

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST CLUE I got that someone was following me were the soft footsteps I heard behind me. I stopped walking and looked over my shoulder, but I did not see anyone. The alleyway in which I walked was totally empty. Well, not *totally* empty. I mean, there were garbage cans and stuff, but I was the only living thing in the alleyway, at least from what I could see. I glanced at the rooftops, but I didn't see anyone up there following me, either.

Maybe I had just heard my own footsteps echoing off the alley walls, but I didn't think so, because the footsteps I heard were soft, almost womanly, while mine were louder and heavier. Yet I didn't see anyone, male or female, in the alleyway with me. It seemed like I was alone, but I was sure that I had heard *someone* behind me, even if I didn't know who that 'someone' was.

You might have thought I was paranoid, but I didn't think so. I was on my way to the island base of the secret organization known as Icon to rescue my grandfather. Knowing Icon, they'd probably send someone to take me down before I got even close enough to reach their base.

But again, I saw no one. I wished TW, my AI assistant, was still alive, because he could have scanned the alleyway for any heat signals. Unfortunately, I couldn't manually use the Trickshot Watch's scanning capabilities, mostly because TW had not taught me how to do that before he died. I had to rely on my own senses now, which had worked out for me well so far, but at the same time, I knew I was very vulnerable without TW and so I was more sensitive to noise than I normally was.

But I didn't hear any other sounds, so I decided I'd just heard things and turned around to keep walking. I needed to get back to the hotel room my parents had booked for me so I could get myself ready for my trip to Icon's base. I still had the coordinates to their base in my Watch and intended to fly across the sea to get there. I'd have to be careful about when I did that, however, because I didn't want anyone to see and follow me. I had left my hotel room in order to scout out the docks and beach and see if I could find a good, isolated spot to take off from tonight.

This was the first time I'd traveled any significant distance by myself. Sure, I'd gone on field trips and family vacations across the state and even country, but this was the first time I'd ever left Rumsfeld entirely on my own. Dad had insisted on coming with me, but I told him and Mom that they were much safer in Rumsfeld. The closer I got to Icon's base, the more dangerous it would be for both them and me. Icon had already tried to harm my parents before. I didn't want to put them in harm's way again.

I had to admit, though, that I was a bit lonely. The hotel I stayed in was nice, but without any friends or family, I really did feel like I was all on my own. I'd even considered heading back to Rumsfeld, because the idea of assaulting Icon's island base alone—which I knew practically nothing about—was very overwhelming, even though I knew I needed to do it, because that was where my grandfather and the original Trickshot, Gregory McDonald, was being held prisoner.

Soft footsteps again. This time, there was no mistaking them for anything other than what they were. Someone was following me, like an Icon agent. I wasn't in costume at the moment, but that didn't mean I was entirely useless.

I drew three small Trickshot disks out of my pocket and whirled around and threw them behind me. They didn't fly nearly as well as they did whenever I used my powers, but I did hear someone jump to the side as the disks flew through the air. The disks clattered against the pavement, but that was okay, because I now knew that there was definitely someone here, even though I couldn't see them.

"I hear you!" I shouted. "Why not just show yourself? Are you scared of a teenager like me?"

No response, but frankly I didn't expect one anyway. Whoever was following me was obviously smart enough to keep quiet. Looked like I was going to need to *make* them show themselves.

I dropped my backpack on the ground and hit the *TRANSFORMATION* button on the Watch. In the next instant, I was covered head to toe in the Trickshot costume, with my cape flowing out behind me and my fists balled.

"I know you're there, but if you think the fact that you're invisible means I can't hit you, then you're about to be proved wrong," I said, "in the most painful way possible."

I rapidly drew twenty Trickshot disks from my pouch and hurled them all against the pavement. All of the disks started bouncing off every conceivable surface in the alleyway, bouncing off the walls and pavement with blinding speed. If the invisible person was here, then at least one of the disks ought to hit him. There were too many disks bouncing off the alleyway too quickly for anyone to dodge. Even I wouldn't be able to dodge all of them if I tried and I doubted this idiot would be able to, either.

But then I felt something slam into the back of my knees and I fell forward. I broke the fall with my hands, but rolled over onto my back and kicked out. My foot connected with someone's shin and I heard a cry of pain—which sounded feminine—and then a woman appeared before me.

She was a pretty young woman, barely out of her twenties most likely, but she looked incredibly goth, with pitch black hair, skin as pale as a ghost, and dark clothes to match. Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes as she clutched her shin and bounced backward on her other leg.

"Ow!" the woman said. "That hurt!"

"Kind of the point, lady," I said.

I jumped to my feet and rushed toward her. Before the woman could react, I'd grabbed her and pinned her against the wall, twisting both of her arms behind her back to make sure she didn't try anything. She struggled against my grip, but it was obvious that she was not even remotely strong enough to break my iron grip.

"Let me go," said the woman in a whiny voice. "You're hurting me."

I rolled my eyes. "You're the lamest would-be assassin ever, you know that? The last assassin Icon sent against me wasn't anywhere nearly as whiny as you."

Confusion flickered across the woman's face. "Assassin? I'm not an assassin. I'm not even with Icon."

"And you're a bad liar, too," I said. "Seriously, I thought you guys were *good* at lying. Try something a bit more convincing than—"

Suddenly, someone grabbed my cape and yanked me backwards. I let go of the woman and before I knew it, I was thrown at the wall on the other side of the alley. I slammed into the wall hard enough to leave an imprint shaped like myself and fell down onto the pavement. The crash didn't really hurt—super durability was a really useful power—but I was nonetheless surprised by the impact of the throw, mostly because I hadn't been expecting it.

Shaking my head, I sat up and looked over to see who had thrown me and was surprised to see that the woman and I weren't alone anymore. A large man stood between me and the woman, who wore a full bodysuit similar to mine, except his was brown and gray. He looked like a walking boulder, especially with his huge muscles.

"Okay, now who are *you*?" I said as I slowly rose to my feet, rubbing my back.

"My name doesn't matter," said the man. He pointed a large finger at me. "What does matter is that you assaulted my partner. Normally I cannot stand *anyone* who even so much as threatens a woman, but I especially despise anyone who harms women I care about. Men must never use their power to harm women."

"She attacked me *first*," I said, but shook my head. "Doesn't matter. I'll kick your butt just as much as I would anyone else's."

But to my dismay, the man had apparently forgotten all about me. He had turned his back to me to focus on the woman, who was rubbing her arms like she was trying to massage the pain out of them.

"Gina, are you okay?" said the man in a tender voice that didn't fit his hulking form. "Trickshot didn't break any bones or anything, did he?"

"No, I'm fine," said the woman, who was apparently named Gina. She sniffled. "But he did *hurt* me. Nothing permanent, but I'll feel it for a few days at least."

"I'll make sure you get a full body check up after we finish our mission," said the man. "Your health is of utmost importance to me and I will ensure that you stay in top health at all times."

"Thanks, Mack," said Gina, flashing him a smile. "I really appreciate it."

Ugh. It was obvious that these two were in a relationship. I was over the whole 'Girls have cooties!' thing, but I still found these kinds of public displays of affections groan worthy. I even felt uncomfortable when my parents did them.

But Mack had his back to me and seemed to have forgotten about me entirely. Guess he was too distracted by his girlfriend to realize what a terrible mistake he had made. One solid punch to his back and Mack would be the one who would need a check up.

I flew toward Mack and punched him directly in the back.

But instead of breaking Mack's back, my fist just stopped. It felt like I'd punched a mountain. In fact, I doubted Mack even felt my punch, even though my punch had been fueled by my super strength.

All of a sudden, Mack whirled around and grabbed me with both of his large hands. He closed his huge fingers around my body and squeezed, instantly squeezing the air out of my lungs and making me gasp for breath.

"Foolish boy," said Mack, with no strain in his voice at all. "Attacking an enemy from behind is not honorable, but even that could have been forgivable if your attack hurt. I barely even felt it, so let me teach you what I do to enemies who fail to beat me. It will be quite painful."

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