

Jacqueline Harvey

KENSY AND MAX

— TAKE DOWN —



CHAPTER 1

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Max turned the handle of the door that had just shut behind him, only to find it refused to budge. ‘Hey!’ he yelled, pounding his fist on the metal surface, but there was no answer.

Curtis looked around the empty stairwell and jiggled uncomfortably on the spot. ‘There’s no toilet out here, is there?’

‘No,’ Max said with a sigh.

‘I’m really sorry. I can’t believe I fell for it,’ Curtis said. ‘That kid was so convincing – I just thought he was being kind.’

‘That was probably the furthest thing from his mind.’ Max gave a wry grin and closed

his eyes, remembering the plan of the stadium he'd been studying this past week.

'We've got to find a way back inside or the team's going to be disqualified and it will be all my fault,' Curtis lamented. He banged on the door and yelled for help again but no one came.

They'd spent the day at the O2 Arena with dozens of other school groups, competing in the National STEM finals, which comprised a series of challenges designed to test the children's knowledge of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. When the afternoon tea break had seen a mass exodus of students to the toilets, the pair had trusted a boy from another team at his word when he said there was an additional facility at the end of the hallway. They were through the door before they realised it was a trick.

'Come on,' Max said, and raced up to the next level. 'I think I know a way out of here.'

The auditorium fell silent as the event's host, a former soap star turned children's book author,

strode to the centre of the arena. He adjusted his blazer lapels and ran a hand through his perfectly coiffed chestnut hair.

‘I think you’d all agree with me that it’s been an incredible day,’ Riley Morton bellowed into the microphone with his trademark enthusiasm. ‘We’ve seen everything, haven’t we? Tears, tantrums, fireballs, catastrophic collapses, collisions and a rather unfortunate act of collusion,’ he continued, referring to a team that had been caught cheating by using a mobile phone. ‘It’s hard to believe it’s only been six hours. I don’t know about you, but at times I think it’s felt more like six days.’ There was chortle of laughter from the crowd. ‘From fifty teams there are now only three, and we’re about to welcome them back to the floor for their final contest.

‘And remember, the winners will progress to the World STEM Championships in steamy Singapore – all expenses paid – happening next week. I hope your passports are in order, and make sure you have some chilli crab for me while you’re out there, kids; it’s delicious.’

Kensy felt her stomach flip. The teams had come from all over the United Kingdom, and consisted of twelve students plus one reserve – a thirteenth member who could be called upon in the event of illness or misadventure. The final three teams included Central London Free School, their old football foes from Bridgewater and a group of kids from somewhere in the Scottish Highlands. Television cameras had been beaming the proceedings to several giant screens all day, to ensure that the audience had a good view of the activities.

Kensy was standing with Autumn and Harper, the three girls wondering what their final task would be. So far they'd had to undertake feats of civil engineering, with the design and construction of a tower that could hold a small aerial on top, build a robot to carry a cup of tea without spilling a drop and create a water filtration system. There had also been mathematical problems and a design challenge to upgrade the features of a wheelchair. Who knew what this last test would bring, but Kensy rather hoped she could use her expertise with insect drones.

‘Where are Max and Curtis?’ Carlos asked as he glanced around at the remaining students.

‘They must have gone to the loo,’ Dante said. The children had only been allowed off the stadium floor for tea breaks and urgent calls of nature. The competition was due to start again soon though, so Max and Curtis were cutting it fine.

‘Okay, finalists, this is your five-minute call,’ Riley announced.

Their Science teacher, Mrs Vanden Boom, caught Kensy’s eye from where she was sitting in the front row, supervising the student audience from Central London Free School. ‘Where are Max and Curtis?’ the woman mouthed.

Kensy looked around and held her hands out, palms upturned. ‘I don’t know,’ she mouthed back, and shook her head. She would have sent Max a message via her watch, except that none of the contestants have been allowed to wear one today – given the advent of smart watches, the organisers didn’t want any possibility of cheating.

She had a bad feeling about her brother's absence. They'd been doing well in the competition all day. It didn't hurt that every student who had earned their way onto the team were Pharos trainees. Kensy glanced at the clock, her mind ticking. It wasn't like Max and Curtis to be remotely unreliable. Losing fair and square was one thing but losing for any other reason would be a total outrage.