ROCK STAR DETECTIVES

MURDER AT THE MOVIES

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For Beatrice and Maisie –
may you always be stylish and funny and clever.





***DAY 1** – 11.05 a.m.*

The Colosseum Soundstage, Fox Studios, SYDNEY

Charley Parker wandered through the columns of the Colosseum, her accomplice by her side.

'What are you smiling at?' she asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

'Oh, just the thought of me in a toga,' replied the boy in the wheelchair with a cheeky grin.

Charley grinned back and paused to take in her surroundings. She gazed at the person beside her, his face so familiar, and yet not quite the face she was used to. Behind him, half obscured by a column, was a red-haired girl in her twenties who had a nose piercing and

was carrying a rucksack. She seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

'Ahem,' fake-coughed the boy, shaking Charley from her daydream.

'Oh!' Charley nodded. 'Yes. Now I'm picturing *both* of us in togas . . .' She seemed to be struggling to find the next words.

'On our way to watch an event here in the stadium?' prompted the boy.

'Exactly,' answered Charley, relieved.

A young couple walked past, holding a map and whispering to each other. Charley noticed the red-haired girl behind the column fidget nervously. Further back a mother and father posed silently for a photo with their children as a bystander pointed a camera at them.

Beyond them all Charley saw a camera pointed directly at *her*. And another. And another. A smile crept across Charley's face as she spied her best friend George sitting between those cameras. He peered back at her, as if urging her to do something. But what?

'I assume you'll be feeding me grapes as we watch,' said the boy beside Charley. Her attention returned to him, and she noted with glee how similar he looked to George.

The boy stared at Charley, almost shouting at her with his eyes. This made him look even more like George, who had cast her the same look a few seconds ago. Before Charley knew it, she had burst out laughing. The more she tried to fight it, the worse it became – like when you hear an inappropriate noise in a church.

'Cut!'

The shout came from an American man in his fifties, who was sitting alongside George. He tried to jump up from his chair but was wearing a pair of headphones that were plugged into a small TV monitor in front of him. As he attempted to stand, the headphone cable pulled him violently back down again, and he said a word he probably shouldn't have.

George took the opportunity to wheel over to Charley, dodging the photo-taking family and the couple with the map, all of whom were returning quietly to their starting positions.

'What's wrong?' asked George when he reached his best friend.

'Nothing!' said Charley, wheezing.

'So why are you laughing?' said George, with genuine confusion.

'Because this is hilarious!'

'What is?'

'All of it! We're making a movie about the time we were accused of being international art thieves. I'm walking through what looks like the Colosseum in Rome but is actually a giant indoor movie studio in Australia. There's a guy next to me who looks like you, sounds like you, and is saying the exact words we said a year and a half ago – but he isn't you. Meanwhile you're sitting between three cameras and there's a director next to you watching the whole thing. Don't you think this is absolutely ridiculous?'

Slowly George turned and surveyed the scene. He did a complete three-sixty, taking in the columns, the cameras and the director, who was now tangled in the cable of his headphones. George craned his head up to the sky and instead saw a dozen enormous lights hanging from the ceiling above their heads, doing their best to imitate sunlight.

George's gaze turned to the boy in front of him, also in a wheelchair, dressed in a similar style to George. The same shoes, the same shirt, even the same hairstyle – short at the sides, naturally curly on top. The main difference between him and George right now was that while George's face was slowly morphing into a grin, his doppelgänger was frowning.

'It looks like you're in front of a wacky mirror at a

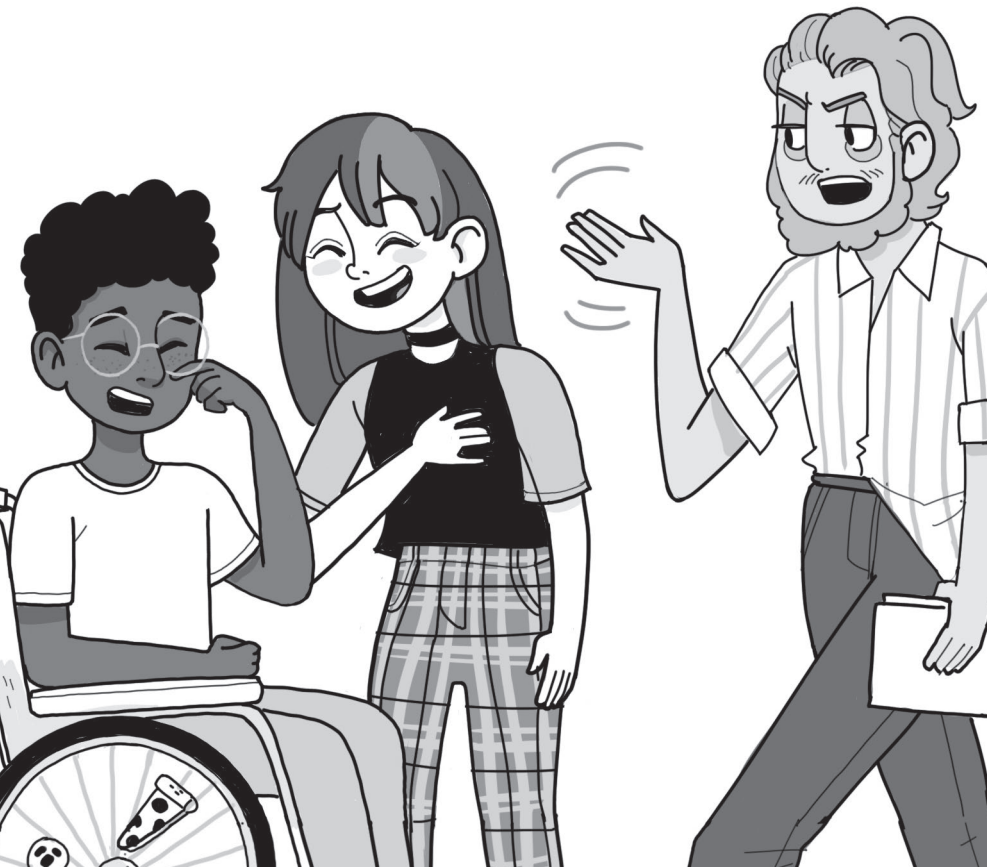


funfair,' said Charley, 'but instead of making you look taller or shorter, it makes you look grumpier.'

George snorted. Properly snorted with laughter. So much so he nearly blew a snot bubble. This made the boy in front of George turn away in disgust, which made Charley laugh even more.

'What's going on?' shouted the director, finally arriving on the scene. His unkempt grey hair seemed to reflect his emotions: tangled and frazzled.

'I'm sorry,' said Charley, desperately trying to pull



herself together. 'I got a bit overwhelmed. It won't happen again.'

'Good!' answered the director, before turning on his heel and striding back to his chair. Charley thought she heard him mutter the words 'damn kids', but she couldn't be sure.

'You OK?' asked George.

'I'm fine. I think.'

George returned to his position behind the cameras, and Charley returned to hers in front of them.

'All right, let's go again!' shouted the director, who was now struggling to plug his headphones back into the monitor. 'Charley, we'll start from "What are you smiling at?" Action!'

'What are you smiling at?' asked Charley once again to the boy next to her in the wheelchair.

'Oh, just the – LOOK OUT!'

Charley had no time to react to the unexpected line. She stood frozen, feeling a rush of air pass close to her head as one of the enormous studio lights smashed to the floor beside her, exploding into shards of metal and glass.

For a second no one moved and no one spoke.

Charley was well aware that the scene was now unsalvageable but delivered her line anyway. 'Now I'm

picturing both of us in togas.'

The director raised a megaphone to his lips and shouted 'Cut!!!'

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12.07 p.m.

Charley's trailer, Fox Studios, SYDNEY

George Carling surveyed the table of food in front of him and wondered who on earth was supposed to eat it all. From left to right it straddled the spectrum of snacks – apples, bananas, strawberries and grapes to muesli bars and dried fruit, then raw carrots, raw broccoli and an assortment of dips, cookies, chocolate bars, crisps and cupcakes. On the far right was a line of glazed doughnuts and a gap where one had been taken. George knew exactly where it would be – in Charley's hand. George grabbed a carrot stick, dunked it in one of the dips, took a bite, then spun towards Charley. She was seated on a leather chair, with (as predicted) half a doughnut in her hand.

Facing Charley was a woman with designer clothes and impeccable hair. In her late fifties, and with stunning talon-like nails, the woman introduced herself as Angela Maynard, a journalist from *Empire* magazine.