

CHAPTER ONE

GOTTA SAY, WHEN I went to visit my grandparents for the first time, I really didn't expect to get attacked by their gardener ninja. For that matter, I didn't even know that gardener ninjas existed. I wondered if I could hire one off Craigslist or something.

I stood alone in the front garden of what I assumed was my grandparents' mansion. I say 'assumed' because I had never actually been to their place before and so I didn't know for sure if this was it. I mean, I only found this house because it matched the address that Mom had given me before I left Texas, but Mom had admitted to me that it was possible that my grandparents—who were my late Dad's parents—might have moved in the years since she last spoke with them and she didn't know how to contact them to let them know I was going to visit them ahead of time. Apparently, my grandparents didn't even have a land line or had not given Mom their phone number for some reason.

I looked carefully around the garden, but the gardener ninja was nowhere to be seen. I called him 'gardener ninja' not because he was a gardener or even a ninja, but because I didn't know what else to call him. I had just walked into the garden about five minutes ago when a guy in a ninja costume just burst out of nowhere and started chucking throwing stars at me. I'd dodged them (one of the perks of super speed), but he'd vanished the second I went after him.

And man, was this garden *huge*. Or it felt that way, anyway. Lots of trees and flowerbeds everywhere, statues and birdbaths shaped like Cupid and other things like that, plus tomatoes and other veggies growing everywhere. Mom had told me that Grandfather liked to garden, so I took this as a sign that Grandfather and Grandmother were still here, but I couldn't be sure about that.

"Okay, Mr. McNinja," I muttered, looking this way and that for the ninja. "Why don't you come out and play? I am really not in the mood to play with you right now."

Of course, the ninja didn't respond. I listened for him, but all I heard was the leaves blowing in the wind. I was tempted to just use my new lightning bolt power to blast the entire garden into pieces and force the ninja to reveal himself, but since I didn't want my grandparents to hate me, I didn't.

Instead, I tapped my earcom and said, "Val, do your sensors pick up any heat signatures nearby?"

"No," said Valerie, my late Dad's AI assistant and who was now my assistant. "You appear to be the only person in the entire garden."

"What? That's bull," I said, scowling as I looked around again. "Even ninjas can't hide their body heat."

"I am merely reporting what my sensors indicate, Bolt," said Valerie. "But if I may make a suggestion, perhaps you should have brought the rest of your team along with you. Treehugger, in particular, would have been very useful here, since her powers over plant life would have made it easier to use the plants to find the ninja."

"Val, you know this is a personal mission of mine," I said. "The others don't need to get involved in my life like this. Besides, I doubt my grandparents would be happy to have a bunch of rowdy super-powered teenagers in their mansion anyway."

“Perhaps, but backup is always nice to have,” said Valerie.

“Yeah, but that would require knowing ahead of time that my grandparents employ ninja gardeners,” I said. “And there’s no way I could have known that, so the point is moot.”

“I know, but—”

“Val, just can it,” I said. “If you sense anything, let me know. Otherwise—”

I didn’t get to finish that sentence because I heard something flying through the air toward me. I looked over my shoulder to see a ninja throwing star coming my way. I immediately flew into the air, allowing the throwing star to soar past me harmlessly and disappear into the foliage somewhere.

“Ha!” I said, turning in the air to look for the ninja, though I couldn’t see him anywhere. “Can’t get me up here, you dumb ninja!”

I heard shuffling in the trees nearby and looked at them just in time to see the ninja burst out of them and fly toward me. He came fast, so fast that I didn’t even have time to move. He flew past me, pulling a rope around my neck and dragging me down to the earth with him.

We landed on the ground hard, the ninja on his feet and I on my back. Before I could react, the ninja tied my arms and legs up, but since it was just normal rope, I snapped it and jumped back to my feet instantly.

But just as I got back to my feet, the ninja was gone, though I noticed his footprints in the muddy earth heading deeper into the garden.

“Hey, get back here!” I shouted.

I ran after him, though not with my super speed because I didn’t want to run straight into some trap he might have set. I pushed aside huge leaves and branches as I made my way deeper into the garden. I couldn’t hear him, but I assumed he must still be somewhere up ahead.

Then I burst out into a clearing, shouting, “Ah ha! I got you now, you—”

I cut myself off when I saw that I was standing on the edge of a shallow pond all by itself. I looked this way and that, but I didn’t see the ninja hiding in the bushes or in the trees. It seemed like he had just up and vanished ... again. The bastard.

Just as I was about to turn and leave, however, I heard something small flying through the air and then felt something sting me in the side of the neck. It felt like an insect, so I grabbed at the spot and pulled off a small dart that was leaking some kind of black liquid.

“Huh?” I said. “A dart? Where did this—”

I stopped speaking because I felt my body starting to stiffen. Dropping the dart into the pond, I staggered backwards, but I couldn’t escape the effects of the poison that I belatedly realized the dart had injected in me.

Thus, I fell over backwards onto the ground with a *thunk*. And I couldn’t get up, because the poison had paralyzed my body. I tried to move, but I couldn’t even make my pinkie finger twitch.

Before I could do anything else, the ninja suddenly appeared out of nowhere and stood over me with a long, sharp-looking knife in his hand. He raised the knife above his head, clearly about to bring it down on my neck and kill me.

But before the ninja could stab me, a rock flew out of the bushes and smashed into the back of the ninja’s head. The ninja immediately staggered to the side and collapsed, though he looked more unconscious than dead.

Panting, I had no idea who had knocked him out until someone stepped out of the bushes and said, "Bolt? What are you doing here?"

I looked up at the man standing above me and was surprised to see that it was a tall, Japanese man in a long coat. "Triplet? Is that you?"

The superhero detective known as Triplet nodded as he looked down at me. "Yes. But I noticed that you still haven't answered my question."

"Well, that's because I was going to ask *you* the same," I said. "I didn't expect to see anyone I knew here. Are you on a case or something?"

Triplet opened his mouth to answer, but then the ninja suddenly jumped back to his feet and lashed out with a kick aimed at Triplet's head. Triplet, however, ducked and threw a punch at the ninja, but the ninja quickly dodged and then vanished back into the trees and bushes around us.

"Damn ninja," said Triplet, looking around in annoyance. "I hate it when they do that."

"When they do that?" I said. "Have you fought ninjas before?"

"Once, when I visited my grandparents in Japan," said Triplet. "Tricky bastards. But anyway, he won't get far."

I was about to ask Triplet what he meant when I heard rustling in the bushes, followed by what sounded like a fist punching someone's jaw, and then the ninja stepping out of the bushes again. Only this time, the ninja's arms were being forced behind it, held by none other than Triplet himself.

For a moment, I was confused at how there could be two Triplets until I remembered Triplet's superpower, which allowed him to split into three different clones that were all the same as him. Of course, he called them 'Thirds' rather than clones, but that's basically what they were, regardless of his preferred terminology.

The Third forced the ninja down to his feet. The ninja didn't say a word, but he did glare up at Triplet, who nodded at his Third.

"Good job, me," said Triplet. "Keep him down while I help Bolt here. Feel free to punch him in the head if he tries to escape."

The Third nodded while Triplet turned to look at me again. "Can you get up, Bolt? Or is the ninja's poison keeping you down?"

Suddenly, I was able to bend my fingers and I could feel movement starting to return to my body, so I nodded and said, "The poison is fading, I think. Either the ninja didn't get to put as much poison in my body as he wanted or it doesn't have any permanent effects."

"Sounds good," said Triplet. "Let me help you up."

Triplet held out a hand, which I grabbed, and he then helped me up to my feet. I could stand on my own now, although my body was still fairly stiff and I doubted I'd fully recover for a little while.

"Now, can you tell me what you are doing here?" said Triplet. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon after your Dad's funeral."

I rubbed the back of my head as I said, "I came here to visit my grandparents. I was told they live here."

"Your grandparents?" said Triplet. "Paternal or maternal?"

"Paternal," I said. "They were Dad's parents, but I've never met them before. Mom told me about them and so I'm trying to meet them."

“Interesting,” said Triplet. “So you are the grandson of Matthew Jason, then?”

“How do you know my Grandfather’s name?” I said in surprise.

“Because I’m also here to meet him, though not for the same reasons as you, evidently,” said Triplet. He nodded at the ninja. “If this guy is any indication of your grandparents’ desire to see people, I guess they aren’t exactly welcoming to guests.”

“Why are you here to meet my grandparents?” I said. “Do you have some business with them or something?”

“Yes,” said Triplet. “It’s part of a larger investigation that I’m undertaking, but before I tell you about it, I am going to have this ninja tell me about his masters and if he’s alone or not.”

Triplet walked up to the ninja—which was still held down by one of his thirds—and said, “Okay, ninja, talk. Are you alone? Or are you just one of the bodyguards protecting Matthew Jason and his wife?”

The ninja didn’t answer. He just glared at Triplet from behind his mask, causing Triplet to say, “Okay, then I guess we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

Triplet grabbed the ninja’s mask and ripped it off. That was when we discovered that the ninja wasn’t a ‘he’ at all, but a woman, and a young one, at that, who didn’t look much older than me. She had skin that was either naturally dark or just very tanned and she had short brown hair. She still glared at us, as if her looks alone could kill.

“Talk,” said Triplet. He raised a hand. “I’m not afraid to hit a girl, if you’re hoping on chivalry to save you. Don’t believe in it.”

“I will never tell you intruders anything,” the ninja said. She looked away. “Hit me as much as you like. I will not tell you anything else about this mansion’s defenses.”

Triplet looked like he was about to slap her, but I grabbed Triplet’s arm and said, “Hey, man, let me try to talk to her. Maybe she’ll listen to me once she finds out I’m related to her master.”

I thought Triplet was going to brush off my suggestion at first, but then he lowered his arm and said, “Okay, but be quick about it. I don’t want to spend all day interrogating her.”

I nodded and walked up to the ninja girl. She wasn’t looking at me or Triplet; her eyes were focused strictly on the ground. It was like she was afraid that we might be able to read her mind, even though neither of us had telepathic powers. Or maybe she just didn’t want us reading her face in case it helped us figured out what she was thinking.

“Hey,” I said, stopping in front of her. “What’s your name?”

“None of your business,” said the ninja girl, still without looking at me.

“Right,” I said. “Well, you probably don’t know this, but I’m the grandson of your employer, Matthew Jason. I just came here to see him.”

The ninja girl suddenly looked up at me and I saw fear in her eyes. “You’re his grandson?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding eagerly. “So is Matthew Jason still living here? And also his wife, Jane Jason?”

But the ninja girl seemed to have stopped paying attention to what I was saying, because she was looking at the ground again and muttering, “Then her vision has come true. This is not good.”

“Vision?” I repeated. “Who is ‘her’ and what kind of vision did she have?”

“I will never tell,” said the ninja girl. “I am not only the protector of my employer, but I am also his secret keeper. You can torture me all day and all night, but I will never betray my employer.”

“Well, we’re not going to torture you,” I said. I looked at Triplet. “Right?”

Triplet shrugged. “I don’t really want to, but it depends on how you define torture.”

I immediately looked at the ninja girl again and said, “Look, you can trust me. I’m Matthew’s grandson and I have no intentions of harming him or anything. I just want to talk to him.”

“How can I know for sure that you are indeed his grandson?” said the ninja girl. “You have not offered any proof to back up that claim. You could just as easily be lying in order to gain access to information that no one is supposed to know.”

I was about to tell her that she was just being really unreasonable now when I heard more rustling in the bushes. Triplet and his Third must have heard them as well, because they were also looking around, though the ninja girl didn’t seem as surprised as us.

“Who’s there?” I said, looking this way and that for any sign of whoever was in the bushes. “Show yourself or else.”

“How arrogant,” came an elderly, male voice from somewhere in the bushes. “Demanding that I show myself on my own property ... you are just like your father. But very well, I will reveal myself anyway, because I’ve been meaning to meet you for some time now.”

Then a man stepped out of the bushes. He was an elderly man, probably in his late sixties or so, wearing an old-fashioned suit, his silver gray hair combed back neatly. He wore glasses very similar to Dad’s, except his looked a lot more expensive and maybe even custom-made, but I couldn’t tell that for sure.

“And who are you?” said Triplet. I noticed his hand move toward his coat pocket, like he was reaching for a weapon. “Another one of Matthew Jason’s bodyguards?”

The man shook his head. “No, no. I am surprised that you haven’t already recognized me, but given that neither of you has ever seen me before, that is unsurprising.”

My eyes widened. “Wait, did you just mention my father? How do you know him?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said the old man. “Let me state it plainly, then, so that there is no confusion: I am Matthew Jason, the father of Theodore Jason, also known as the superhero Genius, and you, my young man, are Kevin Jason, better known as the superhero Bolt. Don’t look so surprised; I know much about you already, but let’s talk about this inside my mansion, rather than out here in the cold and dirty garden.”