

# CHAPTER 1

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15-14 19-15-14-7

*Max* ran his finger along the text and read the words again. He'd scoured the library at Alexandria, looking for books on ciphers and coding and finally found this one. It was far more complex than any he'd studied to date. Perhaps it would help him to unravel the mysteries of the coded note he'd accidentally found in Headmaster Magoo MacGregor's office last term. The page had fallen out of a book Mrs Vanden Boom had instructed Max to pull on to open a secret passage – except that he pulled on the wrong book and this

one clattered to the floor. When he'd noticed his and Kensy's names on the top of the paper, Max couldn't help himself and stuffed it into his pocket.

No one knew he had it, not even Kensy as he didn't want to worry her unnecessarily, although maybe that wasn't the only reason. After months of trying all manner of combinations and ideas, he'd only managed to unscramble three words: *future*, *imminent* and *threat*, which on their own didn't mean much at all. It was as if there were several layers. Plus there was always the possibility that the ciphers and codes that had been used were known only to the writer and the intended recipient. If that was the case, it might prove uncrackable. The boy turned his attention back to the jumble of letters and numbers he'd scrawled on a separate page. Max was concentrating hard and thinking about a new formula he'd studied when, almost like magic, he deciphered the word *Song*. And it was written with a capital 'S' – as if it was the person and not just a thing.

Max checked again and was convinced that he was correct. Then there was another word – *birthright*. He felt a tingle down his spine. Perhaps he was going to get it after all. Unfortunately at the moment he didn't have a lot of time. They had a guest to entertain, if he ever emerged, that is. Max was focused on the text when Kensy barged into his room.

'What are you doing?' she asked as he quickly slipped the page and his jottings inside the book.

'Reading the paper,' Max said, turning to page two of the *Beacon*.

'You do know we're on holidays,' the girl said, flopping down on her brother's bed.

Max grinned at his sister. 'Do trainee spies ever get to take a proper holiday? Have you seen this story about the poison-laced letters in the United States? Apparently as soon as the recipient opens the envelope they get a blast of whatever the toxic substance is and immediately fall ill. It only affects the person holding the letter – which is weird and clever. Initially the authorities thought it was anthrax,

but now they believe it's something even more powerful. One man has already died and another woman is critically ill in hospital.'

Max had read the article earlier that morning.

Kensy sat up and shook her head. 'Sounds like something Dash Chalmers would do – the way he unleashed all those viruses he had Grandmère and Grandpère create. It's hard to imagine there's another human being as sick as that horrible man, but I guess you can never underestimate humans' capacity for evil. I wonder if Uncle Rupert is any closer to finding him.'

Max frowned. They hadn't heard any updates recently. Following Dash's escape, a decision had been taken that Pharos would bring him in alone. His assistant, Lucy Dowsett, and the journalist, George Kapalos, who had helped investigate his evil doings were currently in witness protection given how much they knew – they believed that the people looking after them were police, but they were actually Pharos agents. Hector

and Marisol did not want their return from the dead to be made public – as that would bring Interpol into the picture and Cordelia thought it would be easier to flush Dash out by letting him think he'd got away with it. There was also the delicate issue of Faye and Conrad Chalmers, Dash's parents being two of her dearest friends. Neither had any idea of Cordelia's 'other life' as the Head of Pharos. They'd both been unwell and a revelation like this could tip them right over the edge. Cordelia had to handle the whole dastardly business very carefully. At least Tinsley and the children appeared to be out of harm's way, though she was keen for them to be found just in case. They would be safer under Pharos protection rather than going it alone.

'Curtis should be up by now,' Kensy said.

The boy had arrived around midnight the previous evening. The twins had stayed awake to greet him, but Curtis was suffering horribly with jet lag and had barely been able to keep his eyes open. It was no wonder, considering he said he hadn't slept for a day and half.

‘Do you think Granny will invite Curtis into the program?’ Kesy asked her brother.

‘I hope so,’ Max replied. ‘He’d make an excellent spy. I mean, seriously he’s probably done a lot more pre-training than we ever did.’

‘Don’t be so sure about that. Did you ever wonder why Fitz insisted we learn mixed martial arts and parkour when all our friends were into ballet and soccer?’ Kesy arched her left eyebrow.

There was a knock at the door and Curtis poked his head around.

‘Speak of the devil,’ Kesy said. ‘You’re alive!’

Curtis Pepper walked into the room. ‘Good morning,’ he said, his blue eyes sparkling.

Kesy pointed at the clock beside Max’s bed. ‘I don’t think so.’

The boy did a double take. ‘Is that really the time?’ He couldn’t believe it was quarter past twelve.

Max nodded. ‘We weren’t going to wake you.’

‘Sorry, I had no idea. I fell asleep as soon

as my head hit the pillow and I only woke up a little while ago. You must think I'm so rude – Mum would be mortified.' Curtis wandered around the room then walked to the window and looked outside. 'Whoa! That's some garden you've got there.'

'Are you hungry?' Max asked.

'Starving,' the boy replied as his stomach growled on cue. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten.

There was another knock on the door and this time Song entered the room. With the sun streaming through the window, his white suit took on an almost ethereal glow.

'Bit bright, Song.' Kensy shielded her eyes dramatically, much to the chagrin of the butler who ignored her antics.

'Good afternoon, Master Curtis.' The man gave a bow and acknowledged the twins. 'Miss Kensington, Master Maxim.'

'Hi Song. It's good to see you,' the boy replied.

'And you.' Song smiled. 'I came to let you know that lunch is ready. I hope lasagne and

crispy baked potatoes will be to your liking.’

Curtis licked his lips. ‘That sounds great. Yours is the best lasagne I’ve ever eaten.’

The butler grimaced. ‘This time I only placed the order, Master Curtis. Mrs Thornthwaite has made the meal in honour of your visit. I told her it was one of your favourites.’ He then lowered his voice. ‘I suspect it won’t be nearly as good as mine, but please don’t tell her. She doesn’t take well to criticism.’

Curtis gave the man a wink and tapped the side of his nose. ‘It’s our secret,’ the boy said.

Max hurried into his walk-in wardrobe and returned with a pair of sandshoes. He would have preferred to stay in his room and keep working on the note, but he couldn’t abandon his friend on his first day. It would just have to wait a little longer – though he was intrigued about the idea of a *birthright* and why Song was mentioned too.

‘What about a tour after lunch then?’ Kensy asked.

Curtis’s face lit up. ‘Yes, please.’



Song dallied at the door. 'I'm afraid that will have to wait until after you see your grandmother. She has requested a meeting as soon as you finish your meal.'

Kensy and Max looked at one another. Surely she couldn't have made her decision already.