

Desperate for a solution, Mayor Hunter signed the Superhero Incentive Act...and it changed my life.

It gave immunity from criminal and civil suits to citizens acting 'in good faith'. Overnight every vigilante in Grand City was made legal, legit. No more did they have to fear arrest or civil suits should their identities become known.

I hated it. Why? Well, I'm no villain, if that's what you are asking. I'm one of the good guys, the 'vigilantes' that have been trying to keep the ever-growing cycle of villains in check for years. It was honest work, satisfying. I knew I was making a difference and so did the people. They adored all of the vigilantes, one even getting an endorsement deal for some cola brand.

Yeah, I don't get that either, but it just shows you how much the people loved us. Then...they came.

Chapter Two

The night was moist.

Well, there was a bit of a mist, and it was night, so...the night was moist. I had the robbery suspect pinned at the end of an alley in Baker's Square, one of the more disreputable areas of lower Grand City.

The suspect was taller than me, maybe 6 feet and a couple of inches. He also looked like he worked out and knew how to handle himself.

Had I dealt with this guy before? Was he a villain in plain clothes? It was a good idea to keep such possibilities in mind. Slumming it and committing a petty crime was a good way to catch your nemesis with his guard down, or so I have been told. I would play this one safe.

Sizing up my prey, I reached down and unclipped the covers of two pouches on either side of my utility belt. Using just the fingers on both hands I quickly found the items I knew would be there, never taking my eyes off the target.

I did not have superpowers, I was just a normal person. With some training in the arts, and an insanely innate tolerance for pain...plus the most awesome, most incredible utility belt known to mankind. That was my secret weapon, how I stayed on top.

I could see him starting to panic. Before, he could only hear me, catch glimpses. I must have moved into one of the patches of light...he's seen me before. Maybe on the TV...he's panicking. Good.

I keep moving across the light to the next patch of shadow, waiting for it...waiting...and then he takes a moment to look behind him one more time, desperate to find an exit.

I move in a flash, my right hand tossing a small homemade flash-bang just in front of him, my left arm crossing my body as I move to throw the explosive ball at the wall. Hearing me move, the perp snaps his head back just in time to be blinded by the flash. A moment later the explosive ball hits the brick, showering the left side of the perp's face with sharp, stinging debris.

I jump to my right, changing the vector of attack. The belt provides my left hand with one of its collapsible truncheons, my right hand I keep free, just in case. If this guy is looking to grapple, I don't want both my hands full.

With his hands now to his face, I bring the truncheon down across one knee, then the other in a backhand that brings howls of pain from the perp. Good, I like this part. I sidestep as he reaches out, blindly looking to grab ahold of me, returning a counter right cross that knocks him face down on the ground. I love this!

This was the kind of human interaction I had gotten used to, the kind that the citizens respected and I had planned to keep doing for a long, long time. But you see, this moist night was only four years ago...so what I was doing was no longer illegal. And it meant I had to deal with them.

I barely had the perp hogtied before the first showed up, crawling along the wall of the alley like some sort of...I don't know what. A fly, maybe?

"Need a hand?" asks the wall-crawler.

"No, I'm just fine," I say as I move to stand between the hogtied perp and the goodie-goodie 'hero' that has come along to 'help'. "Got this one tied up, I'll just be taking him down to central booking..."

And then it happened. Again. While I was fending off the guy on the wall, some idiot with a jetpack zooms in and then takes off with my perp, faster than it takes to read about it.

I hear a zoom, then turn to see Bully Nova...I was right about the idiot part...flying away with the perp dangling by a chain below him. "I'll take this one in for you, citizen!" I hear Bully Nova say as he gives me a salute. I return the favor with a different gesture.

And that was it, that was the last time I went out 'superheroing', as the kids today call it. I had had enough, I was calling it quits. Hanging up the tights for good. Good riddance. I was never, ever going to wear tights again. Ever.

Chapter Three

Four Years Later.

I hear the alarm screaming, and I reach across to let it know I am ready to begin my day. Well, evening actually, that was one of the only things that has not changed since I retired. Getting out of bed, I check my calendar to be sure of my schedule, and then I hit the bathroom.

Soon enough I am standing in front of my closet, a wood monstrosity passed down from my father. I open the tall doors that make up the top of the wooden beast, and without thinking about it too much I reach to click a small wooden button half-hidden along the frame.

I hear a satisfying 'click!' and the clothes hanging in front of me swing forward, revealing a hidden compartment. I reach up and feel the leather jacket, the padded armor on the pants...and the belt. Sometimes I wonder if I secretly yearn to wear it again. To fight crime, kick-ass, and have my prey stolen from me by actual superpowered jerks.

'Oh well,' I think to myself as I open a drawer and pull out a pair of tights. 'Off to work I go.' I say to myself. Hey, gotta pay the bills, right?

Chapter Four

I leave my apartment just as the sun goes down and head down the street to the nearest subway station. I used to count the number of heroes I'd pass on the way to a gig, but not anymore. It was just the usual, normal city sounds of car horns and construction, mixed with the occasional 'good citizen!' routine, or some obnoxious hero with a noisemaker, like a jetpack or the 'That Guy'-mobile tearing off from stop sign. Heroes did like to be noticed, after all.

But nowadays, I'm just so used to it all that I hardly even pay attention. I mean, there are just so many of them.

Reaching the entrance for the subway stop, I spot what is obviously a tourist pointing a camera my way. Ugh. Still, I give a polite wave as I pass by. I guess I kinda do look like some generic hero, wearing these green tight with a lightning bolt from shoulder to knee. Hey, gotta pay the bills, right?

I queue in line for a moment and feel the 'whoosh' of the train as it stops only a few feet away. I love the subway, it's genuinely one of my favorite parts of living in Grand City. I board and take the nearest open seat facing the exit...old habit. I feel the press of bodies as the doors close, and we are off.

Unlike on the street, when riding the subway I like to play a little game with myself. Looking around I spot the usual mix of citizens and heroes, both real and not so real. Poseurs, we call them, mostly because they hate it. I keep scanning then go back to just looking at the floor when it occurs to me that I just saw...me.

I can feel the skin around my nose scrunch up, my eyes drawing together as I turn my head to look at the 'hero' standing next to me, holding onto a pole for balance. He was about my height, though a bit chubby. He was wearing a jacket of not quite the right shade of deep blue, the helmet, padded pants that were more padded than armored...and the belt.

"Excuse me," I ask as I poke at the padded hip. Yup, definitely not armored. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"You must be new to Grand City, fellow hero!" said the impostor. "I am one of the oldest heroes to ever...er...hero in Grand City. They call me The Utility Man!"

"You don't say." I find myself at a loss for words, unsure of how to respond. I mean, I never got a soda endorsement or a sidekick, but someone once offered to make an action figure of me, and that was nice. But out of what barrel of nostalgia did this guy dig up...me?

Still confused, I take a moment to inspect this impostor a little closer, particularly the belt. While the jacket and pants are not right, I have to admit that the belt looks genuine. I mean, even the stitching is the same, so far as I can tell.

"I'm sorry," continues the impostor, "but I'm afraid I'm not familiar with your look either. You must be new here. Is it...green lightning?"

"I'm not a hero."

"Too bad, you've got the build for it." says the impostor. "So, if I may ask, if you are not a hero...why the tights."

I open my mouth to answer but nothing comes out. Why am I conversing with this jerk? Why am I not pummeling him and taking the belt from him? As I sit there, mouth open, thinking about this for an awkward moment, I realize that the train is slowing. We must be approaching the next station, my stop.

I close my mouth, deciding not to kick this poseurs ass for the time being, and decide it's best to just go on with my day. I mean, the train is chock full of heroes and it's not good for the citizens to see two people in tights going at it. "I think this is my stop," I say instead, getting to my feet and pulling a wedgie out of a crevice.

I hear the other me announce that this too is his stop about the same moment the train enters the station, and the event happening on the platform becomes visible to all on the train. My mouth drops open again.

On the platform is an all-out brawl, heroes charging into a melee with a band of villains dressed as pirates. Or maybe buccaneers...who can tell the difference? The doors to the train open, and out the door rush several heroes, including the fake me. As I step out of the subway car, one shoulder, then the other, then the first again knocked forward by charging heroes rushing past me, I look down at a beautiful woman kneeling, peeking around a cement support for the ceiling.

I'm mesmerized at the sight of her, at her perfect shape, her red hair, her...

"Those guys are trying to kidnap this poor girl!" says the other, less attractive woman also cowering behind the pillar. "You've got to get her out of here!"

At this, the red-haired beauty turns to see me. Well, she probably only sees someone wearing tights, and assumes. For once, I did not really mind. Before I know it, she is pressed against me, screaming into my face.

"Please, you've got to save me!" she says imploringly, her hands full of my spandex top. "You've got to get me out of here!"

I feel something land, hitting my feet. I look down and see that it's the utility belt the impostor had been wearing. Wait...what? I look up and notice that not only are accessories flying past us, but several heroes are simply being tossed, thrown by rag dolls by the largest of the buccaneers. Assessing the situation, I realize that the remaining heroes simply won't be able to hold out much longer.

Reaching down, I grab the utility belt with one hand, the other holding the hand of the red-haired maiden in distress. Yes, that's what I'm calling her. Stepping over an unconscious Red Rooster, I

give her hand a pull as I yell, "Follow me!" and head for the exit not blocked by the largest 'super battle' I'd ever seen.

"There she is!" I hear behind me as we hit the stairs. We emerge into the still-new night of Grand City Downtown, tourists and gawkers stopping nearby to take a picture of the scene we must be making.

"This way," I say as I pull her behind me. I steal a look behind us and see nothing the first time, but then...about five of them coming out of the station, looking around and then spotting us.

Without thinking about it, I had headed us towards an alleyway between two buildings, a spot I had fought in before. A defensible position I realize as I pull her in.

"Why are we stopping? They are after us!" she screams as she tries to pull me back onto the main street.

"I need a moment to prepare," I tell her as I fasten the utility belt around my waist. The weight is familiar, the way it rests on my hips like an old friend. I pull the belt two notches tighter and set the buckle back into place. "Get behind me, try to find something to fight with, like a pipe, or something. Anything." I add as I begin to quickly inventory the various pouches on the belt.

It's all here. All of it...like he stole my spare right out of my closet. And...I'm smiling? Yes...this is going to be fun I decide. My eyes move to the head of the alley, my hands pulling items from the pouches without even looking. Just like the good ol' days.

Chapter Five

They turn the corner, coming into the alleyway just moments after my last toss. There are five of them, all rather large and dressed as pirates. Or buccaneers...yada, yada.

I take a few steps backward, moving towards the center of the alleyway, inviting them to move towards me a bit. They take the bait.

"We just want the girl," says the one in front, dressed in pantaloons and a sash. A large sword sways from his right hand, his left on his hip...near a matchlock pistol. "Don't be foolish, just hand her over and we'll be one our way."

"Not today, scumbag!" I yell as I ready to leap. And I stay frozen, ready to leap. Ready...anytime. Just waiting for the small explosives I tossed to go off.

'Oh fudge,' I think to myself, "this is what I get for trusting some stranger's utility belt. Seriously, what made me think..."

Then the charges go off, and before I know it I am moving. The lead Pirate turns, his sword raised in defense. One of the rearmost pirates falls to the ground, his hands to the side of his face, a piece of a chopstick sticking out the side of his cheek.

Seeing the lead pirate turn to his right, I move to my right, his left. I know from years of fighting that he'll most likely turn back the same direction. As expected, I see his head snap back, then I see the moment he realizes I am moving too fast for his sword arm. As he pulls the pistol, I begin to twirl the weighted line I hold in my left hand.

He expects me to engage him directly, but instead I keep moving, tossing the weight at his wrist. My body tumbles low along the ground, under the level of the pistol barrel, spoiling his shot.

"Arrgggh!" I hear his scream as I come out of my tumble, directly in front of one of the middle pirates. This one is only now recovering from the turn of play, pulling at his cutlass. His snarl follows me as I dive left, pulling hard on the line attached to the weight. His head turning, the cutlass is almost out of its scabbard when the shot rings out.

"Uugghpgh!"

I tumble once more at the remaining middle pirate, my right hand dropping caltrops in my wake, my left hand already in another pouch. I come up twisting my torso to avoid the sword thrust, my left hand up, palm flat and filled with powder.

I see the sword hilt twist, the blade edge of the sword moving from facing the ground to facing me. But before he can begin his backhand cut, I blow the powder directly into his face, catching him just as his eyes widen in surprise.

He begins to cough, the sword arm faltering as I grab him by his tunic, throwing him behind me. I try my best to approximate where the lead pirate should be about this moment, hoping to either catch him on his leader's sword or cause the leader to step around him, into the caltrops.

It's not always skill that wins these fights, a bit of luck goes a long way. Besides, I cannot afford to look back a the moment anyway. I am about to face off with the only remaining untouched pirate, and I really need to keep my eyes on him and his pistol, which is raised and pointed directly at my chest.

I see his eyes go from concentrating on his aim to focusing on me. Or, rather, behind me. Now like I've already said, I have years of experience fighting, and I was not about to fall for the oldest trick in the book. Then I heard a loud, high pitch 'PING!', and the pirate's eyes went wide.

OK, I have to look.

Spinning to avoid any possible shot at that moment, I turn back and see the red-haired beauty...er, maiden...still bent over the body of the pirate leader, a large section of pipe in her hands. The look on her face is fierce, her chest filling with air from deep breathes. She was...distracting me!

I turn to see the remaining pirate grabbing at the arm of chopsticks, the two of them stumbling towards the entrance of the alleyway.

I reach the maiden as she is lifting the pipe for another blow, grabbing her wrist and pulling. "We've got to go, they could bring more of them."

She looks at me, at first without seeing me. Her eyes focus and I can see her coming back to her senses, I pull again. "Let's go!" I hear the pipe drop, it's ringing ping echoing off the walls of the alley.

"You guys need any help?" I hear from above. I look up and see Mr. Wall Crawler arriving right on cue.

"Yes, thank you. All yours, and take your time...no hurry!" I say over my shoulder as I pull the maiden towards the mouth of the alley.

"We need to hurry," I say as we emerge back onto the street, pushing through a small gathering of tourists and onlookers. "They may come back with help, maybe that huge one."

"But you just told that guy on the wall..."

"Yeah, I heard myself. I hope he did too," I say as we head uptown, away from the alley and the subway station.

Chapter Six

"Thank you so much."

I must admit it is nice to hear. During my days as a vigilante the victims usually left during the fight, not many would still be around to offer a thank you or such. Not like I blamed them, but it was nice to hear.

"You're welcome," I say back to her. "You should probably go find some real help now, I've done about all I can for you."

"What are you talking about? You saw what happened at that station. You're the only hero that actually stood up to those guys and walked away."

"I'm not a hero." I offer to her as I look down and just keep walking.

"What? Don't be ridiculous, I mean look at you. You have got to be the fittest man I've ever seen, and you are wearing tights," she says as she gestures towards my spandex. "What else could you possibly be?"

"Yeah, about that," I say as we approach a cross street, the neighborhood turning from a commercial district to residential. "So look, I have something to do, somewhere I need to be, so I'll be going now."

"Oh, hell no!" she says back to me. "Mister, those hooligans are probably still looking for me. There is no way I am leaving your side tonight."

I stop, taking a moment to look around and be sure of my location. We are standing in front of a row of brownstone style homes. It's a nice neighborhood I decide as turn to speak to the red-haired maiden that is becoming a pain in my ass.

"Alright, how about this," I say, trying to reason with her, "How about you go wait at that diner on the corner there, and I'll be back in say about an hour."

"No."

"Fine," I say mostly to myself, reaching down and unbuckling the utility belt. "At least hold onto this for me, alright?"

Turning, I head up a flight of stairs to a door and reach out with one finger, pushing the doorbell. I can hear the chime go off inside the brownstone along with a small commotion.

'Is he here?' 'WooHoo, this is going to be fun!' 'Keep it together sister, you'll scare the poor boy off!'

I hear a stereo system start playing music, the beat and rhythm hitting me as the door opens. I can feel my hips start to wiggle, my elbows at my side, my hands out in loose fists, gyrating with the music.

"Hello, ladies," I say, smiling my best smile.

"Oh my god, you're a stripper?" Red-hair says in surprise.

"Gotta pay the bills," I reply as I gyrate through the door. "Who ordered a superstud? Was that you?" I ask the room.

Red-hair lets out a sigh, walks up the stairs and into the brownstone, closing the door behind her.

The End