

# Almost Super

A Heroic Tale

By Greg Wagner

Copyright 2022 Greg Wagner Books

Smashwords Edition

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com or your favorite retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This is a work of fiction.

The characters, situations, and dialogue are drawn exclusively from the author's imagination and are not to be considered real. Any resemblance is purely coincidental.

Also By Greg Wagner

Trouble In Paradise - A Psychedelic Encounter of the Extraterrestrial Kind

A Moderne Guide To Witchcraft - A Magical Comedy

The Sisterhood of the Rubber Ducky – A Crime Comedy

A Time to Die - A Supernatural Crime Story

At The End of Forever - A Historical Novel

Dragons Don't Grow On Trees – A Magical Tail

YOU LIE! - A Cautionary Tail

What Lies Beneath – An Urban Fantasy

A Cold Day In Hades

The Adventures of Esme the Wonder Dog

The New Adventures of Esme the Wonder Dog

I would like to thank (in this order) my amazing wife Roberta, The You Tubes and The Internets, because without any of the above this novel wouldn't have happened.

## Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

# Chapter 1

The bustling street echoed hollowly sixty stories far below as Clarke hovered just outside his apartment window, his long blue cape snapping in the brisk early morning breeze.

After a few seconds, he let his feet touch down soundlessly onto the steel slats of the tiny balcony. He looked around briefly to make sure nobody saw him, then turned back to the breathtaking view.

Glistening lights spread out for as far as he could see. As the largest city in the world, New Megatropolis consists of three separate time zones and four different geographic regions. The city doesn't sprawl, so much as it seethes. It has everything, agriculture, manufacturing, minerals extraction, its own motion picture and music industries, financial exchanges, fine food, and live entertainment. Some of the most powerful movers and shakers in the world call New Megatropolis their home. Unfortunately, a sizable criminal element also resides there.

Clarke shook his head as he reached for the window frame and tugged lightly on the sash. It resisted, so he pulled a little harder. When it remained closed, he put his hand against the glass to see that the latch was in the locked position.

*Oh great!* He thought then immediately pictured his new girlfriend fiddling with something in front of the window last night. *It's not her fault. How could she know? It isn't like I can just let everyone in on my dirty little secret.*

*Hmm, he frowned, I guess I could break the window, but then of course I'll have to fix it.*

Seeing no other choice, he brought his hands over his head and levitated effortlessly up to the edge of the roof. He watched for movement. Once he was sure there wasn't anyone about he flew up and landed on the pebbled surface right beside the door marked EXIT.

Clarke couldn't let anyone see him dressed in his second shift getup so he used his x-ray vision to scan the stairs thoroughly before flinging the door open and sprinting down them. When he reached his level, he stuck his head out and looked around. Throwing caution to the wind, he started down the hallway. Voices came toward him from just around the corner so he sprinted back to the stairs and hid in the shadow of a support pillar.

Two women walked past on their way to the elevator, talking adamantly about the new Thai restaurant that just opened up on Fifth Street. Their voices faded to silence as they disappeared around the corner. Wasting no time Clarke sprinted down the hallway, slid up to his apartment and fumbled briefly with his key before swinging the door wide. He ducked in, slammed the door, and went to walk away, only to find the lower half of his cape still stuck in it. He opened the door again and yanked his cape out, this time carefully closing it before he leaned back, took a deep breath, and let it out as one drawn out sigh.

It had been a long day.

It was well after midnight and he was so tired of dealing with assholes. It seemed like everywhere he went today, someone tried to screw with him. First, it was the colossal Mothman terrorizing the sun worshippers down at Oceanside Beach, then The Punster and his gang of misfits tried to make another run on the First National Bank of Megatropolis, then to top it all off someone attempted to hack into the city's electric grid. Whoever it was had their act together too. The only reason anyone found out was the HVAC thermostats at the power plant were acting weird.

He took off his cape and laid it reverently on the kitchen chair next to the derby hat and horned rimmed glasses that were his disguise during the day shift.

*Sometimes it's so hard to just turn it off,* he thought with a slow shake of his head. *When the fate of the free world is depending on me, I have to be on 24/7, but who will I turn to when I need help?*

He reached over to power up his computer. In addition to keeping everyone safe, Clarke also has an image to keep up.

Back in the day, rooting for the good guys was always the way to go, but since the advent of the whole cool-to-be-bad thing; it's so hard to get social cred. With profiles on all the major and a few of the minor networks, when Clarke isn't protecting the city from evil doers he is updating his status, posting messages, recording insights, sharing and all the other mind numbing tasks involved with being an effective social media influencer.

*It just never ends.*

After a solid hour straight of liking and commenting on his ever-dwindling follower's posts, Clarke stopped to rub his eyes.

"Bingly bing!" His computer chortled merrily as a strange notification icon popped up on the screen.

*Hello, what's this?* He thought.

It was a request to join a new social networking platform. This one supposedly allowed you to upload a series of images through your webcam to create a realistic 3D holographic profile avatar.

*Hmm, that might help me get more followers,* he thought wearily. Without hesitating, Clarke activated the webcam and ran his fingers through his short dark hair. *OK, how's this go? Accept terms and click start to scan.*

He followed the directions until the little blue light at the top of his screen activated telling him his camera was live. Without warning, there was a blinding bright flash of light. When Clarke could see again he discovered that he was on the other side of the screen looking out. He peered through the glass to see himself sitting at his desk with a blank look on his face.

"Excellent! Excellent!" Insane laughter broke out all around him, "Ha, ha, ha, oh you super fool! You fell for it! Now you are mine!"



Emma Doherty casually dropped a popcorn bag in the microwave, slammed the door, and hit the preset button. The machine groaned in protest before the turntable finally began rotating slowly, accompanied by the sound of muffled popping. A major thunderstorm brooded heavy on the horizon and dark foreboding clouds gathered just outside her window. The lights flickered briefly as if in premonition.

"Of course he was cute," she held the cell phone to her ear and frowned at the ceiling, "he just wasn't my type."

*"You aren't getting any younger Emma. At this point if they have a pulse and a job, they should be your type. Did I mention how much he makes a year?"*

"I know, but he smelled like fish." A flash of lightning punctuated her comment and was followed immediately by a boom of thunder that made her windows rattle. She pulled her ear away from the phone to check if she still had service.

*"What was that?"* Lois' voice echoed around the tiny kitchen.

"Bad storm, aren't you getting any?"

*"I'm in the mountains Honey; we get everything two hours later than downtown."*

"Oh yeah I.."

**\*\*CRASH!\*\***

A brilliant flash of lightning lit up the street outside the same time that a great ball of blue flames exploded from the microwave. Emma's face caught on fire and she fell to the floor rolling. Flaring starbursts of agony seared her skin but

no matter what she did she couldn't make the pain go away. She squirmed around in anguish forever, sobbing hysterically. When the pain finally subsided, she lay on the floor staring up at the ceiling. The electric was out down the block and everything was black. Bright afterimages from the flash still reverberated in front of her eyes.

Her phone rang somewhere in the darkness. She crawled around feeling for it, but all she found was pieces of the ruined microwave.

Sirens wailed in the distance. The wind howled like chained demons. Rain battered relentlessly against the front windows of her apartment and the phone kept ringing. Emma staggered into the bathroom just as the electric came back on. The sound of ringing followed her. She gave herself a good once over in the light. In spite of the circumstances, she felt fine, a little scared, but no life threatening injuries. When she glanced in the mirror, she noticed a rectangular dark spot on the side of her face.

The ringing stopped.

*What in the world is going on?* She thought as she wandered out to the kitchen in search of her phone. Her popcorn was just a memory. The microwave was a heavily incinerated broken husk lying pitifully in the middle of the floor, but still no sign of her phone. She looked under the kitchen table. When she went to stand up, her phone started ringing again.

The sound came from everywhere at once. As she walked around the kitchen, she realized the ringing was coming from inside her head. She ran to the bathroom and looked in the mirror again. She pulled aside a hank of her short curly brown hair and sure enough, a faint outline of her phone was clearly emblazoned across her cheek. She could even make out the camera lenses. It was still ringing so she closed her eyes and pictured the answer button in her mind. When she gave the imaginary button a tap, the ringing stopped.

"A...hello?" She ventured.

*"Yes hello, this is Sgt. Holloway from the Policeman's Benevolent Associ..."*

"Look I'm sorry," she rolled of her eyes, "I don't have time for this right now."

*"But Ma'am..."* she disconnected the call.

The phone rang again. Emma stabbed the imaginary answer button and yelled, "I told you I'm not interested, leave me alone!"

*"Whoa, hold on there girlfriend." Lois laughed, "I was just calling to check up on you, we got disconnected."*

"I'm sorry. Damn telemarketers."

*"Are you OK?"*

"Um, yeah I guess so." She ran her fingers over the phone mark on her face, "Hey do you mind if I call you back in a little bit?"

*"Yeah sure, as long as you're going to be all right."*

"I will, I just need a few minutes."

*"OK talk to you later."*

"Thanks, mwah," Emma disconnected the call.

Her head was still spinning with the implications. To help her sort things out she focused on cleaning up the mess in her kitchen. When the last of the junk was safely stowed outside in the garbage can she sat down to concentrate on her dilemma.

Whenever she closed her eyes she could sense her phone floating out there somewhere beyond her usual consciousness. She focused on the internet and checked the weather.

It worked, just not the way it did before.

After a little experimentation, Emma realized she didn't have to picture the screen icons in her head in order to operate the phone. All she had to do was think and it happened. It was weird. Like the phone had fused with her brain. In a blink of her eye, she accessed a dozen websites way faster than her provider's connection could have possibly handled before. She checked the service icon.

*Hmm, no bars? She shook her head, I wonder if this means no more cell bills?*

After Emma called Lois back, she went to bed. That night she dreamed electric dreams.

## Chapter 2

The incessant subsonic humming from the massive high voltage power supplies changed pitched when Professor Rex Bannon engaged the coolant pumps keeping the homemade cyclotron from exploding. He watched as preprogrammed computer algorithms synchronized the input frequencies to match resonances before he twisted the dial to increase the voltage feeding the twin one-ton opposing magnets. He switched the safety interlock system to active and slowly opened the hydrogen supply going to the mass flow valve. Finally, he crossed his fingers as he activated the ION source and the power supply's pitch changed again.

A flicker of lightning in the cyclotron's chamber signaled the production of protons. The highly charged radioactive particles raced around the giant magnetized maze as Rex adjusted the gamma ray beam line so that it fired directly at the target station. He marveled at the godlike power he had harnessed, briefly wondering how it must have felt to create the universe from nothing more than an endless vacuum.

As a third generation research scientist, Rex was on a perpetual quest for the theoretic Holy Grail of Science, to discover the beginnings of life itself.

Our origins have been on the minds of human beings since the beginning. In the absence of answers, they made up stories. Rex had other plans. By bombarding a primordial stew of amino acids, sugars, phosphates, hydrogen, methane, and ammonia with ionized gamma particles, he hoped to accomplish what others have only dreamed.

The creation of proto-life was the easy part. The trick was to make it self-replicating, with the missing piece of the puzzle convincing the primitive nucleic acids to bond to the newly created peptides.

He was so close.

Fortunately, money wasn't an object. With the help of a considerable endowment started several decades ago by his great grandfather who made it big in the early petrochemical age, Rex would never have to worry. Which was good, because all he really cared about was his research.

A wild shock of stereotypical mad scientist grey blond hair stuck out from his head at a weird angle as he peered through the scope to observe his sample. He took his eyes away from the controls for just a second and the cooling interlock alarm started beeping. Two seconds later the low hydrogen alarm sounded. Rex spun around to initiate the shut down sequence only to trip and fall face first into a tall rack of controllers.

He lost consciousness.

Rex awoke to the taste of blood. He jumped up when he realized the interlock system must have failed. Thick white smoke poured off the power supplies, flooding the room with a bitter toxic haze. He reached for the shutdown override just as a huge explosion slammed him against the far wall. The last thing Rex heard as he drifted off to oblivion again was the scream of safety warning beacons.



Billionaire philanthropist Brice Warren sat alone in Warren Manor's stately library waiting for his computer to boot up. Floor to ceiling mahogany book cases lined the walls overflowing with priceless first editions, one of a kind reference manuals and classic masterpieces and yet there he sat waiting on a machine to fulfill his intellectual needs. Brice took a deep breath and let it out slowly, *So this is what we've become.*

His manservant Albert appeared at his side, "Will you be having your tea in the library this evening Sir?"

"Yes please, I have some work I need to do."



"Ah yes the social networks," The older man nodded at the screen.

Brice shook his head playfully, "Now, you know I don't like it any more than you do."

"Oh no, I understand Sir, it is a necessary evil."

"Evil?" Brice frowned, "Hmm I never thought about it that way."

Albert nodded but stayed silent.

"Don't worry my old friend; I just updated the antivirus program. They say it's the best on the market."

"As you wish sir," he started backing out of the room.

"Oh now don't be that way. If you have something to say..."

"No, no, I am only concerned for your cyber safety."

"Well I appreciate that Albert, but I'm a big boy, I can handle myself. Besides, what's the worst that can happen? We're on a triple firewalled private encrypted network."

"As you wish Sir," Albert bowed out into the hallway with just a hint of a smirk painting his lips.

Brice chuckled and shook his head. His old friend was right. Over the last ten years, the internet has become a virtually overwhelming maze of perils for even a master surfer. Phishing scams, self-replicating bots, ransomware, rootkits, coupled with a whole host of worms and trojan horses just waiting to turn your computer into a pile of useless high tech junk. Brice fell somewhere in between fairly dangerous and seasoned expert when it came to the internet, even so he figured he could make his way around well enough without messing things up too bad. He was on the majority of the popular social networks after all and even had his own crime fighter webpage with a sizable array of helpful community PSA videos and important contact information.

He smiled as he brought up the web browser and started into the long slog of responding, friending, commenting, posting, and liking. He didn't mind too much. It was kind of cool to have so many admirers. The thought that he was helping people, made it even better.

Just as he was really getting into his work, a notification window popped up on the screen. Brice squinted in the dim light of the library. It looked like an invitation to join a new social network.

*Hmm, this could be interesting,* he thought as he clicked the icon to find out more.



Albert Nichols III peered through the open doorway as his longtime friend, adopted son, and boss, continued to surf the web in spite of his dire warnings. He knew that Brice had it under control, but he couldn't help worrying about the unknown. The hidden pitfalls that lie in wait every time you send your data out there. His stomach rumbled as he made his way back to the kitchen.

*Call it paranoia, call it sixth sense, I still worry.*

When Albert met young Brice, he was just a boy still mourning his parents' tragic deaths. Even then, the emotionally fragile young man showed promise and determination. He has come a long way since then, not just proving himself a competent leader, but also a formidable crime fighting force in his own right.

Albert shook his head while he prepared the tea setting on a small cart. When everything was just right, he headed out. As he steered the cart down the long hallway, the wheels made muffled squeaking noises that echoed off the walls. When Albert entered the library, it looked like Brice had fallen asleep, but when he saw the empty look in his masters' eyes, he realized his previous fears had been well justified.

Immediately forgetting the refreshments, Albert lunged. When he grabbed Brice's shoulders roughly, his head lolled to the side and a tendril of drool leaked out the corner of his mouth. Albert turned to look at the computer. His

master's social media webpage displayed with a small box in the corner of the screen that said, "Join the hottest new thing on the web!" and a button with the words "CLICK HERE!" in the flashing letters.

He spun around and checked for a pulse. It was there but it was faint. Without hesitating, he retrieved the red phone from his jacket. As soon as he hit the special icon, a voice came over the speaker. "*Commissioner Jordon here,*" there was a slight pause. "*If you're calling me I'm guessing you have bad news.*"

"I do. I found him unresponsive just now. You know what this means?"

*"I'm afraid I do, unfortunately he isn't the first."*

Albert raised an eyebrow. "There are more?"

*"Quite a few and I don't know what we're going to do about it."* There was silence on the other end for a few seconds. *"Look I better get going. Thanks for the heads up old friend. I'll be in touch soon."*

## Chapter 3

"Where in the blue blazes is Clarke?" George Georgeson the executive producer for New Megatropolis WTXX Channel 5 news station bellowed from his open office door. He came storming out and stomped up to Emma's desk. "Have you seen Clarke?"

"No Sir, you might want to ask Lois."

"Have you seen Lois?"

"No Sir. I believe she is out covering the Benson story."

"Oh yeah," he stood there grinding his teeth for a few seconds. "OK, I may regret this later, but I need you to look into something."

Emma felt a rush of adrenaline as she stood up and saluted. Her boss eyed her suspiciously from under a pair of bushy brows, but he continued, "There's a rash of important people being found unresponsive all over town. It may not be anything, but I want you to check it out. Here are the names and addresses of the latest victims. Go see what you can find."

She took the slip of paper and saluted again, bouncing on the balls of her feet, "Oh thank you Sir, you won't regret this."

"Yeah well, just make sure I don't," George Georgeson growled and stomped back to his office.

*Finally, my big break,* she thought.

Emma was thrilled to death, not just because this was her first real assignment, but because she was anxious to get out of the office so she could figure out what to do about her head/phone problem. The red mark on her cheek where her body absorbed the device has faded to almost nothing. For some reason it didn't feel weird or anything, other than when her phone rang. Even then, it was strangely enough like using a brain activated, hands free connection, if something like that even existed. Internet access was even weirder. It was still a bit of a mystery, but so far, Emma found she could call, surf the web and control her smart appliances all without an ISP connection or cell phone service. No shortcuts, links, interfaces, networks, or icons, just pure thought. She made her way across town in a daze still considering the implications.

She pulled up to the address of the first victim. Before climbing out of the car, she glanced in the rearview mirror and halfheartedly dragged a comb through her windblown curly hair. The neighborhood was middle class cookie cutter with its nearly identical houses all lined up neatly in a long row. Emma checked the note again then started down the line.

When she knocked, an older white haired woman peeked through a tiny gap in the security chained door. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm Emma Doherty, with WTXX Channel 5 News." She handed her business card through the opening.

"Oh yes, you must be here about Peter. I'm his aunt Mae." The door went shut. It swung open again and she beckoned her in.

"A, yeah, Peter. I understand you found him unresponsive. Tell me, does he have any medical issues that would explain his condition?"

"No, he is a perfectly healthy young man. When I checked in on him last night, he was sitting in front of his computer. At first I thought he was sleeping, but when I tried to wake him he just sat there staring at the screen."

"I see," Emma nodded sympathetically. "Do you know what he was looking at?"

"Looking at? Well the computer of course."

"No I mean what was on the screen?"

"Well nothing, it was blank."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, here take a look for yourself."

She followed the older woman into a small sparsely furnished office, "See it's blank."

Emma searched for the computer tower and found the power light blinking. She pushed the button and the computer came to life.

"Oh my! I didn't know. I just assumed it was off."

"It must have gone to sleep after so long."

The screen displayed one of those social networking programs that are so popular these days. In the top corner, was a popup notification for a new website.

Emma right-clicked the link and selected inspect element from the drop down menu. After scrolling the page code a little, she discovered that the popup pointed to the URL [www.mygram.com](http://www.mygram.com). She did a quick search and came up empty handed.

"Is everything OK?" The older woman asked over her shoulder.

Emma frowned and turned away from the screen, "A, yeah, I think so. Look, I really appreciate all your help. I have some more things to look into, but I promise I will let you know the minute I find anything."

They exchanged hugs and Emma went to the next name on her victim list. Five hours later found her back at the newspaper. George Georgeson met her as she stepped off the elevator.

"Hey Kid, what'd you find?"

Emma didn't say anything, she just gestured for him to follow. Once they were in his office, she shut the door. "You were right. Something is going on. All of the victims were found in front of their computer screens."

"What?"

"Yeah, and they were looking at this site." She handed him the web address she wrote down."

"My gram dot com hunh? Did you check it out?"

"Yeah, but I couldn't find much and the domain registration is private."

"Private shmprivate," George Georgeson scoffed, "I'll get you that info."

"Great, I'm telling you Sir there's something to this. Let me do some more investigating. I think I can get the scoop on this one."

"All right," he frowned, "but I want results. Find out who's behind this and I'll put you in charge of the city desk."

"But Sir, that's Clarke's job."

"Job shmjob," he barked. "I don't care. I haven't seen the bum in days and if he doesn't show up soon he's gonna be out on the street, permanently. I can't run a news room without reporters."

## Chapter 4

As Rex Bannon slowly surfaced to some semblance of consciousness, he smelled smoke. His head swam when he tried to sit up. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and it came away bloody. Everything was dark.

*The main circuit breaker must have blown,* he thought.

His lab was a disaster area. Fortunately, it was isolated from the main part of the remote complex by a massive lead and steel reinforced concrete blast wall.

The cyclotron was ruined. *Well this is going to set my research back a little,* Rex mused as he staggered among the toasted power supplies and melted controllers.

He felt strange, all wobbly like he was made of thick gelatin. He bent down to pick up a piece from one of the target stations and felt his body flex in places it never flexed before. When he stood up and ran his hand down his spine, everything felt normal enough. He turned for a second and tripped on a cabinet that had fallen over. Instead of hitting the floor, he curled up into a tight ball and kept on rolling until he reached the far wall.

*What the?*

He frowned and stood back up, then dropped into a ball again. In the ball position, he was perfectly round like a startled armadillo. He rolled back and forth across the floor in detached clinical fascination.

*Hmm, this could come in handy, but what in the world could have caused it?* He glanced around the room then at the breached cyclotron chamber and rolled his eyes, *Yes, of course, exposure to radiation just like in the movies.*



The bald headed man grinned evilly and rubbed his hands together as he checked in on the most recent victim of his diabolical master plan. The dark haired young man trapped in the plasma screen cell looked bewildered at his sudden imprisonment. His eyes glowered as he paced back and forth searching in vain for a weakness to exploit.

*Yes, things are going exactly as planned.*

He knew the super egos wouldn't be able to resist his trap. Their desire to be worshiped wouldn't let them. Because ultimately it wasn't just about being super heroes, it was about making sure everyone knew it. They have grown vain over the years, looking down on humanity as inferior material, a burden to be selflessly borne, a proverbial thorn in their sides. *Now the tables have turned though and they don't appear to like it very much.*

He sat back and studied his giant wall of secure screen prisons. He was getting quite a collection. All of them super heroes in one way or another and all of them powerless, brought low by their overinflated egos.

He chuckled deep in his chest, "Yes, yes, it's perfect."

The bald headed man knew that the people in the screens couldn't hear him, but he taunted anyway, "That's right, struggle my pretties. Struggle all you like. Soon you and all your Super Zero friends will be under my control."

**THE END OF FREE PREVIEW**

Greg Wagner lives in a tree house with his wife Roberta and their dogs Abby and Olivia on the side of Wagner Mountain (more like a really big, really steep hill) in Maysel, West Virginia.

When he isn't plotting to take over the world or in search of spiritual enlightenment, Greg manages to find time to spin yarns of wonder and amazement. In whatever time is left over, Greg enjoys riding his motorcycle, splitting firewood, reading, playing music and working with glass.

His other books can be found at <http://www.gregwagnerbooks.com>