

CHAPTER ONE

Wirenut pulled the ranch's van into the Boardwalk's packed parking lot. The Boardwalk stretched three miles along San Belden, California's coast. Amusement rides, food, dancing, roller blading—you name it, the place had it. It never closed down.

He turned around in his seat to face all of us. "Now kids," he jokingly began, lowering his voice to an authoritative tone. "I want you to remember we represent the San Belden Ranch for Boys and Girls."

Wirenut looked at me. "Okay, Miss tall blondie. You will behave yourself. No hacking into anyone's computers. You hear me, GiGi?"

I saluted him, hiding my smile. "Yes, sir."

"And you." Wirenut looked at Beaker. "No mixing of strange chemicals. And absolutely no more body piercings."

Snapping her gum, Beaker nodded her pink dyed head. "You got it."

"And you." Wirenut narrowed his eyes at Bruiser. "Youngest member of our clan and today's birthday girl. No beating anyone up."

Flipping a red braid over her shoulder, Bruiser batted her lashes. "I'm only here to celebrate my sweet sixteen."

"And you." Wirenut switched his attention to Parrot. "No speaking any foreign languages. English only tonight."

Parrot smiled.

"You." Wirenut nodded to Mystic. "Mr. Thick Neck. No reading of fortunes."

Mystic put his hand over his heart. "Never."

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Wirenut turned to the van's passenger seat where Cat sat. "You," he softened his tone, "my gorgeous, Mediterranean, goddess are allowed to break into *anything* you want to."

"Hey!" we all objected.

Cat reached across the space between them and tugged on Wirenut's dark goatee. "And you are absolutely *not* allowed to tinker with anyone's electronics."

Wirenut pulled her over for a swift kiss. "Deal."

I smiled, a little sad despite the happiness around me. They're cuteness together made me miss David.

"Okay, enough already," Bruiser said, pulling open the van's side door. "Let's paaarrty!" She jumped out. "It's my birthday. Yo, yo it's my birthday. Everybody say woot-woot, it's my birthday." She danced across the parking lot. "It's my birthday. Yo, yo it's my birthday. Everybody say woot-woot, it's my birthday."

We laughed at her silliness as we piled out of the van.

As we walked through the parking lot, memories of David flooded back. We'd gone on our first date here at The Boardwalk. We'd ridden the Ferris Wheel and explored all the eclectic shops. We'd eaten too much junk food and shared beautiful kisses. He'd won me a stuffed giraffe.

Inwardly, I sighed. I had really messed things up with him when I told him about kissing Professor Quirk on my last mission. David had said he needed space and time to think. And then TL had sent him on a pre-op assignment that had turned into a month long trip. I'd heard from David exactly twice a week via text messages. Unfortunately, they were the kind of texts he'd send a friend, not a girlfriend.

HEY. JUST WANTED U TO KNOW I'M HERE SAFE.

HEY. THINGS R GOING WELL.

HEY. I'LL BE COMING BACK SOON.

*No I miss you. I'm thinking of you. Or even sweet dreams.*

He came back yesterday, gave me a hug hello, and told me we would talk. We hadn't had that talk yet, and I hoped beyond hope that when we did, things would be back to normal between us. Fun, romantic, light hearted.

Parrot looped his arm through mine, and I turned and smiled into his dark eyes. Our friendship had gone to another level since our mission together. We'd bonded in a way I hadn't bonded with my other teammates. We'd almost died in the jungle on that cliff.

I still shuddered every time I thought of it.

Actually, I'd experienced one too many close calls since joining The Specialists over a year ago. Being kidnapped in Ushbania, thrown in a dungeon in Rissala, and coming face-to-face with my parents' killer in Barracuda Key.

“What'd you get Bruiser for her birthday?” Parrot asked, bringing me from my thoughts.

“A gift certificate to that T-shirt shop she loves.” Bruiser lived in T-shirts, each with their own unique saying. She wore one today that read, KISS ME. IT'S MY BIRTHDAY AND I'M AWESOME. “What'd you get her?”

“Well, my mom has recently begun making Native American jewelry. I bought Bruiser a pair of turquoise earrings.” Parrot glanced over at me. “You think she'll like them?”

“Oh, Parrot.” I smiled at his sweet question. “Yes, I'm sure she'll like them.” I squeezed his arm, so glad he'd decided to stay. After being reunited with his mom, none of us were sure if he'd stay on the ranch or leave. *I can't imagine life without you all*, he'd said very simply.

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Mystic and Beaker came up beside us. “I made her my own personal blend of herbal tea,” Mystic said. “She should drink it once a day for tranquility, relaxation, and sedation. Lord knows she could use it twice a day.”

Beaker snorted. “You know as well as we all do that she’s not going to drink that.”

True. Mystic and Bruiser were always messing with each other. Him trying to calm her down and her trying to toughen him up.

Mystic smiled. “I meditated about it. She’ll drink it.”

“What did you get her?” I asked Beaker.

“Six hours of argument-free chemistry tutoring.” She waved her blue nail-polished fingers through the air. “No more. No less.”

“Very generous of you.” Beaker had tried on numerous occasions to tutor Bruiser, but they always ended up in a fight.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Wirenut and Cat holding hands, meandering across the parking lot toward us. I knew Cat had gotten Bruiser a make up kit in an effort to bring out her feminine side. That kit would go in a bathroom drawer and gather dust. Bruiser had no girly-girl side; she was a tomboy through and through.

And Wirenut? Funny enough, Bruiser had begged him to show her how to hot wire a car. So after today’s outing, that was the first thing on Bruiser’s list. Hot wire a car.

We stepped from the parking lot onto the sidewalk that began The Boardwalk, and I stopped. Slowly, I turned around, feeling that creepy sensation that someone was watching me. I’d felt it a lot since returning from my last mission. I searched the full parking lot, looking for anything, anyone that may seem odd. I’d never been the paranoid type, but since I’d found out I had a sister, subconsciously I’d convinced myself she was looking for me, too.

Parrot tugged on my wrist. “You okay?”

Nodding I turned back around. “Thought I heard something, that’s all.” Maybe I was just being paranoid.

Up ahead I saw Bruiser talking to David. He’d driven separately with Adam. David’s yum factor was pretty much off the scales today. With that dark, five o’clock shadow and form fitted long sleeve T . . . sometimes he was so hot I could barely stand it. He said something and Bruiser laughed. David laughed, too, and the sound made my stomach flutter.

They were the only two that had come from Team One. The rest of them, Piper, Curtis, and Tina, were gone on missions.

Leaning down from his towering height, Adam gave Bruiser a birthday kiss on the cheek. Her freckly face turned bright red to match her hair as she playfully pushed him away. I smiled. That was probably the best gift ever for her. Bruiser had a big time crush on Adam.

We all approached and David glanced up at me before giving me a slight smile. I wanted to ask him when we would talk, but now wasn’t the time. This was Bruiser’s day.

Wirenut came around and put Bruiser in a head lock. “Okay, birthday girl.” He knuckle rubbed her head. “What do you want to do first? Sky’s the limit.”

She flashed this innocent, dimpled grin. “Sky’s the limit?”

Everyone nodded, but me. I knew that innocent grin. She was up to no good.

Her grin got bigger. “Anything I say goes?”

Everyone nodded, but me. I didn’t like this one bit.

Bruiser batted her lashes. “I want one of those old timey pictures. Ya know, black and white, where we all have on a costume.”

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I narrowed my eyes. Something wasn't right. An old timey picture sounded a little *too* easy.

She looked at each of us through wide, childlike eyes. "Everybody in?"

They all nodded.

"And it's my birthday, so I get to chose what you wear, 'kay?"

No one nodded that time, probably because they'd finally realized she was up to no good.

Cat stepped forward. "Come on everybody. It's her birthday. Let's all be sports."

Reluctantly, let me repeat that, *reluctantly* we followed her down The Boardwalk to the old timey photo shop. She'd made a reservation, the little twerp, and so we got right in. She'd even pre-arranged our outfits.

And I had to admit they weren't that bad . . . for the girls.

There we all stood, we girls dressed in old western gunfighter outfits, complete with duster coats, suspenders, six shooters and holsters, leather pants, black boots with spurs, and cowboy hats.

And the guys? Our barmaids. Complete with fish net stockings and garter belts, high heels, form-fitted dresses, hand fans, and feathers in their hats.

Leave it to Bruiser.

Outside the photo shop, Bruiser handed me the picture. "Look at the guys." She busted out laughing. "Oh, yowza, that's funny. That's going right on top my dresser when we get back."

Cat and Beaker crowded in beside me as we looked at the black and white photo, all of us girls smiling and all the guys frowning. I glanced at David's legs in the fish net stockings and couldn't help but grin.

I studied Beaker and David's faces, like I frequently found myself doing, looking for similarities. They'd found out during the Barracuda Key mission that they were half brother and sister. It made me think of my own sister, the one I'd just found out about. I knew exactly what she looked like from the wanted picture of her that we'd obtained on my last mission.

There was a lot about us in common, like our eyes and the shape of our faces. I wondered what kind of person she was. Funny? Serious? Quiet? Loud? And I wondered where she was. Even with my computer expertise, I had yet to nail down her current identity and location. Her aliases were too numerous, and she seemed to move around every few days. And it appeared that she'd recently become an independent agent, working for whoever hired her.

She was a puzzle, that was for sure, but I hadn't given up. I'd been leaving bread crumbs through cyberspace in hopes she'd find them and follow them back to me. She was my only family, and I *would* find her. Or she'd find me first.

"You and David have the same nose," Cat told Beaker, bringing me from my thoughts.

"Food," Wirenut announced. "I need food."

Cat rolled her eyes. "You're always hungry," she laughed, playfully tapping his belly.

Bruiser picked an outdoor Mexican place, we all ordered, and right as our food arrived, Mystic's cell went off.

Every one of us turned and looked. *My* cell was always the one going off, not my team members.

I unclipped my phone from my pants and checked the display. Huh. No text messages.

David's went off next, which was usual. Being TL's, our team leader's, right hand guy, David's cell stayed more active than the rest of us.

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He checked the display, then looked at Mystic. “That’s TL’s stat code. We’re out of here.”

I checked my phone again and gave it a little tap. Maybe I just hadn’t gotten my text yet. I glanced up at David, and he shook his head. “Only me and Mystic,” he said in answer to my unspoken question.

I looked at Mystic, and he shrugged, clearly as perplexed as me.

The two guys took off running, and all my team members dug in to their food. I sat at the outdoor table, idly watching them eat, listening to the ocean, completely sidetracked by what had just happened.

What was going on? I mean, I knew that one day we would all be going off on missions at different times, but up until now, it had always been me and one of the others. I wondered why I wasn’t involved this time and more than a little curious to find out the details.

We finished eating and spent the rest of the time doing exactly what Bruiser wanted. We rode every single ride, including the tilta whirl (barf). We ate way too much ice cream. We played nearly every video game in the arcade.

At seven that night we pulled through the ranch’s gate and up the long driveway to our house. Wirenut and Bruiser stayed with the van for the hot wiring lesson, and the rest of us filed inside.

The guys went off to their room and me and the girls went to ours.

I plopped down across my bed, and Mystic strolled straight in our room.

I sat up. “So?”

Mystic sounded as stunned as he looked. “I’m going on my first mission.”

“You are?”

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Cat came out of the bathroom. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Mystic responded, still not moving from his stunned spot.

Beaker kicked her black flip flops off and shoved them under her bed. “Where you going?”

Mystic shook his head. “I can’t tell you yet.”

The secretiveness was the worst part of being a member of The Specialists.

“When are you leaving?” I asked.

Mystic blinked. “Tonight.”

Beaker and I looked at each other. “*Tonight?*”

Cat sat down on her bed. “That’s weird. No training? No preparation?”

“TL said there wasn’t any time. He and David are going with me.”

I was dying to ask Mystic if he’d seen his special room. All of my team members who had been on a mission had been introduced to their room, complete with training items specific to their specialty. Beaker had a state of the art chemistry lab. Wirenut an electronics warehouse. Parrot a language facility. And I, of course, had a kick butt computer lab.

David peeked his head in the door. “Mystic, come with me. We need to talk about a few things.”

Without a glance in my direction, David headed off and Mystic followed.

Cat lay back on her bed. “GiGi, is there something wrong with you and David? I know he’s been gone a month, but I figured you two would be connected at the hip since he returned. What gives?”

I glanced across the room to Beaker, who looked right back at me, obviously curious what my response would be, too. I hadn’t told any of my team members about the Professor

Quirk episode. And normally I didn't just go around sharing my personal business. But something made me want to share and possibly get some advice.

"I . . ." I began and then stopped. How did I say this exactly? "I," I tried again, and then sighed. "Another guy kissed me, and David's upset. But I don't think it's so much the kiss as it is that I told David this other guy 'got me'."

Neither Cat nor Beaker uttered a word.

"Oh, yeah!" Bruiser rushed into the room. "That was awesome! I can't believe I just hot wired a car. I'm totally going out on the town tomorrow night and becoming a criminal." She stopped and looked at each of us. "What's wrong? Looks like someone ate your last lollipop."

Laughing, Wirenut came in behind her. "That was too cool. She actually got it the first time around." He looked at each of us. "What's wrong?"

Parrot stuck his head in the door. "Heard the commotion. I take it you hot wired?" He looked at each of us. "Something wrong?"

"GiGi," Beaker and Cat said in unison, "kissed another guy."

Everyone turned and looked at me, and I felt about as big as my pinky toe.

"I didn't say *I* kissed another guy." Pushing off my bed, I stood and gave Cat and Beaker a dirty look. "So glad everybody knows my personal business now."

Beaker shrugged. "David *is* my brother. I'm naturally going to take his side."

"Beaker," Cat got onto her and then turned to me. "GiGi," she softened her tone.

I waved them off. "Never mind." I didn't need their disapproval on top of my already confusion over the situation. "I'll see you guys later." Snagging a lollipop from my dresser, I walked past Wirenut and Parrot and out the door.

“GiGi,” Bruiser called. “Come back. Let’s talk. We were all just shocked, that’s all. And everyone knows Beaker’s an idiot.”

Ignoring her, I strode down the hallway, past TL’s office, and came to a stop at the mural that hid our elevator. Placing my hand on the globe light fixture, I waited while it scanned my prints and the mural opened to reveal the secret elevator.

I stepped inside, punched in my personal code, and the elevator descended. I unwrapped my lollipop and plunked it in my mouth. *Mmm, pina colada*. I realized then that this was one of the lollipops from the candy bouquet David had given me when I returned from my mission with Wirenut.

David was always doing sweet things like that. Somehow that thought made me feel even worse.

The elevator stopped at Sub Floor Four, the doors opened, and I stepped out. I chunked the wrapper in the garbage and told myself I was not going to think of David anymore.

I headed off to the right and down the hall to where my lab was, along with all the other secret rooms. When I first arrived here at the ranch, these undisclosed doors had driven me absolutely insane. But now I knew what lay behind nearly every one.

I came to a stop at my lab door and as I began punching in the code to enter the room, I heard voices coming down the hallway.

“Oh, GiGi. Goodgood, you’re here.” Chapling, my mentor, said. “I want you to meet someone.”

I punched in the last few code segments on the key pad and with a smile turned . . . and gasped. I stumbled back, straight through the lab door, missed the step down, and landed on my butt.

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“Ooohhh,” I groaned.

“Kelly?” The guy used my real name.

I looked up and straight into the eyes of, “Professor Quirk?”