

Kensy and Max 8: High Voltage

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Chapter 1

Max looked at his watch for the umpteenth time since they'd left home. 'Do you really think this is a good idea?' the boy asked, glancing at his father, who was sitting beside him dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and cap – all in black. 'And is this car stolen?' Ed turned and grinned at his son. 'You really think we'd do that sort of thing?' Max raised his eyebrows. 'I'll ignore that. Do you want your notebook back or don't you?' Ed asked. Father and son were seated in a grey, late-model Mercedes-Benz that Max had never seen before, parked down the road from Magoo MacGregor's townhouse.

Kensy and Fitz were parked the next street over in a Volvo SUV – another car of mystery origin. They would move on Ed's instructions once the Headmaster of Central London Free School and his wife, Tippie, had left the house.

'What if it's nothing, Dad?' Max said. 'And we've gone to all this trouble, not to mention a fair amount of risk, for some silly note that means zippo?'

The boy took a deep breath and tried to calm his racing heart.

'And what if it's something?' Ed replied. 'I'm glad you finally told me about it, Max. Coming on the back of that DNA Song discovered on the doorstep of number thirteen after Sidney was kidnapped, I have to say I'm more than a little concerned.'

'Could Percy MacGregor have faked his own death?' Max asked. 'Is it possible he's still alive?'

Ed shrugged. 'I've come to believe that anything's possible – but the photographs of his bullet-riddled body seemed pretty conclusive.

If he's still with us then that corpse must have belonged to someone else.'

'Does Granny know anything about this?' Max said.

Ed shook his head. 'No, best we keep this between us at the moment. She's fragile after being poisoned, and I don't want her worrying. I think the Novichok has given her some lingering complications. Let's just get your notebook back and try to decipher the rest of that code, then we'll worry about the mysterious Percy.'

Max nodded, then focused on the bottom left corner of his glasses, which had a built-in rear-vision mirror.

'Dad,' he said, and touched his father's arm. Magoo and Tippie MacGregor had just walked out the front door of their terrace. Magoo was dressed in a dinner suit with a bow tie, and Tippie wore a long gold gown, a matching shawl around her shoulders.

'Rabbits have left the building,' Ed said aloud.

‘Roger that,’ Fitz replied. He, Ed, Kensy, Max and Song were all wired with miniscule earpieces, allowing them to communicate.

‘What’s the status, Song?’ Ed asked.

The butler was in the process of disabling the MacGregors’ security system from the back of an innocuous grey van parked across the road. He would loop the cameras’ feeds and check for any other security the MacGregors might have installed themselves. Non-sanctioned devices weren’t allowed, but tonight’s intruders couldn’t be too careful.

‘Almost done,’ Song said. ‘No additional appliances detected, but I will do one more scan to be sure.’

‘Roger that,’ Ed said.

Upon their return from the World STEM Championships in Singapore, Max had finally told his parents about the coded note he’d found in Magoo’s study at school – and then lost in the library at the headmaster’s home. Sharing the secret felt like a weight off his shoulders, though Anna and Ed had both been curious as to why he’d kept it quiet for so long when he hadn’t done anything wrong. The note had quite literally fallen into his hands by accident. The words he’d deciphered so far included his, Kensy and Song’s names, along with *birthright* and the rather concerning phrase *Romilly must be stopped*. The family needed to work out the rest – just in case it was more than the headmaster playing silly games and trying to outsmart himself with his cipher skills. Max knew that the original was gone, but his notebook – which he’d lost in the MacGregors’ mysterious library cellar – contained copies, and all of his decodings too. Anna and Ed had brought Fitz and Song into the fold and the six of them had discussed ways they might conduct the retrieval mission at length. Kensy had suggested they could invite the MacGregors for dinner and while they were away from home a team could break into their place – though given Magoo’s eagerness to get inside 13 Ponsonby Terrace at any opportunity, the idea was quickly dropped. Meanwhile Max’s thought that his parents could engineer an emergency trip away and ask the MacGregors to look after him and Kensy again seemed too contrived. While Magoo often gave the

impression of a mad professor, it was common knowledge that his eccentricities disguised the fact that he was one of the smartest people in the entire organisation. Even brighter than his genius wife if the IQ tests had anything to say about it.

In the end, it was decided to wait until Tippie and Magoo had something that would take them out together for at least a few hours. Fitz soon learned that Tippie had purchased tickets to *La Traviata* at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden as a surprise for Magoo’s birthday – an occasion which had now arrived.

The MacGregors hopped into a taxi – secretly arranged by Song himself – which quickly disappeared around the corner.

The butler tracked the vehicle as it sped away down The King's Road, then: 'Operation Notebook is live,' Song said over the airwaves.

Max and his father hopped out of the car and walked towards the MacGregors' gate, hurrying through it and down the short path to the front door. Within seconds, Ed had

picked the lock and they were inside. Max ran down the hallway and opened a window at the end of the passage to let Kensy and Fitz in. The pair had scaled the rear wall and had been hiding in the back garden for the past few minutes.

'Hurry,' Max urged. 'I haven't spotted Mr Pippin yet, but if he's wandering around the house and we let him out we'll be in all sorts of bother.'

Fitz closed the window but left it unlatched.

'So where's this secret room?' Ed whispered, glancing about.

Max ran his hand over the adjacent wall and waited until he heard a click.

The panel pivoted.

'Someone has spent a lot of money on that,' Fitz said. 'It's very well concealed.'

'I'd never have found it if it wasn't for Mr Pippin,' Max said. The boy scampered through the opening, the others behind him. He switched on the small black torch in his hand, illuminating the space as the rest of the party did the same.

'I can see why you were intrigued,' Ed said. 'You'd imagine this was a cellar but . . .' He stopped mid-sentence as they turned the corner on the stairs. 'Wow, you were right, kids. The MacGregors were clearly inspired by the library at Alexandria when they built this.'

Ed and Fitz scanned the room, taking in the carousel automaton, globe, desk, couches, rugs and bookcases – all of which could have been plucked straight from Cordelia's country mansion.

'My notebook fell down the back there,' Max said, pointing at the third-lowest shelf of the bookcase that spanned the width of the room.

Kensy fiddled with the end of her torch, which not only contained a light but a camera inside it too. She pulled out an extendable arm and donned a pair of folding glasses, which she had retrieved from her pocket. Max took several of the books from the shelf, giving his sister enough room to send the camera and light down the back of the unit.

'Can you see it?' the boy asked. The twins were in charge of recovering the notebook while

Ed checked the desk drawers for anything incriminating and Fitz scanned the room for bugs – just in case Song’s earlier investigations had missed anything. Fortunately he’d come up empty handed.

‘Oh yuck, there’s a dead mouse,’ Kensy said, wrinkling her nose. ‘He’s with a couple of cockroach friends.’

‘What about my notebook?’ Max urged. The longer they were there the more nervous he felt, even though Tippie and Magoo wouldn’t be home for hours.

‘There’s something. Yes!’ Kensy squinted. ‘I think it’s wedged quite tightly.’

Max steered another extendable arm – this one with a retractable claw – into the space.

‘Left,’ Kensy said. ‘Slowly . . . slowly. Too far. Back a bit.’

‘I wish someone had thought to put a camera on this thing,’ Max said, wondering if he was ever going to find the right spot.

‘I’ll sort something for next time,’ Kensy said, though Max hoped they wouldn’t have to repeat this particular exercise.

‘Okay, steady Max. Just a little bit to the right. There! Grab,’ Kensy instructed. The boy did as he was told, but the pincers missed their target.

‘Did I get it?’ Max asked.

Kensy shook her head. ‘Okay, take a deep breath and let’s try this again.’ She helped her brother manoeuvre the contraption back into place.

‘Yes!’ Kensy yelped, garnering reproachful glares from her father and Fitz, as the claws seized the notebook.

‘Careful. Just bring it up slowly,’ she said holding her breath. ‘Almost there, only a bit further.’

Max reached in and grabbed the book as it came into view, feeling an enormous sense of relief. It was covered in dust, but had fortunately landed spine down. His copies of the original note were still inside.

‘Well done, kids,’ Fitz said. He’d been taking photographs of the MacGregor family tree – this time without the glare of the flash that had ruined Max’s original pictures. That they might be related to the MacGregors had come as a surprise to Ed too. He had no idea there was a blood connection. Kensy had retracted her torch and was taking off her glasses when there was a sudden crackling in her ear. ‘What was that?’ she whispered. ‘Did anyone else hear Song then?’ The others shook their heads until a high-pitched whine almost burst everyone’s eardrums. There was a crackle of static. ‘Code . . . *cs*h . . . re . . . *cs*h co . . . *cs*h . . .’ He was breaking up. Max looked at his father. ‘Did Song say “code red”?’ Fitz pulled a small, wand-like device from his belt and waved it around. ‘Oh heck. This room must have some sort of interference. I can’t get a proper signal.’ ‘That’s weird – I heard Tippie on her phone when I was down

here before,' Max said. 'It mustn't be like this all the time.' 'If it's a code red, that means the MacGregors are back, Dad,' Kensy said.

She felt clammy all over. Surely, they wouldn't notice the unlatched back window, but what if they came down to the basement?

There was a creak on the floorboards above them.

'Right – hide,' Ed ordered, looking around for somewhere he could make himself scarce.

Max had a creeping sense of déjà vu. He'd been in this exact same tight spot before. Max grabbed his sister and the two of them scampered up the library ladder to hide on top of the bookcases, in the same place he had concealed himself the last time.

But there was not enough room for Fitz and Ed. The door to the basement creaked open and footsteps sounded on the stone stairs. Then the lights came on.

'I'm sorry, darling. You should have told me where we were going. You know I hate being without my opera glasses,' Magoo called out. 'I'm sure I left a pair . . . oh, Mr Pippin – I don't want you down here . . . come back, you hairy monster.' Fitz dove to lie flat on the floor behind the Chesterfield sofa. Ed, remembering he'd seen a pair of opera glasses in the top drawer of the headmaster's desk, quickly pulled them out and sat them on top. Then, with nowhere else to go, he tucked himself into the centre of the partners' desk and hid himself with the chair, hoping that Magoo would see what he was looking for right away. It was a risky move.

A loud miaow filled the space.

Kensy watched Mr Pippin from her vantage point on high as he padded behind the couch and started rubbing himself all over Fitz's face, trying to get the man's attention.

Fitz pushed the cat away, but the creature was undeterred. He pressed his nose against Fitz's chin before, alarmingly, he turned around and his tail started to quiver. This was a very bad sign – it looked as if Mr Pippin was about to mark his territory on Fitz's forehead. Kensy jammed her fist into her mouth. If the situation wasn't so dire she'd have laughed out loud.

'We're going to miss dinner, Magoo – and you know I don't do opera on an empty stomach. Hurry up!' Tippie shouted from the doorway. They heard the sound of her heels clacking on the floorboards and seconds later she shouted again. 'I've found granny's old pair – you can use those.' 'I'd rather have my own,' the man called, then let out an exasperated sigh when the doorbell rang. 'Who is it now?' He sounded very tetchy. Having just reached the bottom of the stairs, he turned and hurried back up, switching the light off as he went. Fitz grabbed the cat and sped after him, making no sound. He turfed Mr Pippin through the door a split second before Magoo closed the panel. 'Oh there you

are, you mad cat,' Magoo said, looking at the feline. The man wondered what had possessed Mr Pippin to leap through the door at such speed. He had planned to let him out when they returned home. 'Who is it, Tip?' he called, peering towards the front door, where his wife was talking to someone. 'It's Song Li,' Tippiie replied, turning around. 'Delivering your birthday gift from Cordelia. Silly sausage, you needn't have been

in such a huff all day after all – she hadn't forgotten you.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Magoo replied with a frown.

Song, who'd been listening in on the pair of them since early this morning, knew that was a lie. Magoo had been having a real pout. The butler had intercepted the Pharos courier Cordelia had sent, putting the parcel in the van to have up his sleeve in case of an emergency. He was glad to have had the ruse.

Downstairs in the cellar, there was a collective expulsion of breath.

'That was close,' Max whispered.

'You're not kidding,' Kensy replied. 'Though Mr Pippin was doing his best to lighten the mood.'

Fitz hurried back down the stairs – they'd have to wait a few more minutes before leaving to make sure the MacGregors were gone.

Ed hopped out from under the desk. 'At least we got what we came for.'