

CHAPTER 1

DOFR-KTQRTK

‘Kensington, may I see you for a moment please?’ Mrs Vanden Boom asked loudly as the children streamed out of the lab into the corridor.

Kensy looked at her best friend, Autumn. ‘Uh oh,’ she murmured.

Autumn raised her eyebrows as she retied the red ribbon at the end of one of her long black plaits. ‘Any idea what that’s about?’

Kensy shook her head. ‘No. I haven’t destroyed anything this week – at least nothing obvious.’

Autumn grinned. ‘I’ll see you upstairs,’ she said. ‘Remember we’ve got Reff’s history excursion to the Houses of Parliament leaving straight after morning tea, so try not to be too long.’

‘Thrilling,’ Kensy said, deadpan as she turned to walk back to where the teacher was standing at the front of the room.

‘Is something the matter, Mrs Vanden Boom?’ Kensy asked. She thought she might as well just come out and ask.

‘No, nothing’s wrong,’ the woman said and waited until the last student had closed the door behind them. Then she lowered her voice. ‘I wanted to show you something. A new invention I’ve been working on for quite some time now. Though it’s not ready yet – it definitely needs to be trialled on some willing participants.’ There was an unmistakable glint in the teacher’s eye.

Kensy let out the breath she’d been holding and felt her stomach settle. Last week she’d knocked over a bottle of sulphuric acid in the lab and although the stainless steel benchtop

got off unscathed, the timber doors on the cupboard below hadn't fared so well with the liquid burning a huge hole in the middle of them. She'd earned herself a right telling off for that, though deservedly so. This week Kensy had earned full marks for her research project on soundwaves, so she was definitely back in the woman's good books.

The science teacher reached into her pocket and pulled out a small silver case. It was quite flat and looked a bit like one of the antique snuff boxes in the collection Kensy's grandmother had on display at Alexandria, the woman's country estate. Romilly unsnapped the latch and revealed three pieces of black material, each less than a centimetre square, along with what looked to be three small earpieces paired beside them.

'Aren't they beautiful?' the woman said, picking up one of the patches between her forefinger and thumb.

Kensy frowned. 'Um, what are they?'

'Mind-readers,' Romilly replied.

Kensy's eyebrows jumped up. 'Are you serious?'

The teacher nodded and pressed a finger to her lips. ‘Top secret, but I had to share it with someone whom I knew would appreciate what’s gone into the development.’

‘How do they work?’ Kensy asked.

‘Well, the patch needs to be attached to the inside of a hat or a helmet around about here.’ Romilly patted the side of her head. ‘Although it doesn’t matter too much if it’s a little out of alignment, as placing it accurately under pressure is going to be tricky. The messages from the wearer are transmitted back to the receiver, via the earpiece. It’s still in development, but I’m sure it’s going to be a game changer for the organisation.’

‘Are you working with the inventions team on this?’ Kensy asked. Kensy and her twin brother had recently been given a tour of another Pharos site located deep below the headquarters of the *Beacon* – the newspaper that their grandmother and father ran. The pair had been stunned to meet a small team of scientists and inventors who were responsible for all of the Pharos-issue gadgets.

Apparently it was a rare privilege to be given a peek and they'd been sworn to secrecy.

Romilly shook her head. 'No, unfortunately. Tippie and I, we don't always see eye to . . .' the woman hesitated. 'Never mind . . . and, Kensy, you're not to mention this to another soul. No one – not even Maxim and especially not your grandmother. I promise I'll reveal more when I can.'

'That's an incredible invention,' Kensy declared, clenching her fists and jiggling on the spot.

'Yes, it is rather. Now off you go – and remember, this is our secret,' the woman said, tapping the side of her nose.

'Of course,' Kensy agreed.

The girl could hardly believe it. A mind-reader. Imagine what could be done with something like that. Although she'd hate for someone to plant one on her – that would be horrible. And what did Mrs Vanden Boom mean about her and Tippie not seeing eye to eye? The twins had been shocked to learn that Tippie MacGregor, their headmaster's

impossibly glamorous wife, whom they'd met a couple of times now at Alexandria was actually a highly accomplished scientist in charge of the Pharos inventions team. No one had thought to mention it before, which was odd, but then again, Pharos was a secret organisation. Their grandmother had seemed delighted by the looks of surprise on Kensy's and Max's faces. It was probably another lesson in stereotypes – just because someone appears a certain way and is called Tippiie doesn't mean they're an airhead. Far from it. Kensy had felt a bit bad for having thought that in the first place. Clearly the MacGregors were a formidable team.

Her thoughts returned to the mind-reader. This was next level – and showed just how clever Mrs Vanden Boom was too.