

The Super Hero

By Tony Burton

It was the news report about the kid killed in a drive-by shooting that really clinched things for Marvin. Marvin loved kids, though he and his wife Thelma never had any. Marvin had always given the kids on the block hard candy when they came around – but that was before all the drugs. Now there were so few kids on the block, and who could blame the parents?

So, Marvin did his rounds as the super of three buildings, and occasionally got to see the kids in the third-floor apartment at 1100 Madison. But it was those kids that really worried Marvin. They were cute kids, about four years old and six. They had their mother's dark eyes and skin, but they didn't look like either of the two guys that lived in the apartment.

Marvin snorted as he lugged the trash cans out to the curb. *For cripes sake, why did they have all that stuff cooking in there all the time?* The first time Marvin went up there to fix a leaky faucet, they almost shot him when he walked in! Then he noticed the fumes burning his eyes, and he made short work of fixing the leak. But he couldn't help noticing the two kids curled up in a blanket in the corner, asleep but wheezing, breathing that crappy air constantly. That was the first time he saw them.

He paused a moment to look at the kids, and one of the men poked him in the back with a pistol. "Yo! What you waitin' for? You fixed da sink, now get outta here!" His companion was carefully sorting something that looked like rock salt and putting it into little bottles and plastic bags. But Marvin gave no sign that he noticed any of this. He mumbled an apology and hurried out. Marvin couldn't get those kids out of his mind, though.

* * *

That apartment was the only one occupied at 1100 Madison. But Marvin managed to get by that building pretty often, checking on a variety of things. Sometimes he heard the kids crying through the thin walls, and one day he heard one of the men yelling in Spanish and the mother answering angrily in the same, the wailing of the kids in the background. He tentatively knocked on the door.

Suddenly there was no sound from the apartment but the muffled crying of the kids. The door lock clicked, and a bloodshot eye peered out at him from around a door held by three chains. "Que? What you want?" he was asked.

Marvin had acted on impulse, so he stumbled as he answered, "Um, well, I'm through with all my work for the day, and I heard the kids crying. I figured you could use some peace and quiet, so I thought my wife and I could keep them for you for a couple of hours. We love kids." All this was said in a rush to the suspicious eye that stared at him from around the door.

There was some muffled conversation in Spanish and English from within the apartment and a male voice said, "Hey, we ain't payin' for no babysitter!"

Marvin raised his hands and shook his head. "No, no, I don't need you to pay. My wife and I don't have any kids, and we like kids. So I thought we could keep yours for a while, and that way give you a break, too." He ended with a hopeful tone, and looked at the eye peering from behind the door.

There was a scuffling noise, and the door shut. Then he heard the chains being removed, and the woman opened the door with the two children in front of her. "Take 'em. They make too much noise, and cry all the time, ever since their daddy left – *la cabron!*" She shoved them forward without a kiss or hug goodbye, and slammed the door behind them. He heard the chains being refastened, and a bolt clicking shut. The little boy and girl looked up at Marvin with wide, bloodshot eyes and mistrustful expressions, but they went along with him.

When Marvin brought the children in the door of his apartment two buildings down, Thelma was delighted. She sat on the hassock in front of the television and pulled each of the little ones to her. They both got one of her special "easy-squeezy" hugs, then were taken into the kitchen for cups of milk and peanut butter cookies.

As the children munched cookies and sipped their milk, Thelma came back to their sparsely-furnished front room. She regarded Marvin steadily, and he ducked his head. "You'd have to see it, Thelma," he began, and explained in a low voice what he saw and heard that day.

Thelma shook her head and clucked her tongue, but didn't remonstrate with Marvin at all. Instead, she went back into the kitchen to refill milk and hand out two more cookies. Later, after sitting with Marvin and Thelma while watching cartoons on television, both kids took a short nap as Thelma put together a supper of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans and biscuits. Soul food was her specialty.

The children were wide-eyed at the food, but wasted no time in eating healthy portions. Thelma nudged Marvin. "Look at those two! It's like they haven't seen food in weeks," she said in sad amazement.

Marvin wasn't surprised. "I think their stove is mostly used for making the drugs. Prob'ly the kids get a lot of cold cereal. I always see a lot of empty boxes of 'Chocolate Sugar Bombs' in the garbage over there."

Thelma frowned at this. "What is their mamma thinkin' about, anyway?" she muttered as the boy, who had identified himself shyly as Luis, shoved half a biscuit into his mouth. "These kids ought to be eatin' more than that junk!"

Little Selena looked up at them both and asked for more "papas", and it took a little while for Marvin to realize she wanted potatoes. He spooned some into her plate, and watched with a smile as she dug into them eagerly.

"I know," Marvin said in a murmur, "but what am I supposed to do? Turn them in to Child Welfare?" He snorted his disgust. "Like that would do any good!"

The meal was soon finished, and Marvin realized that he had to take the kids back or their mother might be worried. Probably not, he thought in anger, but no sense in stirring up a fuss.

He delivered the two children to their apartment with no problems. As the door was closing, he cleared his throat. The woman looked at him suspiciously. "Look, we really enjoyed watching the kids. We could do this pretty regular, if you want."

"You no charge us nothing?"

"No, no charge. Like I said, we like the kids a lot."

"You no doing nothing bad with the kids, eh? You know, *il pornografico?*"

Marvin was shocked, and a little angry. "Hell, no! What do you think I am?"

The woman held up a hand. "Hey, got to ask, you know?" She looked at him again. "*Bueno*. You come by any time and take the kids. Keep 'em overnight, if you like." She shrugged. "Makes no difference to me."

So, the children's visits with Marvin and Thelma became regular events. Soon, Thelma bought them clothes at a second-hand store and dressed them up nicely. Marvin taught them both to play checkers. They went to church together at the Temple of Deliverance Baptist Church down the street on Sunday mornings.

One day, as the kids were sitting and watching Sesame Street on TV, he looked out the window and saw an old Lincoln pull up in front of 1100 Madison. Three guys wearing long black coats got out and went into the building after checking the area. Marvin opened the window and listened. He faintly heard some yelling, then was shocked to hear the "Pop! Pop-pop!" of gunfire.

The three men came running out of the old building, one of them holding his arm, and sped away in the car. In a little while, one of the young Hispanic men came out of the building holding a pistol and looked up and down the street, then went back inside.

As Thelma sat and colored pictures with the kids that evening, Marvin watched the news. He saw with horror that a six-year-old little girl had been caught in the crossfire of a drive-by shooting and killed by two bullets striking her in the head. He shook as he sat there, not hearing any more details, as he ran through the possibility of such a thing happening to Luis and Selena. *They could have been in that apartment today.*

* * *

Marvin tossed and turned that night after taking the children back to their mother. The next day after he finished making his rounds, dumping the garbage cans and all that, he called on the apartment at 1100 Madison again. By now, they were accustomed to his visits, and it only took a moment for the children to come rushing out into his arms. "Abuelo Marvin," they now called him. He carried Selena, and Luis trotted happily by his side.

He left the children with *Abuela* Thelma, explaining that he had some work to do at another of the buildings, and they began a coloring and checkers marathon. Marvin left to do what had to be done.

In his shop in the basement, he easily prepared what he needed from some light bulbs and an old stove he had for parts. Carefully, he drilled holes in the bases of the bulbs and squirted white gasoline from his old camping stove into each, then put a drop of glue on the holes to close them.

He pulled out the thermostat from the old stove and filled it too with white gasoline, sealing the hole he drilled with more quick-drying glue.

After all the glue was dry, he went to 1100, and quietly entered the basement there. He put the bulbs and thermostat on the worktable in the basement. Taking a deep breath, he pulled the fuses for the third floor and hurried back home.

Within minutes of his arrival, there was a pounding at his door. One of the tenants of the apartment, a gun-shaped bulge at his waistband, was very agitated. "Hey, we got no lights, no power, no nothin'! You gotta come now and fix things, man!"

Marvin protested mildly, but the man was insistent and threatening, so Marvin held up his hands in surrender and said he would be right over. He put on a shirt and followed the young man back to the building and to the apartment.

Marvin went into the darkened apartment. The woman was sitting in the corner smoking pot, and the other young Hispanic male was jerkily moving around the kitchen, touching things and trying to get them working again.

"*Madre de Dios!* You gotta get this goin' again, man! We got a lot to do today!" Nervous jets of cigarette smoke came from his nostrils. Marvin nodded and began looking around, checking the lights, the electrical outlets, the stove – everything. Soon, he nodded.

"I think it was a surge came through the building," he said. "Blew these bulbs, and even part of the stove. It's an old building, you know? I got some parts down in the basement. I'll go get them and get everything fixed up perfect in no time. You just relax, OK?"

The older man squinted suspiciously at Marvin. "I never heard of that before. You sure?" He fingered the bulge in his waistband.

Marvin nodded, sweating from the heat and tension. "Hey, I've been maintaining these old buildings for fifteen years. Of course," he spread his hands in front of himself, "if you want to try to fix it yourself..."

"Hell, no, man! You the super - that's what you paid to do. An' hurry up, too!"

Marvin went to the basement and retrieved the bulbs and the stove thermostat he had placed there. He went upstairs and replaced the bulbs in all five of the apartment's dangling light sockets with the ones he had prepared. He removed the oven thermostat and replaced it, being sure to turn on the stove when he was through.

With a grunt, Marvin stood up, rubbing his lower back. "Now, I'm going to go downstairs and turn the power back on. I want you to watch the bulbs real close and tell me if anything different happens when I turn the power back on. The switches are all on, so all you have to do is stand under them and watch them, OK?"

The three of them nodded sullenly, and each of them moved to a position underneath a dangling light fixture. Marvin left the apartment on trembling legs, and hurried back to the basement. He stood looking at the fusebox for a long moment. *Am I doing the right thing?* He asked himself. With a prayer, he closed his eyes and restored power to the third floor. Nothing happened. Marvin's eyes flew open. *Sweet Jesus, it didn't work!*

With a thunderous roar, the building shook to its foundations. Marvin headed for the stairs and ran up them as fast as his 60-year-old legs would take him. He heard another "whoomp!" of explosion, and ran from the building, into the street.

Neighbors from two other buildings were leaning out of their windows, and Marvin yelled up at them, "Call the fire department! Call 9-1-1, or it might spread to your building!" That was enough; six

heads shot back inside their respective windows, and within minutes Marvin heard the screaming sirens of two fire trucks.

Firemen and policemen arrived at the scene, with ambulances a close third. The old dry-rotted interior of the building burned like paper. When the fire investigators were finally able to get into the third floor, the evidence was clear: a meth-lab operation gone horribly wrong. "Flash fires happen all the time in these things," the fire chief explained to Marvin. "It's the ether, white gas and other volatile chemicals they use. Don't worry, we'll write up the report and the building owner will be able to claim for insurance purposes." Marvin nodded without saying much at all.

Marvin walked home, meeting Thelma, Luis and Selena along the way. "Come on, Thelma, let's get the kids home." He looked down at them. "You are going to live with us now, OK?" Both children looked up uncertainly at him, but Luis smiled.

"Sure, *Abuelo!*" He took Selena by the hand, and the children led the way back to 1065 Madison.

Tony Burton is an author and the editor of Crime and Suspense Ezine. He also owns and operates Wolfmont Publishing, a small-press publishing house. He has been writing for a few years now, and occasionally feels the need to indulge in a Thuglit kinda story. Some people just need killin'.