The Sidekick

Lawrence Watt-Evans

The young man looked up at the sound of a throat clearing.

“You can go in now,” the receptionist said. She smiled at him, an expression that might have been slightly patronizing.

He stood, flexed his fingers nervously, glanced about the outer office one last time, then marched up to the unlabeled door. He hesitated for an instant, debating whether or not he should knock, weighing etiquette and audacity, and decided to go straight in; he opened the door and stepped in, then closed the door behind himself.

No one was in the office.

His first reaction was to think, “Trap!” and look for a way out, but then he caught himself. Who would want to trap him here?

And the room looked like an office, not a death-trap. The walls were lined with bookshelves, most of them empty, and the rest as likely to have executive toys as actual books. Thick blue carpeting covered the floor. In the center of the room was a desk, a big one, and a video camera on a small motorized tripod stood atop the center of that desk. Bookshelf speakers stood on either side of the camera. The speakers and the camera lens were all aimed toward a blue armchair—which appeared to be the only seat in the room.

If this was legitimate, that set-up probably meant he was dealing with one of the technoheroes—Dr. Electric, maybe, or the Mechanic. That would be okay.

And if it wasn’t legitimate...

A little uneasily, worried that he might be making the wrong impression, he turned the doorknob and opened the door a crack, just to be sure he could.

He could. He got a glimpse of the receptionist’s back, in that tight red dress—no question about it, that was a fine-looking woman out there—and then quietly closed the door again.

Could the receptionist be his mysterious prospective employer? That might be very interesting. Of course, she was a good five years older than he was, at least; he supposed he should stick to girls his own age.

And right now, he told himself, he should stick to business.

“Hello?” he said.

“Welcome, Mr. Smith,” said a voice from the speakers—a resonant baritone, so unless the receptionist was being very clever indeed, she was just a receptionist after all. “Have a seat.” The video camera swung up, then back down, as if waving him toward the armchair.

Cautiously, he settled into the chair, looking for hidden wires as he did. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

“My name isn’t really Smith,” he said. “You probably guessed that, but I want to get it out front, I don’t want you to think I’m trying to fool you.”

“Oh, I had an open mind on the subject,” the voice said. “Would you mind explaining why you gave a false name?”

“Smith” leaned forward, forearms on his knees; the camera tracked down slightly to keep his face centered. “Well, it’s the nature of the business, isn’t it?” he said. “We all keep our identities secret, so we can have lives outside our work—or almost all of us, anyway.”

“And what sort of work is this you refer to, Mr. Smith?”

“Heroics,” the youth said. “Crime-fighting. You know.”

“You think that’s the sort of work you’re here to apply for?”

“Well, if it’s not,” he said, “then I’m in the wrong place. I can’t see what else your ad could have been about. ‘Special people with an interest in crime,’ you said. ‘Able to operate independently, outside established frameworks.’ Sounds like masked vigilante stuff to me.”

“And do you have experience in this sort of enterprise?”

“Well, yeah, actually. I do.” He leaned back in the chair, his expression smug.

“Would you care to elaborate on that?”

“I mean I have experience,” he said, with an edge in his voice.

“As a costumed hero? I understand your reluctance to tell me your true name, but surely, if you’ve operated as a masked crime-fighter, you must have had a, shall we say, nom de guerre? If not one of your own invention, then surely the press gave you a nickname?”

“I had a name.” He wasn’t sure why he was so reluctant to say who he was; maybe it was something about the set-up with the camera and the speakers and the hidden microphone. “What about you? Do I get to find out who you are?”

“Perhaps later, Mr. Smith. For now, though, we’re discussing your qualifications, and I think it’s clear that, as with any application for employment, your previous experience in the field is an essential part of the information to be conveyed.”

Whoever it was on the other end of the wires, “Smith” thought, he spoke nicely, better than Big Jim ever had. And he had a valid point.

“All right,” he said. “I’m Pinch.”

There. It was out. And somehow, the name he had been so proud of for so long sounded stupid.

When he’d started he’d loved it, he would grin every time he punched someone and said, “Feeling the Pinch, bozo?”

Then, after a while, it was just a name.

And now it sounded dumb.

“Pinch,” the voice said. “You mean the Crime Crusher’s boy sidekick?”

“That’s right,” the young man said.

For a long moment, the speakers were silent. At last the voice asked, “Can you prove it? After all, Pinch’s true identity has never been revealed, and he’s never been seen without his helmet and visor.”

“You’re seeing me without them right now,” Pinch said, “but I don’t know how I can prove it. I’ve got the costume on underneath my civvies, but that could be faked. What sort of proof do you want?”

“Perhaps information about the Crime Crusher...but no. It wouldn’t be fair to ask you that, not yet.” The voice paused, then asked, “Why are you here?”

“Because I’m looking for work, of course.”

“And are you leaving your partnership with Crime Crusher? You and he have been together for a long time...six years?”

“Eight. Since I was ten.”

“And now you’re leaving? Is this a lover’s quarrel, perhaps? If so, you’ll...”

“No, dammit!” Pinch interrupted angrily. “Those rumors are all lies. We’re both straight, we always were, he never laid a hand on me or said a funny word. For Chrissake, he took me to a whorehouse when I was fifteen, flew us out to Nevada so it’d be legal...” He cut himself off, almost biting his tongue.

“Ah. Why, then? Crime Crusher has apparently not been very active of late; is there a connection?”

“Yes, there’s a connection.” He hesitated. “Listen, can’t you just accept it that I’m not working for him any more, and I need a job?”

“I regret to say, Pinch,” the voice said, in a tone that really did sound regretful, “that I can scarcely take you on when at any moment you might patch up your quarrel with the Crime Crusher, whatever that quarrel might be, and go back to his employ. Eight years—that’s a lot of history you two have.”

“All right, all right,” Pinch said. “I see your point. And I can’t keep it a secret forever anyway, it’s going to come out sooner or later.” He chewed his lower lip, staring at the camera. “I wish I knew who you were,” he said.

The voice didn’t answer.

At last, Pinch sighed. “He’s dead,” he said.

For a moment, no one answered; Pinch began to wonder if the sound system had failed.

“The Crime Crusher is dead?” the voice said, finally.

“That’s right. When that building fell on him in the fight with Dr. Driller, Thanksgiving weekend? He didn’t get out.”

“No body was found.”

Pinch let out a humorless bark of laughter. “Come on,” he said. “Of course not. That’s what a sidekick is for, isn’t it? He pulls the hero out and nurses him back to health, right? Well, I pulled C.C. out, but he was all broken inside, he died before I could get him to a hospital, blood coming out of his mouth and his nose and out his goddamn asshole, for Chrissakes, every bone in his body must’ve been smashed. I mean, he was big and strong, but a building fell on him. He wasn’t some alien or freak like Captain fucking Cosmos, he was just a big tough guy with a weird hobby, dressed up in kevlar armor.”

“No one reported his death.”

Pinch laughed again, or perhaps it was a sob. “Of course not. That’s not how it’s done. You don’t ever let the bad guys know they won a round. You don’t tell them they got one of the good guys, once and for all. They already have an edge in a fight, since they don’t care if they kill us, if they wipe out innocent bystanders—you can’t give them an inch. If you’re in the business, you must know that!”

“You’re right, of course.”

For a moment, neither spoke. Then the voice asked, “How did you get into this in the first place? Was the Crime Crusher a relative? Your father, perhaps?”

Pinch shook his head. “Nothing like that.”

“Tell me about it, then.” After a second’s pause, the voice added, “Take your time.”

“I was just an ordinary kid, I lived with my folks,” Pinch said. “My Dad drove a bus, Mom sold jewelry, and we had a crummy little apartment, but it was home. And then this maniac with a gun broke in looking for something and shot them both. He was high on something, maybe just crazy. He picked me up by the throat, started screaming at me, and I couldn’t make out what he was saying, it might’ve been in Spanish or something, I didn’t know any Spanish. He threw me against the wall, and I thought he was going to kill me, he had the gun and he was coming toward me, when this big man in a jazzy black outfit and a fancy motorcycle helmet jumped him from behind. I was dazed, I’d just gotten flung around like a doll, my father was lying on the floor in a pool of blood just a few feet away with his brains all over the wallpaper, and my mother was lying on the bed in the next room with a .45 hole through her chest, and these two idiots were there fighting, nobody called the ambulance or anything, nobody dialed 911. I didn’t realize what was going on, I didn’t realize this was the Crime Crusher trying to help me. I wanted to get to the phone, or to my Dad, or somewhere, but I couldn’t get past, these two were all over the place, and I was so mad I just screamed at them, and I jumped at them. And the junkie tried to point the gun at me, so I grabbed it and shoved it in his face, and it went off.”

Pinch paused, remembering.

“Then what?” the voice asked.

“Then we ran,” Pinch said. “I mean, I’d blown the top of his head off. And the Crime Crusher didn’t think it’d be real good for his image, or anything else, if he was found in an apartment with three corpses and a hysterical kid. He also didn’t think it would be real good for me, being found there with the gun and having to explain it all, and having cops and city welfare people all over me, and probably getting shipped out to one foster family after another. He figured at the very least I needed some time to calm down. So he took me with him, back home.”

“Home?”

“That’s right. He took me home, and he took care of me there, until I had calmed down and gotten myself back together a little. And then he asked what I wanted to do, and one thing led to another, and I asked if I could stay with him, and he agreed. Not that it was that easy; I had to argue for over a week, and I argued dirty, I used threats and blackmail, but in the end, he agreed. And for the next year he taught me karate and all the rest of it, forensics, weapons, everything.”

“And you became his sidekick.”

“That’s right—I watched his back, I was his getaway driver, his spotter, his decoy. And I was his son by a previous marriage the rest of the time, that was how we explained it.”

“Were you after revenge, then? Is that why you fought crime for eight years?”

Pinch shrugged. “Who knows?” he asked. “Maybe at first, it was. Mostly, it was just what I did, and I did it because C.C. did. It seemed to help, sometimes—we saved a few lives, kept some people out of trouble.”

“Is that all?”

“Hey, what are you, a shrink?” Pinch demanded angrily.

“No,” the voice replied calmly, “I’m a prospective employer. I think you’ll see that your motivation is important to me.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Pinch admitted. He thought for a moment, then said, “Revenge was part of it. And making good for C.C., showing him I could do it, that was a part of it, too. And helping people—saving some old guy’s shop from the Torch, keeping a loonie from shooting up a bunch of kids, that sort of thing felt pretty good.”

“If I told you that the job you’re being considered for wouldn’t have that, that you’d never operate out in the open where people could see you and be grateful, would that bother you?”

The young man hesitated, mulling that over.

“They weren’t always that grateful, anyway,” he said at last. “I mean, we’d take out the guy who beat up some old lady, and she’d be angry we hadn’t stopped him before he hit her, and the guy’s family would be all over us, yelling, and the cops were always pissed at us because we were vigilantes... we got gratitude sometimes, but we got more’n our share of grief, too. I don’t think I’d miss it.”

“Then that wasn’t really your motivation, was it?”

“I guess not.”

“Avenging your parents?”

“Partly—but man, sometimes I don’t even remember what they looked like any more. I’d shot the bastard who killed them, right on the spot, and a month later we cleaned out his whole neighborhood. It didn’t bring my Dad back, it didn’t do a thing for my Mom, they’re still just as dead. I could punch out every crook in the whole damn country and it wouldn’t change anything. Revenge is a crock, really.”

“What, then?”

“Well, it’s just what we did, man—if you’re in the business, you must know how it is. C.C. made his living at it, of course—reward money and finder’s fees and so on. He’d used up his inheritance years ago, couldn’t hold a day job because of the schedule—how do you tell your boss you won’t be in Monday because you’re staking out the Dragon King’s secret headquarters? What medical plan is going to cover someone who gets his jaw broken three or four times a year? So the money kept him going, the need for the money, even when he didn’t feel like it.”

“A man like the Crime Crusher must have been qualified for other work, though; why didn’t he just give it up and take that day job somewhere? Why did he go on?”

Pinch shrugged. “What kind of resumé could he give?” he asked. “Besides, he didn’t want to quit.”

“Did you want to quit?”

“No, I didn’t—I told you, I liked it.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know.” Pinch shrugged again. “I just did.”

“We’ll come back to that a little later, if you don’t mind,” the voice said.

“I don’t mind,” Pinch said, a bit edgily. “I don’t think I’ll have any better answers, though.”

“We’ll see. For now, though, another question. By your own account, you’re eighteen now, you learned everything the Crime Crusher could teach you, you’ve been fighting crime for eight years—why are you looking for work?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why are you here? Why didn’t you just carry on by yourself? You could have become the new Crime Crusher, if you chose—no one would know the difference, you have all the equipment, the files, the skills.”

“I don’t have his size,” Pinch said. “Anyone would know in a minute I wasn’t him.”

“Would that matter? But suppose it did, suppose you couldn’t simply step into his shoes—why not create a new identity, then? Your mentor invented a role for himself when he became the Crime Crusher in the first place, almost a decade ago; all the costumed heroes have done it, from Dr. Electric to the Night Man. You could have called yourself the Hammer, for example, without changing that distinctive style.”

“Style?”

“Feeling the Pinch.”

Pinch hesitated. Naturally, everyone knew about his catch-phrase; it was supposed to be distinctive. Still, it felt weird to hear it like that. And he didn’t like the question, somehow. Working alone just didn’t feel right.

“I dunno,” he said.

“I think I’d like a better answer than that, Pinch. Why didn’t you continue on your own?”

The young man glanced uneasily about the office, but found nothing that helped him.

“I suppose I could have,” he said, “but I’ve never worked solo. I’m not comfortable with it. And the money end—I never had anything to do with that, I don’t know how it works. I don’t have any inheritance the way Jim...the way C.C. did. He didn’t leave me much of anything but overdue bills.”

“So you want the security of a paid position?”

“I guess that’s it, yeah.”

“And you want to stay in crime-fighting? Specifically, in vigilante crime-fighting? Surely you’ve thought about police training.”

“Yeah, I thought about it. It’s boring, though. The paperwork, the traffic work, cruising the city and getting fat on jelly donuts—it’s not for me.”

“So why crime-fighting?”

“It’s what I know.”

“But why?”

“Why’s it what I know? Why’d I stay in it? I told you, I don’t know.”

“Excitement, maybe?”

“Well, sure, it’s exciting.” Pinch rubbed uneasily at his knuckles, and glanced at the half-empty shelves.

“Is that all? It’s just exciting?”

“Well, I...it’s a challenge, anyway. I mean, it’s dangerous, you could get killed, like C.C. There are people out there trying to kill you, and you have to stop them before they can do it. You have to stop them before they hurt anyone, if you can. I mean, it doesn’t really work that way, you can never stop them, there are always more, but you have to try. It’s them or me, sometimes—life or death.”

“That’s what you need, isn’t it?” the voice asked, very softly.

“What?”

“That’s what you need—the thrill. The danger. The risk of death. That’s why you do it. The challenge—matching your wits and your muscle against an enemy who’s almost as good as you are, in a fight that could easily end in death. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No, that’s not it,” Pinch said angrily, smacking his fist into his palm.

The voice didn’t answer, and after a few seconds Pinch repeated, very quietly, “It’s not.” He stared into the camera for a moment. “Who the hell are you, anyway?” he asked.

“That is it,” the voice said. “Isn’t it?”

“No!” Pinch jumped to his feet; the camera swiveled up, following, staying focused on his face.

“It is for most of you—of us,” the voice said.

“Not for me,” Pinch said, glaring at the lens. “Is that why you do it? Does the violence turn you on?”

“Perhaps not I,” the voice said, “but certainly most of the costumed heroes—and the costumed criminals, as well. Had you ever thought about that?”

“Thought about what?”

“About why someone like the Grinder goes out in the streets in that outfit of his? Why he takes on people like you and the Crime Crusher using only those hand-blades, instead of just machine- gunning you from ambush? It’s the same thrill for both sides, Pinch. The costumes, the names, they’re all ritual combat, all meant to frighten the other side. To the customers of a protection racket, the Torch or the Grinder is more frightening than an ordinary thug with a gun, but which one’s really more dangerous?”

“Yeah, but the heroes, we help people!”

“But is that why you do it?”

“Yes, damn it! It is!”

“It’s not for the thrill?”

“I told you it isn’t!” Pinch kicked the chair away and glared at the camera.

“Why do you protest so much, Pinch? Why are you so vehement?”

“I don’t need this shit!”

“If it’s the thrill—if it’s just the thrill, Pinch, you could fight for either side, it wouldn’t make any difference, would it?”

“And that’s why it’s not! It makes all the difference!”

“It does make a difference, Pinch, you’re right.” The voice was silky, almost purring. “You mentioned it yourself. Because every time you go out there as a hero, anyone you take on is likely to try to kill you, he’s going to want to just blow you away. But the good guys don’t do that, do they? So a criminal can get as good a fight as anyone could want, but no one will be trying to kill him—they’ll just want to stop him, to beat him into submission. In a way, Pinch, isn’t that better? Isn’t that even better than what the heroes have?”

“What is this? You testing me? You think I haven’t got what it takes, I don’t know what side I’m on?” Pinch shoved at the camera, knocking it back until it was pointed at the ceiling; the motor ground for a moment, then pulled it back down.

“There’s another thing, Pinch,” the voice said. “Haven’t you ever noticed how few of the heroes have sidekicks? Most of them can’t afford to support anyone else. Most of them don’t want the responsibility. They don’t want the risk. A good many of them are half-crazy anyway, running around in those costumes, playing gladiator in the streets, and they have just enough sense left to realize that they don’t have any business bringing in anyone else, pretending to be role models. The Crime Crusher was probably unique. You’re never going to have a chance to play the sidekick again.”

“Then what the hell am I doing here, anyway?” Pinch shouted. “Why am I listening to all this crap about how I’m some kind of pervert who gets his kicks punching people, and how I’m no different from the creeps I bust? Sure, there’s a charge in it, out there on the street, up against Benny the Hook or the Grinder, it’s just the two of you, you look him right in the eye, you bruise your fists on his ribs—but that’s not why I’m out there. It’s not. Maybe it is for you, but not for me.”

The voice remarked, “I didn’t say it was. I was explaining why you won’t have a chance to be a sidekick again.”

“Then what the hell am I doing here?” Pinch demanded, reaching out and shaking the camera; the motor whirred desperately as it tried to compensate. “So what am I here for?” he shouted. “If you’re not looking for a sidekick, what do you want me for? Who the hell are you, anyway? Have I ever heard of you?”

“You’ve heard of me,” the voice said. “And I’m in the crime business, just like you and your dead mentor—but haven’t you figured it out yet, son?”

“Figured out what?”

“That I’m on the other side. You’ve been after me for months now. You know me as the Director.”

For a long moment, the office was utterly silent.

“Shit,” Pinch said at last. “You’re lying.”

“No,” the voice said, “I’m not. I’m the Director, Pinch. And I’m offering you a job. You don’t have to go solo. I need henchmen, muscle, the boys out on the street working for me. I can use you, Pinch. I can pay you better than the Crime Crusher ever did, I can give you clothes and women and all the rest of it, and you can still fight the battles in the streets, you can still feel that thrill, feel your fists hitting flesh. Isn’t that what you want?”

“You’re crazy!” Pinch threw a flying kick at the video camera, sending it backward off the desk. “You’re crazy! I’m a hero, not a crook!”

“You punch out people in fancy costumes, Pinch. And I’ll pay you to do that. Nobody on the other side will, not any more...”

Pinch’s fist smashed through the walnut-veneer case of the left-hand speaker; something sparked, and it went dead.

“Just think about it,” the other speaker said, in a voice oddly flat without stereo. “Think it over. We’ll repair the equipment, you can come back...”

A sideways blow sent the right speaker spinning off the desk; the connecting wire snapped free with a brief crackle, and the speaker smashed into a nearby shelf. In a fury, the young man smashed the shelving from the walls, shattered the desk, drove broken chunks of speaker and camera through the walls, gouged out strips of carpet.

Finally, Pinch stood alone in the office. “I’m a hero,” he said; then he turned and marched out.

He stamped past the receptionist and out into the hallway—and stopped.

Where was he going? What else could he do? How else could he stay in the game? He hesitated.

It took time. He walked the streets the rest of that day and all through the night, and in the morning he came back to the empty office and accepted the job he’d been offered.